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Top management leadership, employee empowerment, job satisfaction, and customer satisfaction in TQM organizations: an empirical study

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Abstract

Top management leadership and employee empowerment are considered two of the most important principles of total quality management (TQM) because of their assumed relationship with customer satisfaction. As a result, many top management leadership and employee empowerment strategies and practices have been suggested in the management literature. However, few studies have been done to test this assumed relationship and determine which of these strategies and practices may be most effective in bringing about the intended results. This study surveyed organizations that have adopted TQM to determine the relationship between top management leadership, employees' empowerment, job satisfaction, and customers' satisfaction. The results reveal positive correlation between top management leadership, employee empowerment, job satisfaction, and customer satisfaction. Employee empowerment and improved levels of job satisfaction are facilitated by top management leadership and commitment to the TQM goal of customer satisfaction by creating an organizational climate that emphasizes total quality and customer satisfaction. Effective strategies for achieving employee empowerment and job satisfaction, together with top management leadership roles in a TQM environment, are identified and discussed. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Top management leadership; Employee employment; Customer satisfaction

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1. Introduction

Today, more than ever, the long-term survival of many manufacturing and service organizations is considered to be inextricably linked to the ability of these organizations to produce goods and services that meet or exceed customers' quality expectations. Therefore, organizations are searching for approaches to managing people and production systems in ways that assure the transformation of inputs into quality outputs that meet or exceed customers' expectations. Total quality management (TQM), because of its focus on customer satisfaction, arguably is the most widely discussed approach to directing organizational efforts toward the goal of customer satisfaction. Its tenets are continuous improvement, top management leadership commitment to the goal of customer satisfaction, employee empowerment, and customer focus. Advocates of TQM hold that the goal of customer satisfaction is achieved through top management commitment to creating an organizational climate that empowers employees and focuses all efforts on the goal of customer satisfaction. A positive relationship between leadership and commitment, and employee empowerment (leading to job satisfaction) with customer satisfaction is assumed.

Both the trade and academic literatures on TQM suggest many different top leadership strategies and practices for empowering or involving employees in quality-related decision-making processes. However, few empirical studies, outside of the Malcolm Baldrige Award program, have been done to sufficiently document these relationships and to determine which of the many suggested strategies and practices are effective in bringing about the intended results (employee empowerment, job satisfaction, and superior customer satisfaction).

This study surveyed organizations that formally introduced TQM as a means for identifying the management strategies and practices that are effective in bringing about employee empowerment, employee job satisfaction, and, ultimately, customer satisfaction. The objective of this study is to provide empirical assessment of the assumed relationship between top management leadership and commitment, employee empowerment, job satisfaction, and customer satisfaction. Such assessment should provide guidance to organizations in the design of empowerment and job satisfaction components of their TQM programs. Another objective is to provide empirical assessment for the TQM-based literature.

2. Literature review

In almost all of the TQM literature, employee involvement, empowerment, and top management leadership and commitment are identified as crucial elements of a successful TQM program (Bowen, Siehl, & Schneider, 1989; Brower, 1994; Camp, 1989; Deming, 1982; Mendelowitz, 1991; Roberts, 1994; Senge, 1994). Lawler (1994) referred to employee empowerment as one of the most important tenets of TQM. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) define empowerment "as intrinsic task motivation that manifests itself in four cognitions reflecting an individual's orientation to his or her work roles." By intrinsic task motivation, they mean "positively valued experiences that an individual derives directly from a task that produce motivation and satisfaction." The four cognitions they identified are *meaningfulness*, *competence*, *impact*, and *choice*. Meaningfulness is the value of the task goal or purpose in

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