Ethics of Quality

Make good products and provide excellent service because it’s the right thing to do.

Not long ago, I wrote about how important it is to take care of your customer—even when an event occurs that is beyond your control. I was recently talking to someone who commented that she “didn’t understand the relation to quality.” Because my comments really centered on ethics, to me the question was, “What do ethics have to do with quality?”

This question has been debated by many of the finest minds in history. Aristotle and other great thinkers debated the meaning of quality. To Aristotle, quality was more of a personal preference. Throughout history, there have not been substantial changes to this definition.

Is quality just a matter of making sure that our products or services conform to specifications, meet customer’s needs, etc.? Is it all about numbers—like 3.4 defects per million opportunities, zero customer complaints, 95% of phone calls answered within three rings, 98% on-time delivery? I really don’t think so.

These numbers are the results of quality processes or products. The bottom line is: what is our motivation for quality? What makes us strive for higher levels of quality? Some might say it is really simple. Organizations might say it is strictly financial. We have to make good products because if we make poor products, we won’t make money, and if we don’t make money, we won’t be in business.

Some of us may agree to some degree, but not totally. It is true that if we produce poor products, it will eventually result in fewer repeat customers, lost sales and lower revenues. However, if that is our only motivation, we’re going to be surpassed by competitors who might be motivated by other incentives.

We should make good products or provide excellent service because, in the final analysis, it is the right thing to do. It’s all about a mindset. We’re going to do the best we can because anything less is like cheating.

I would use cheating in the sense that we are cheating the customer by not providing the best that we have to offer and cheating ourselves because we accepted something less than our best. We must want to produce and sell a product or service that we would be pleased to own or use.

One of my quality engineering students remarked that he does his best because his family might be depending on that very product and their lives might lie in the balance of how well it performs. Talk about making quality personal!

If we look upon quality as strictly financially motivated, the tendency might be to focus only on the nuts and bolts. What actions contribute directly to the bottom line? Meaning, how much do we invest in our quality processes to provide a product or service that meets the customer’s expectations? All energy is directed toward what customers say they want. That might not be good enough.

An ethical motivation causes us to look beyond the customer’s stated expectation and look beyond specifications. We must ask questions such as, “Will all customers benefit?” “What would be the effect on the environment?” “How would this affect our people?” “Are there unstated customer expectations?”

Taking an ethical approach causes us to look at our system as a whole, even at areas that may not directly affect our product or service. Genichi Taguchi might equate this ethical approach to his philosophy of the loss function. Taguchi believed that the loss to society should be on a broad scale and include such things as customer dissatisfaction and impact of a bad reputation in the market place.

Quality can’t be just about numbers; if it is, then we’ll lose the game in the market place. Quality has to be about desire and a motivation to do what is right—not just what is right for our customers, but simply what’s right.

At the end of the day, quality means a commitment to total organizational excellence and an overall desire to do more than just deliver products or services. Satisfied customers vote with repeat business and their purchasing power. After all, quality is really what the customer says it is. When it comes to quality, the customer’s vote is all that matters. Delivering what the customer is willing to pay for, time and again, is the only way organizations will really succeed.