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Should the “quality” criterion be reinstated today ?

“Yes, indeed!” chorus all the protagonists at the 10th edition of the Qualita International Congress, organised by and at UTC-Compiègne, March 20-22, 2013. Quality Assurance (QA) is here to stay and is even gaining ground in the French Administration.

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Demonstration? -

"The Qualita Congress began as an astute association of academic spheres and the industrial world", recalls Prof. Alain STORCK, introducing the two day event where dozens of speakers took the floor to address themes like Quality 2.0, reliability testing, QA in R&D, eco-design, rare occurrences, extreme risks, etc.

The President also stressed that the ambition of QA must not slow down or other aims: innovation, design, safety, sustainable development, etc. *"Quality must serve innovation and not inhibit them"*. From the industrialists' viewpoint, real progress is patent and goes beyond lip-service. Claude CHAM shows us how this can be (and has been) achieved.

Facing up to customer demand and the crisis

Claude CHAM is now President of FIEV* and AFQP*; formerly (1987-2000) he has been Chairman and CEO for Dunlop France and Deputy Chairman for Goodyear Dunlop Tyres Europe between 2000 and 2007. He entertains and defends a wide-ranging vision of quality, which he esteems must not be sterilised by rigidly

complying with standards. He had noted on one hand the growing demands of consumers, whose criticisms were levelled at every sector in the market-place, sparing none and spreading like wild fire via Internet and, on the other, the economic crisis which calls for structural answers if we wish to recover our competitiveness - as he sees it, quality should be at the heart of corporate strategies and the preoccupations of public authorities.

"But this just is not true!" adds Claude, regretfully. "You only need to look at the organisation charts: when (and) staff members are appointed in charge of Quality Assessment, they no longer hold a position close to the chief executives, contrary to what was common in the 80s and 90s. What amazes me is that the quality criterion is no longer the backbone of corporate policies and no longer irrigates managerial culture up to the highest levels, but is now a subject for debates among specialists who specialise in tool improvement and methodology".

In support of innovation

As we live in times where the slogan *"All change; now"* can take you to the highest executive and political spheres, Claude CHAM reminds us that quality is a powerful lever for change, in that it can be used to federate colleagues.



"Current approaches to sustainable development all rely on the concept of quality which spread throughout France in the 70s." recalls Claude CHAM. "If we do not have quality, the various strategies in favour of sustainable development do not go beyond the green marketing flyer and this alone will not bring staff and teams together. Innovation is presented everywhere as THE solution to get us out of the crisis. But if there is no underlying quality process, targeted to higher performance, then we shall only get to enjoy a marketing fireworks show. Research and innovation can only progress if there is a quality assurance".

For those who hold that quality is an "outdated" concept compared with the more recent 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR), Claude simply retorts, that whatever the term you prefer *"What really counts is total respect for the men, women and purpose of your enterprise".*

Indeed quality assurance is not seen as out of date in other countries: in the USA, for example, there is a national prize known

as Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award), ceremony under the auspices of the USA's Vice-President's office.

"Compare this with the AFQP Prize in France which is not exactly what we could call a crowd-stirring event. "This association tries to reinforce the visibility of quality and would like to be seen as a vector for a national industrial policy, inclusive", insists Claude CHAM, "of a transverse section within the National Industrial Council (CNI)".

"Lubricating the wheels of enterprise"

To understand better why Claude CHAM places such a level of trust in quality, we only need to refer to his industrial experience which convinced him. He was recruited by Dunlop in 1983 - after two earlier successes with Chrysler and Paris Airports Authority - to get the tyre maker back on track; he did so in just 3 years.

"Not once did I let up my efforts to instil quality assurance practice, which act as a strong federating component. We set up progress groups, organised meetings with all our colleagues to present common goals and the results; we replaced the ageing "suggestion boxes" by a process that saw ideas and proposals move up through the organisation chart together with the guarantee of a reply within one week. I was a very demanding boss, and I did not hesitate at all to get my own hands into the oily, messy business. Proceeding in this way means that you must show the example, in a word be and act as the boss should. I had to close down some factory sites, reorganise work-forces and machines, and in all this my relationships with the trade unions always stayed polite and respectful. The company continued to be profitable and the number of employees remains practically the same throughout the shake-up. When people assert that quality costs money, I say this is an aberration. On the contrary, quality is a guarantee of competitiveness; it amounts to lubricating the wheels of enterprise. If we want the enterprise France to be able to take off, then we should consider applying QA thinking to get the teams involved: who is not proud

when someone admires the work done?"

In contradistinction, who wants to face a displeased customer? To avoid this as much as possible, Oxyane (the mother company for Decathlon (sportswear and equipment)) openly plays the QA card, as they see it, synonymous for customer satisfaction.

Fabien BROSSE, a graduate from UTC Compiègne and Director QA and sustainable development for the groups, gives his views on how quality can be seen in all Oxyane activities.

Should we consider turning the "10 year guarantee" into a standard commitment?

"When quality is taken into consideration at the highest corporate executive level, it proves to be a factor to success", recalls Fabien BROSSE. If we raise the question of planned obsolescence in products, Fabien immediately replies "The most important feature for a product is its operational life expectancy. That is why at Oxyane we placed quality and sustainable development under the same directorate."

For those who remain stubbornly sceptical, Fabien illustrates with two lines of product.

As far as pricing is concerned, Oxyane can use its enormous sales records as leverage in price bargaining with the suppliers: the Group has more than 800 outlet shops in 20 countries, with an annual turn over of 6.5 billion euros for 2011 and a 10% growth rate at over the past 5 years.

Customer satisfaction is the barometer

Quechua, Artengo, Inesis, B'Twin, etc.: all are Oxyane brand-names and represent most of the articles sold. They are made buy 1 500 sub-contractor companies, even if Oxyane does have some

factories of its own.

"These factories allow us to learn the manufacturing skills and practice needed to make our products and provides us with an input for better management policies vis-à-vis our sub-contractors. They must be profitable, competitive and quality seeking", explains Fabien BROSSE, who graduated from UTC Compiègne in 1999, in Mechanical Engineering. *"UTC enabled me to develop personal skills that are really important for the job I now hold: a sense for responsibilities, self-reliance and an open international vista, all of which are key not only at UTC Compiègne but also at Oxylane. When I first applied for a position in the job-market, I had a concrete approach to QA issues and thus was operational from the start".*

Fabien now follows clients' posted notes very carefully. *"Here we have the N°1 marker of our performance rating. We took the decision to publish them all on our Internet site, running, of course the risk of having to stop certain products, for the obvious reason that the 'next day' the sales of these items cease immediately. Getting a bad mark is a signal that we must move in and check the product".*



A QA approach relies on methods that involve every stage, from having an excellent knowledge of what customers expect, thanks to information that returns to our outlets and via the network of amateur sports-people and professionals that we hire to test our products thoroughly.

The tests are designed by the product engineering teams and they reproduce the real life constraints that the items will be facing, etc. *"We carry out 60 000 tests a year and the 700 QA engineers check out the work conditions and the quality of the production at all our suppliers,"* adds Fabien.

Not forgetting after sales services (ASS): *"When a customer returns a faulty product and is dealt with satisfactorily, this actually increases client fidelity. The return rate of Oxylane products to the sales outlets dropped by some 30% over 5 years and for the first time, in 2012, we had no returns from clients or items withdrawn from our goods".*

Quality assurance depends on specialist laboratories

In order to innovate, feels Fabien, good ideas must come in from users and the company must gain an excellent knowledge of their needs. *"Quality problems link more to innovative product lines and quality assessment must accompany the policy rather than hold things up. This means that we must remain careful and not attempt to bring everything into a methodological framework. We brought out 2 800 new products in 1012, all designed by our 800 strong engineering team. Their excellent knowledge of the customers' needs and the technical equipment they dispose of allows them to move from a prototype to a 'sellable' product in less than 24h! Such an approach could not be envisioned without a strong quality assessment approach, to be used intelligently and flexibly, accepting the possibility of making errors".*

Oxylane has been setting up exclusive partnership contracts with external laboratories to help in making innovative progress, for example, to develop a battery specific to an electric bike use.

Movea, for example, a leader in movement analysis also accompanies Oxylane to integrate devices in tennis rackets - to be used to measure speed of racket strikes, the number of 'right' hand strokes, back-hand, etc., in the context of an interactive programme to coach tennis players.

This trend to generalised assistance can also apply to the automobile sector, where QA methods are being strongly modified, updated.

Work more with risks and utilisations rather than on methods

Another example lies with PSA's (French car manufacturer) Annie BRACQUEMOND, who is in charge of Quality and Operational

Safety at the Innovation Directorate that reconciles innovative and safety seeking approaches on a day-to-day-basis: *"Vehicles are incorporating more and more mechatronics and constantly propose new equipment that marks a frontier between comfort and safety. This raises problems of quality and safety that we have to apprehend upstream to avoid having to return the vehicles and have legal issues arise. It is of course unacceptable that any onboard system may lead to an accident due to equipment failure."* We have to reconsider risks in the new environment of "smart" cars, where the calculators are all interdependent. *"Since 2000, we definitely have changed era, moving on from AMDEC methods to risk control protocols,"* sums up Annie BRACQUEMOND.

"From this point forward, we are working on utilisations, getting to better understand the most unexpected situations arising related to real utilisation conditions and to innovations and the identification and processing of associated risks. We are drafting a risk benchmarking process that presents a twofold advantage in that it reduces the number of investigations we have to make, compared with the previous approach which was top-heavy and too systematic, and it covers a wider range of situations, focusing the risky situations".

This change of method stemmed from three strong requirements:

- 1° to avoid overheads that would be incurred by an "over-high" quality demand;
- 2° to react responsively to a growing number of legal cases and media pressure that can impact the image of PSA negatively and
- 3° to adapt to the new safety requirement contained in a European directive that followed the classification of vehicles as consumer goods.

And what about the Administration?

Quality assessment is gaining ground in our Administration, to the

extent that Government is seeking to raise productivity and competitiveness. *"I myself discovered quality concepts about 3 years"* says Yves TALAUD, Head of the Quality Mission at the French ministry for Economy and Finance. Yves has spent his entire career in public service. To initiate a quality approach in the Secretariat General at the Bercy ministry buildings, which houses 3 000 people out of the ministry's total of 12 000, Juan-José PEREZ was recruited as Head of Quality Control, coming in from the private sector; quality was something that came "naturally" to him.



Thanks to this double approach - a good knowledge of the Bercy Administration culture and skilled with methods as applied in the private sector. For these reasons, a Quality assessment was conducted in certain directorates at the Secretariat General, to improve internal service-to-service quality. The approach includes a historic aspect, if only to observe semantic change; for example, moving from the word "beneficiary" to that of "client" is tantamount to breaking long-standing habits.

"Building up a quality assessment approach took us 18 months" underlines Yves TALAUD. "We took the time to listen to all the directors, service heads, and staff at all levels, so that we could define priority areas. This phase, listening to everyone, unusual as it was, showed that the quality of service was in fact satisfactory but not so the quality of the relationships between the services themselves."

To summarise what the services were looking for: more transparency, better reactivity, better acceptance, a single authority and the assurance that request would indeed be processed.

N° 1 commitment: reply under 5 days

"We took the engagement to acknowledge requests within 5 days and this led to a series of debates: the staff thought that this was simply impossible", says Yves TALAUD.

This commitment was top of a list of 5 taken by the transverse working parties on the quality assessment approach. In parallel, 32 "job" commitments were approved, including transparency on pay changes or better co-ordination of numerous office furniture removals. *"This approach revised management thinking round shared objectives; it proves a cohesive cement for team members", says Yves, proudly. "On occasion, our approach was not well perceived, but the intrinsic quality of our dialogue evolved positively as we progressed. Indeed, it amounts to an unnamed breakthrough: quality no longer inspires fear and each ministerial structure now has a person in charge of quality assessment. By 2015-2016, we hope to qualify under the ISO 20000 standard."*

The same goes for the France's Directorate for Civil Aviation. Quality is used there as a federative tool to modernise service operations, via a digital portal called Bravo Victor. This allowed the authorities to frame communications of some 12 000 staff, in order to replace informal staff communities by about 100 formal communities (organised round projects, sites, etc.), to create a

transverse dynamics, to improve collective performance levels ...

"In an administration where the very word "quality" carried a negative overtone, following some unfortunate experiments with dogmatic ISO approaches carried out by external consultant agencies, we are now practising quality without boasting about it" says Jean-Pierre DESBENOIT, Director for the Information Systems and Modernisation of the DGAC, with a knowing smile.

"The portal opens up processes, concentrates the returns on experience (ROE), while integrating the culture and needs specific this ministry. 'Quality' allows you to do more with less: the portal itself cost 6M€ but also saves 1M€/yr thanks to a sharing of the support functions, for example". Quality, therefore, allows you to announce good news in these times conducive to public savings.

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