



## Public Sector Reform Column



MAKING BARBADOS WORK BETTER

### QUALITY CIRCLES

The need for public and private businesses to improve quality of services is no longer an option but a necessity. Since the early 1960's businesses across the globe have been searching for ways to improve overall operational efficiency. This trend has been more heightened with the onset of free open trade and customers demanding so much more for their dollars. Some organisations have successfully implemented the use of quality circles as part of an ongoing improvement programme. Others have experimented with quality circles with the best intentions and faced several obstacles, but what is true is that this type of participatory management brings several benefits to all concerned.

#### Functions

Quality circles are also commonly known as work improvement or quality teams, but no matter the name, their functions share similar characteristics. Generally, the quality circle is a small group of employees who voluntarily meet at regular times to identify, analyse and solve quality and other problems in their working environment. Quality circles can recommend and implement improvement strategies and be a useful reservoir for the generation of new ideas. Normally, members of a quality circle face and share similar problems in their daily work lives and create a programme to tap human creative energy that is capable of generating handsome rewards.

#### Internal Reform Committees (IRC's)

Internal Reform Committees (IRC's) are the public service's tailor-made answer to quality circles. IRC's were introduced into the public service to encourage full employee participation in home-grown reform initiatives to meet the needs of the public service. Since the programme began, fifty two (52) IRC's were established and the main objectives were to:

- Encourage a team culture and team environment;
- Encourage the flow of new ideas;
- Improve customer relations and service delivery;
- Improve levels of communication;
- Improve operational efficiency; and
- Create problem prevention attitudes.

There are some examples of IRC's within the public service, which have had positive effects on several operational issues including the development of quality service delivery, cost effective maintenance programmes and improving the level of staff morale.

### **Problems**

Feedback from all types of industries and business sectors has indicated some common problems arising from the development of quality circles. Some of the problems can cause serious setbacks if not properly resolved. One of the most common problems was that after a few successes, most organisations were willing to declare victorious results and abandon the circles. In this scenario, the quality circle was not used as part of the overall long term planning process and the circle lost momentum. Other problems related to the level of commitment and support from top and middle management, mainly because the objectives of the circle were not communicated effectively. Management viewed the circles as a vehicle for employees to 'get their own way' over management decisions and tended to be suspicious and uncommitted when dealing with the circles' recommendations.

### **Success Factors**

The success of any type of quality circle is dependent on several factors, but the most critical influences are strong management commitment and support. Like all business processes, quality circles have to be managed and a prerequisite should include a document endorsed by management setting out the purpose, policy and objectives of the quality circle. The basic philosophy of quality circles must be known to everyone before the programme is started. Employees and managers of all levels must be aware of the roles they have to play whether they are participants, facilitators or agents for change.

Employees must be willing to participate and contribute to discussions to generate recommendations to improve the working lives for all members of the organisation. Individual desires and preferences should not be ignored, but settled within the context of organisational objectives to give recognition to the desire for circle achievement. The importance of management commitment and support cannot be emphasised enough. Management has to accept the principles of participatory management and be receptive to the recommendations made by the quality circle. It makes sense that the person doing a job on a daily basis is in a very good position to analyse it and recommend ways to improve it.

### **Persistence**

The Office of Public Sector Reform (OPSR) encourages government departments and agencies to keep their IRC's active. Private sector organizations should also pursue the establishment of their quality circles, because the benefits they can produce are far greater than the problems that may occur. Quality circles and IRC's are vehicles for building teamwork among workers and the interaction between participants contributes to the development of new leaders, cost effective services, motivated workers and more transparent relationships. More importantly, the role of a quality circle is the creation of knowledge. Knowledge requires access to information and therefore information sharing becomes a necessity for effective management. The intelligence of an organisation does not reside in top management only. Instead it comes from harnessing organisational intelligence: the gathering of all knowledge from all members. The effective use of quality circles can therefore help an organization to meet the goal of delivering high quality services to its customers.

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