

Longing for the endless sea

Be good and tell IT

*"If you want to build a ship,
don't drum up the men to gather wood,
divide the work and give orders.
Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."*

*Antoine de Saint-Exupéry - The **Wisdom of the Sands** -*

You see the word everywhere, at IT conferences and courses and in magazines: the magic word 'quality'. EXIN has identified a need for quality management among employers, as witnessed by the new Certification Program for Service Quality Management ISO/IEC 20000. Customers are looking for quality and organizations really want to show them that they can supply it. But what is quality and how do we achieve it? Antoine de Saint-Exupéry says you have to first "teach people to yearn for the endless sea."

The Online Quality Circle, a Dutch forum for quality professionals on the internet, held a competition on the subject a few years ago. What is quality? The winner was Peter Bootsma, with the definition: "Quality is the simultaneous and continuous satisfaction of all the parties involved." Peter is the founder of organizational consultancy firm Quality Research in Groningen, The Netherlands. But why must all the parties involved be satisfied? Surely it's about the customer being satisfied, isn't it?

Communication a precondition for quality

"If your motto is 'the customer is always right' or 'zero defects', you're on the wrong track," says Peter Bootsma. "When you want to achieve quality, you have to make sure that not only the customer is satisfied, but also the management, the employees, the suppliers, the shareholders, society as a whole, and the government. In short, all the stakeholders. For example, if you demand everything from your employees in order to supply a perfect product under pressure of time, you'll regret it in the longer term. All the parties have an interest in a sustainable relationship in the long term." With Peter's approach, PR, communication and advertising are important ways of improving the perception of quality among the various parties. Because the parties involved can have conflicting interests, and that means you have to make compromises and sometimes even say no. "If you can clearly explain why something cannot be done, the customer will value you even more. And customer satisfaction doesn't have to suffer either. Good communication is a precondition for quality."

How do we achieve quality?

Where do we start? How does an organization achieve quality? "You first have to identify the stakeholders, then identify their interests and lastly identify what you want to be good in. Moreover, the management has to look critically at its own management style. Is your management based on figures? On intuition? Or both? If you measure and monitor everything and draw up procedures for everything, you'll never achieve quality. You just lose contact with reality, the organization becomes unwieldy and the employees are no longer happy."

IT professionals just love blueprints

Last Spring, ITSME The Netherlands again organized a huge knowledge conference, called 'Best Practices in IT Service Management'. The coordinating theme was 'quality'. All the speakers showed, from their own perspective, how their organization thinks it can achieve quality. Jan van Bon, the conference program manager: "IT professionals just love blueprints, step-by-step plans and procedures. But if you want to provide quality, that's not enough. What matters is not just the method. In the end, what really matters is what we can get our people to do."

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry says it beautifully in his poem: if you want to build a ship, you first have to teach people to yearn for the endless sea.”

The service manager of the future is a customer manager

In the past few years, the focus was on the question: how can we improve IT? Not the question: how can we make public services better, or how we improve healthcare. “Yet these questions are what it’s all about,” says Jan. “They are what we have to use IT for. But in many cases we haven’t got that far yet. The IT world is slowly but surely climbing to the level of top quality. When IT first appeared, the focus was on the technology. Now that we’ve passed that stage, we can focus on the processes. But we’re still looking inward. It’s only when we master the processes that we can start looking outward. Then we can start using IT to get organizations to perform better. On the most mature level, we can start undertaking things together with the customer, investing together in new branches of business. And then customer management will be very important. The service manager of the future is therefore a customer manager. Ultimately, all IT will become standard. Then it will be possible to access IT at the press of a button, just like electricity. Where we used to fiddle around with candles, gas lamps and oil lamps, now we have standard 230 Volt everywhere. That’s the ultimate quality — standardized IT.”

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