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An Organizational Communication Analysis

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Total Quality Management:  
An Organizational Communication Analysis

by

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Dissertation

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Dedicated to the memory of

Margaret R. Webb

William F. Webb

Richard V. Hart

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Total Quality Management:  
An Organizational Communication Analysis

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During the 1980s and 1990s widespread concern about quality among U. S. corporations provided the discursive foundation for a new technology of workplace governance. The worklives of hundreds of thousands of U. S. employees were directly affected by the institutionalization of total quality management (TQM) programs. However, theoretical and empirical articles discussing communication within TQM organizations are almost nonexistent. This dissertation employs content analysis of qualitative data collected at ten TQM organizations to provide a grounded theory of the role of communication in total quality management.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables .....	ix
List of Figures .....	x
<b>CHAPTER 1: THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION IN TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT</b>	<b>1</b>
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Rationale .....	2
Total Quality Management: Principles, Practices, and Techniques .....	5
Defining Quality .....	6
Customer Satisfaction .....	8
Direct Customer Contact.....	8
Collecting Information About Customer Needs .....	9
Quality Function Deployment.....	10
Continuous Improvement.....	10
Benchmarking .....	11
Statistical Process Control .....	12
Teamwork .....	12
Diversity.....	13
Cohesiveness .....	15
Group Skills Training.....	16
Team-building.....	18
Summary .....	25
<b>CHAPTER 2: METHOD</b>	<b>27</b>
Historical and Conceptual Overview .....	27
Participant-Observation .....	29
Interviewing .....	31
Data .....	33
Analytical Framework .....	35
Unit of Analysis .....	35
Coding.....	36
Credibility .....	41
Summary .....	44
<b>CHAPTER 3: FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS</b>	<b>45</b>
Communication Issues .....	45
Intraorganizational Communication Issues.....	46
Interorganizational Communication Issues.....	49
Communication and Integrative Problem Solving.....	51
Intraorganizational Team Diversity .....	52
Cross-functional Team Membership.....	52
Superior-Subordinate Collaboration .....	56



Direct Contact Between Customers and Suppliers .....	61
Theoretical Implications .....	71
Summary .....	76
<b>CHAPTER 4: ROMANTIC ANALYSIS</b>	<b>78</b>
Empowerment .....	79
Cohesiveness .....	84
Incentives and Rewards .....	89
Theoretical Implications .....	93
Summary .....	97
<b>CHAPTER 5: CRITICAL ANALYSIS</b>	<b>98</b>
Bureaucratic Control .....	98
Concertive Control .....	101
Resistance/Opposition .....	109
Theoretical Implications .....	114
Summary .....	119
<b>CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION</b>	<b>121</b>
Summary of Findings .....	121
Suggestions for Future Research .....	132
<b>ENDNOTES</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>VITA</b>	<b>164</b>

## List of Tables

Table 2.1: Pseudonyms of Participating Organizations.....	34
Table 2.2: Secondary Coding Matrix.....	40

## List of Figures

Figure 3.1 Causal Map—Functional.....	72
Figure 4.1 Causal Map—Romantic.....	94
Figure 5.1 Causal Map—Critical.....	116
Figure 6.1: Causal Map—Collective.....	128

## CHAPTER 1: THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION IN TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT

This chapter provides an introduction to the dissertation, and is divided into three sections. The first section provides a statement of the problem under investigation. The second section provides a rationale for the study, addressing the questions of why the problem is worth investigating, and how the dissertation contributes to organizational communication theory. The third section provides definitions and conceptual parameters for the area under investigation, and presents the research questions that guided the analysis of data. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

### Statement of the Problem

During the 1980s and 1990s, widespread concern about quality among U.S. organizations, as a result of Japanese competition, provided the discursive foundation for a new technology of workplace governance. The worklives of hundreds of thousands of U.S. employees and the economic futures of thousands of organizations were directly affected—for better or worse—by the institutionalization of total quality management (TQM) programs. Yet, by the close of the 20th century, quality initiatives were finding less and less support in U.S. manufacturing and service organizations. Choi and Behling (1997, p. 37) summarize several surveys that indicate executive dissatisfaction with TQM and that document a significant drop in its use, including

an American Electronics Association survey [which] revealed that use of TQM by member firms dropped from 86 percent in 1988 to 73 percent in 1991 and that 63 percent of the firms reported that TQM failed to reduce defects by 10 percent or more, even though they had been in operation for almost two and one-half years on average; McKinsey & Company found that two-thirds of the TQM programs it examined had simply ground to a halt because they failed to produce expected results.

A number of researchers have wondered why TQM has proven to be less effective than promised and has encountered such a precipitous decline in popularity. Most have focused upon implementation difficulties, including lack of managerial support (Choi & Behling, 1997; Hill, 1995; Wilkinson & Willmott, 1995), ineffective positioning of change initiatives relative to organizational contingencies (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Shroeder, 1994), poor deployment of statistical process controls (Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Zbaracki, 1998), and partial—versus complete—implementation strategies (Douglas & Judge, 2001). There has been little agreement, and no consensus, concerning the nature of the problem and whether anything can—or should—be done about it.

#### Rationale

One area that has received little attention is the role of communication in TQM programs, although the use of group communication processes and team-based problem-solving are fundamental TQM practices. Despite the considerable body of literature on group and team communication, there has been almost no attention given

to an examination of the successes and failures of TQM from the vantage point offered by communication theory. While some effort has been devoted to articulating management theories implicit in TQM practice (Anderson, Rungtusanatham, & Schroeder, 1994; Dean & Bowen, 1994; Sitkin et al., 1994; Spencer, 1994; Waldman, 1994), the role of communication in organizational quality initiatives has largely slipped by the wayside (Allen & Brady, 1997). Since an understanding of communication would seem to be fundamental to the theoretical and practical development of organizational quality initiatives, and since quality must be considered among the worthiest of organizational—and theoretical—concerns, this dissertation is predicated upon the need for a close examination of the role of communication in Total Quality Management.

Communication is central to the articulation of problems, to the constitution of programs of action, and to the judgments made about problem analysis and responses (Hirokawa & Rost, 1992). Yet, with very few exceptions (Allen & Brady, 1997; Browning, Sitkin, Sutcliffe, Shetler, & Obstfeld, 2000; Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Wendt, 1993; Sutcliffe, Sitkin, & Browning, 1999; Wendt, 1994) organizational communication theorists have been conspicuously absent from the scholarly discussion of TQM. As Allen and Brady have put it, “authors of practitioner-oriented TQM books readily acknowledge communication’s importance . . . [yet] few other management concepts or practices have received so much practitioner attention with so little academic study” (1997, pp. 316-317). Not that this has prevented numerous communication-based concepts from appearing in that discussion. For instance,

Munro (1995) refers to both a “discourse” and a “rhetoric” of quality; Webb (1995) ties rhetoric and persuasion to her claim that "TQM translat[es] enterprise ideology into material practices" (p. 106); Tuckman (1995) also refers to the rhetoric of TQM, and contends that the "growing and pervasive concern over quality [is an effect of] the emergent ideology, practice, and—importantly— discourse of TQM" (p. 54). Kerfoot and Knights (1995) claim to examine the discourse or rhetoric of quality “in terms of the conditions that render it plausible to practitioners, and the effects that it has as a practice on organizations and their employees" (p. 220). Zbaracki (1998) attempts to contrast “rhetorical TQM” with “technical TQM,” attacking the first as an obstruction to the second. Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell (1997) discuss the role of "communication ties" (p. 372) in the institutional forces that encourage conformity in TQM adoption. Yet rarely if ever are such analyses informed or supported by the relevant literature from the field of Communication Studies. According to Allen and Brady, “theoretical and empirical articles discussing communication within TQM organizations are almost nonexistent” (1997, p. 322). In particular, virtually no attention has been paid to the role of communication in the team-based, problem-solving contexts that are both fundamental to TQM in theory and as actually practiced by virtually all TQM organizations. This dissertation provides a valuable communication-based critique and extension of the current theory and practice of TQM. More specifically, I believe that the study of communication can provide crucial insights into the successes and failures of teamwork in quality initiatives, and that an empirical examination of the role of communication in quality teams will

provide a basis for the development of theories of communication in organizational contexts.

To provide a backdrop for this analysis, the next section turns to a consideration of the basic principles of TQM, the practices and supporting techniques through which quality initiatives are defined and implemented, and a review of the literature as it relates to the processes operating in quality-focused organizational teams. As a preface to this discussion, I turn first to an analysis of the term *quality* itself as the basis for discussing organizational change initiatives.

#### Total Quality Management: Principles, Practices, and Techniques

Despite a documented decline in the number of organizations claiming to use TQM, concern about product and service quality is still pervasive. Many organizations employ some or all of the principles, practices, and techniques of TQM under some different label; and, as a recent survey of companies using specific management tools revealed, literally thousands of companies—over 40 percent of those surveyed— reported that they currently use TQM (“Fashion victims,” 2000). Quality as a concept, however, is far from stable, and its meaning is highly contestable. As Munro (1995) explains, "a key matter to be grasped in the quality debate is that quality is *problematizing* . . . The new techniques which form themselves under the rubric of 'quality' are multiple, heterogeneous, and uncertain . . . Quality's elusiveness to definition appears to be part of its resource" (p. 130). Considerable professional effort has been devoted to stabilizing both the concept of quality and the content of TQM programs. This section turns first to a summarization



of four widely used definitions of quality, then identifies three central principles shared by most conceptions of TQM initiatives: customer satisfaction, continuous improvement, and teamwork.

### *Defining Quality*

Reeves and Bednar (1994) discuss four prevailing definitions of quality—as excellence, as value, as conformance to specifications, and as meeting or exceeding customers’ expectations—no one of which applies equally well to all products or all services in all industries. They explain that “each quality definition has strengths and weaknesses in relation to measurement and generalizability, managerial usefulness, and consumer relevance” (Reeves & Bednar, p. 435). A brief consideration of each of these definitions is in order.

Quality defined as excellence has its roots in the ancient Greek concept of *aretê*, i.e., excellence or virtue, which varies according to context: the properties of an excellent automobile are not the same as the properties of an excellent meal, or of an excellent person. Although Crosby (1979, p. 14) argues that “the first erroneous assumption is that quality means goodness, or luxury, or shininess, or weight,” this definition may be the easiest for organizational management to articulate, and it may provide the most substantive basis for employee motivation and commitment (Reeves & Bednar, 1994). On the other hand, the notion of excellence is problematically abstract, subjective, and variable over time, making a definition of quality as excellence of limited value to managers and researchers who desire a more reliable, measurable standard.

Quality defined as value is the least supportable definition. It appears to be based upon a constellation of attributes, including convenience, availability, and price, as well as excellence. According to Reeves and Bednar (1994), quality theorists Feigenbaum and Abbot both “asserted that differentiation in levels of both quality and price, or *value*, were important in consumers’ decisions” (p. 421). The statement appears to distinguish quality from price, combining these disparate measures into the construct, value. How or why this then becomes synonymous with quality is far from clear. “Value is seen by some to be a subcomponent of quality, whereas others view quality as a subcomponent of value . . . Quality may be a component of value, but value is not synonymous with quality” (Reeves & Bednar, p. 430).

The most parsimonious and easily verified definition of quality is conformance to specifications (Reeves & Bednar, 1994; Tuckman, 1995). It is based essentially on the need for the kind of consistency and quantifiability that accompanied mass production techniques. On the other hand, consistent conformance to specifications does little to facilitate organizational adaptation, to predict changing customer requirements, or to encourage innovation and worker discretion (Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Reeves & Bednar, 1994; Sitkin et al., 1994).

The fourth definition of quality, and the one most widely accepted by TQM theorists and practitioners (Anderson et al., 1994; Dean & Bowen, 1994; Feigenbaum, 1991; Reeves & Bednar, 1994; Tuckman, 1995), is meeting or exceeding customers’ expectations. Its centrality to the design and implementation of TQM programs is best reflected by the fact that customer satisfaction, together with continuous improvement

and teamwork, is widely considered one of TQM's fundamental principles (Dean & Bowen, 1994; Hill, 1995; Sitkin et al., 1994; Westphal et al., 1997). It is to a consideration of these principles, and their underlying practices and techniques, that this discussion now turns.

### *Customer Satisfaction*

As indicated above, "the relevance of customer satisfaction in any theory of quality management is apparent because the very definition and, consequently, the measurement of customer satisfaction often has been based on a customer's perception of the quality of products and services" (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 491). In concert with the principles of continuous improvement and teamwork, customer satisfaction provides both the impetus for instituting and the standard for evaluating total quality initiatives.

Three practices are identified by Dean and Bowen (1994) as instrumental in providing customer satisfaction: direct contact between product and/or service providers and their customers; the collection of specific information about customer requirements; and the inclusion of information provided by customers in the design and delivery of products and/or services.

#### *Direct Customer Contact*

In the lexicon of TQM, customers may be thought of as both the final consumers of an organization's products or services, or as organizational members who themselves depend upon the outputs of other organizational insiders. For example, automobile painters may be thought of as internal customers whose work

depends upon the output of automotive sheet metal fabricators.<sup>1</sup> At the conclusion of this internal supplier-customer chain of relationships, the finished automobile is ultimately offered for sale by dealers to whom a number of external customers turn for the satisfaction of their personal transportation needs. As Waldman (1994) has explained, TQM “involves giving employees direct communication and responsibility for managing relationships with clients, presumably including those either internal or external to the organization” (p. 522). Direct contact between employees and customers, either internal or external, is the method by which essential information is collected.

#### *Collecting Information About Customer Needs*

Fundamental to the issue of providing customer satisfaction is the idea of gathering information from customers about their specific requirements. “Although systematic data are not available on the proportion of TQM organizations that directly assess customer preferences and customer satisfaction, nearly all case studies of TQM companies include descriptions of the means such organizations use to obtain customer data” (Hackman & Wageman, 1995, p. 316). Reger, Gustafson, Demarie, and Mullane (1994) argue that direct contact between product or service providers and their customers “is likely to make members aware of the shortcomings of the existing organization, and customers’ communication about their ideals for the organization may prompt members to reassess their views” (p. 575). Customer surveys and focus group discussions are used by organizations to gather necessary

information, and improvements in product or service quality are consequently based upon the information provided by customers themselves.

### *Quality Function Deployment*

The last of the practices associated with providing customer satisfaction is the actual translation of customer-supplied information into the design and delivery of an organization's products or services. Dean and Bowen (1994) refer to this as "quality function deployment" (p. 394), or by the Japanese term "*hoshin kanri*" (p. 404; see also Waldman, 1994). The function of communication in the construction and enactment of relationships between customers and product or service providers constitutes one of the focal points for data analysis in this dissertation, as expressed in the following research question:

RQ 1: Among organizations using TQM, what is the function of communication in satisfying customer requirements?

### *Continuous Improvement*

The second fundamental principle associated with TQM is continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is generally presented as the key to customer satisfaction<sup>2</sup> (Deming, 1986; Johnston & Daniel, 1991), and is generally understood to comprise both technical processes and human resource considerations. The analysis of work processes is the starting point for organizations oriented toward continuous improvement. Process analysis has as its primary objective the reduction or elimination of variance, which Deming (1986) saw as the source of problems in providing quality products and services. A reduction in process variation "leads to

benefits such as increasing output uniformity, continual reduction of rework and mistakes, continual reduction of waste of staffing, machine time, and materials” (Anderson et al., 1994, p. 494; see also Anderson, Dooley, & Misterek, 1992; Belohlav, 1993; Crosby, 1979, 1989; Phillips, Chang, & Buzzell, 1983). Two techniques that are generally associated with continuous improvement are the use of benchmarking and the use of statistical process controls.

### *Benchmarking*

Benchmarking involves the identification of best practices from among competitors in a given industry, or from among the recognized leaders in any of a variety of industries, for the purpose of improving organizational processes and enhancing competitive position (Camp, 1989; Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Olian & Rynes, 1991). The examples thus provided by highly successful organizations may encourage the elevation of process improvement objectives and the willingness of members to accept quality-focused organizational changes (Reger et al., 1994). On the other hand, Hackman and Wageman assert that the popularity of benchmarking among TQM organizations may result primarily from its inclusion as a Baldrige Quality Award criterion, and that the benefits of benchmarking cannot be assumed to accrue without exception. They note that standardization and insistence upon process improvements identified as the best in a particular field reduce or eliminate worker discretion in the performance of tasks, and may, as a result, interfere with their adoption (Ulrich, Von Glinow, & Jick, 1993) and negatively affect employee motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

### *Statistical Process Control*

Statistical process control comprises a range of tools, the use of which is generally argued to be essential to the effective implementation of TQM initiatives (Dondero, 1991; Oakland & Followell, 1990; Rucinski, 1991; Sashkin & Kiser, 1993)<sup>3</sup>. Anderson et al. (1994) argue that “there is ample anecdotal evidence, for instance, to support a relationship between statistical process control and quality improvements” (p. 495). The list of tools associated with statistical process control is extensive (Choi & Behling, 1997): flowcharts and control charts, fishbone diagrams, Pareto charts, and cost-of-quality analysis are among the most widely employed techniques (Hackman & Wageman, 1995). Together, they constitute an orderly system for identifying and quantifying those actions and processes that contribute to—or detract from—efforts at achieving acceptable quality in products and services.

### *Teamwork*

The third fundamental principle generally associated with TQM is teamwork. As continuous improvement is seen as the basis for providing customer satisfaction, the use of teams is seen as necessary to continuous improvement (Dean & Bowen, 1994). The TQM literature consistently identifies teams as the context and teamwork as the necessary requirement for effective problem analysis and decision making with respect to continuous improvement and customer satisfaction (Dean & Bowen, 1994; Hackman & Wageman, 1995). According to March (1994), however, the existence of inconsistencies in the interests and identities of team members is at variance with the most accurate meaning of the word. March prefers to describe real multiple actor

decision making bodies as “groups,” but allows for the use of the term “teams” as an approximation or simplification. It is in this sense, in order to remain consistent with the language used in the TQM literature, that the terms *groups* and *teams* will be used interchangeably in this dissertation. In both cases, I am referring to multiple actors who communicate with and influence each other in pursuing some common objective.

Hackman and Wageman (1995) contend that “the single most commonly used TQM technique is formation of short-term problem-solving teams with the overall objective of simplifying and streamlining work practices” (p. 315). Much of the literature on team effectiveness focuses upon the general issues of diversity, cohesiveness, and group communication processes. It is to a consideration of these issues that this section now turns.

### *Diversity*

Diversity is generally considered one of the sources of the fundamental advantage that teams offer when compared to individual efforts (Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992; McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996; Rogelberg & Rumery, 1996). Although the importance of managerial involvement is a cornerstone of TQM philosophy, one of the primary sources of TQM team diversity comes from the inclusion of front-line employees on problem-solving and decision-making teams. Several researchers (Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Lawler, 1994) have argued that meetings between managers and workers are a crucial source of ideas about how to improve operations that directly impact the quality of outputs. Spencer (1994) notes that, in such teams, “both horizontal and vertical communication networks are established. Information



and advice, rather than instructions and decisions, are shared across functional areas and between people of different rank” (p. 457).

As important as hierarchically diverse teams may be, a number of researchers have emphasized the significance of cross-functional team membership, i.e., teams composed of employees from across a variety of task or departmental divisions. Spencer (1994) explains that TQM “embraces the use of cross-functional teams; users recognize the value of constructive contention and the potential for recognizing new opportunities when multiple perspectives clash” (p. 453). The importance of diversity is directly related to the variety of perspectives that are included when teams are composed of members from across the organization. As Hackman and Wageman (1995, p. 331) put it:

The cross-functional quality teams that are among the hallmarks of TQM organizations stack the cards in favor of learning by the simple fact that they *are* cross-functional; individual members are exposed to more, and more diverse, points of view than would be the case if they worked mostly by themselves or in within-function units. Moreover, the group-process heuristics that teams are taught increase the chances that this built-in talent will be used well.

A third consideration in terms of diversity is the formation of teams that include customers as well as product or service suppliers. Customers in this context may include internal customers, although this idea clearly coincides with the idea of cross-functional team membership, as discussed above. More importantly, the

inclusion of external customers on a particular organization's internal quality teams provides an important source of information and a diverse set of perspectives that may be crucial to TQM effectiveness. For example, Spencer (1994) notes that customer expectations and long-term relationships with suppliers are socially constructed: quality teams would seem likely to provide one of the most important sites for the negotiation of such constructions.

### *Cohesiveness*

Cohesiveness among team members, which may be considered their sense of affinity for and degree of commitment to the group and its purposes (Langfred, 1998; Wech, Mossholder, Streeb, & Bennett, 1998), is partly a function of group climate (cooperative v. competitive) and the tensions and conflicts that are experienced in the group context (Hare, 1994; Rabbie, 1993; Tuckman, 1965). Cohesiveness enhances group productivity (Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 1995), unless it is overemphasized (Evans & Dion, 1991). Excessive cohesiveness is one of the central features of groupthink (Janis, 1982), often generating pressure upon members to avoid conflict and reach agreement, even at the expense of decision-making effectiveness.

Cohesiveness is sometimes made difficult as a result of team diversity (Kirchmeyer, 1993; Kirchmeyer & Cohen, 1992), although shared goals and cooperative norms can encourage cohesiveness within diverse groups (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981; Klein, 1996).

Anderson et al. (1994) note that Deming (1993) strongly opposed internal competition: They contend that "internal cooperation among employees enables

higher individual performance by creating mutually beneficial situations among organizational members and between organizational members and the organization as a whole”(p. 483). Management of the tension between diversity and cohesiveness in quality teams, including the role of communication in the creation of a cooperative team climate, is a focal point for data analysis in this dissertation, as expressed in the following research question:

RQ 2: Within TQM organizations, how do employees communicatively create shared understandings of organizational activity and workplace relationships?

### *Group Skills Training*

A third critical component of effective teamwork is the training of quality team members in necessary group communication and problem-solving skills (Hirokawa, 1985, 1987; Hirokawa & Pace, 1983; Hirokawa & Rost, 1992). Most of the prescriptive literature on group problem-solving and decision-making techniques among quality teams focuses upon brainstorming, and derivative processes such as the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). While brainstorming “about matters such as the potential causes of a problem, possible solutions, and issues likely to be encountered in implementing those solutions” (Hackman & Wageman, 1995, p. 314), members verbally present to the group any and all ideas that come to mind. All suggestions are recorded, often on a blackboard or flip chart, so that they can be seen and built upon by everyone present. Creativity and imagination are encouraged; evaluation and criticism of suggestions is not allowed. Once all participants feel satisfied that there are no more ideas to be generated, evaluative discussion ensues,

and some form of multivoting is employed to reduce and prioritize the list of suggestions.

Nominal Group Technique (NGT), which is a form of multivoting, begins as an individual activity, in which team members generate their own lists of ideas related to the problem under consideration. They then convene and develop a comprehensive list based on each member's contributions. Whether derived in this fashion, or as the product of an open brainstorming session, individual members then select and rank-order their five favorite suggestions, and record them in writing. The rankings are averaged and the most popular suggestions form the basis for group decisions and action. Although Paulus, Dzindolet, Poletes, and Camancho (1993) suggest that NGT is more effective than simple brainstorming, Kramer, Kuo, and Dailey (1997) argue that time and information limitations often reduce the potential effectiveness of either technique.

Hackman and Wageman (1995) contrast the emphasis on communication processes in quality teams with the evidently imperfect attention paid to statistical process control, arguing that "the use of scientific methods is among the most distinctive features of TQM. In contemporary practice, however, there is much greater emphasis on group-process techniques and interpersonal skills than on scientific methods" (p. 317). Certainly, effective problem identification and analysis depends, in part, on the collection and processing of information for which statistical tools are well suited, and such tools are, in fact, a distinctive feature of TQM. However, organizational communication processes in quality teams are no less a

distinctive feature of TQM, and the importance of the relative emphasis placed upon each seems far from clear. Hackman and Wageman offer no general or context-specific needs assessment procedure by which such a comparison could be made, and appear to separate without justification the collection of statistical information from its inclusion as a subject of discussion by quality team members. Tuckman (1995) argues that it was the development of group process techniques and the emphasis on customer satisfaction that distinguishes *total* quality management from early forms of quality assurance that relied exclusively on statistical process controls. In fact, it seems unlikely that training in statistical process control is an organization-wide necessity, rather than a specialized—albeit important—responsibility. Zbaracki (1998), defending the need for the use of statistics in TQM, admits that employees often feel “intimidated,” “overwhelmed,” and “assaulted by the technical nature of the training” (p. 621). On the other hand, every member of a cross-functional team needs to be competent in discussion procedures. As the following discussion of team-building will demonstrate, the importance of group-process techniques and communication skills should not be underestimated.

### *Team-building*

This section focuses upon the specific influences affecting the development and ongoing work of quality teams (Dean & Bowen, 1994). As will become clear, communication is at the heart of nearly all such influences. The section is divided broadly into four topical areas: leadership, culture, empowerment, and rewards.

*Leadership.* The study of leadership has received a great deal of attention from a wide variety of perspectives (Barge & Hirokawa, 1989; Bass, 1985; Bechler & Johnson, 1995; Burns, 1978; Conger, 1989; DeSouza & Kline, 1995; Gastil, 1994; Geier, 1967; Hackman & Johnson, 1996; Johnson & Bechler, 1998; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987; Tichy & Devanna, 1986; Waldman, 1993; Yukl, 1989). Although it is often recognized that leadership is an influence process that is not inherently connected to hierarchical level or formal role (Northouse, 1997; Husband, 1992), discussions of leadership often begin with the acknowledgement that the upper reaches of organizational hierarchy and superior formal roles confer legitimate authority, which itself is one of the sources of power on which leadership can be based (French & Raven, 1959; Hollander & Offerman, 1990; Read, 1974). Consistent with this perspective is the widely accepted position that top management support is essential for the systematic improvement of quality and the effective implementation of TQM (Choi & Behling, 1997; Deming, 1986; Douglas & Judge, 2001). As Dean and Bowen (1994) put it, “writers on both TQ and transformational leadership stress the communication and reinforcement of values and the articulation and implementation of a vision. In TQ, this entails aligning organizational members’ values with quality values of customer focus, continuous improvement, and teamwork” (p. 398).<sup>4</sup>

*Culture.* Culture, in management theory, is closely related to the subject of leadership (Schein, 1992). Culture has been described as the "pattern or configuration of interpretations underlying a matrix of cultural manifestations" (Martin, 1992, p.

38), resulting from the knowledge, values and assumptions shared by the members of an organization (Hunt, 1991; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), and which are "taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel" (Schein, 1992, p. 12; see also Earley, 1994; Jones, 1986). Although such acculturation is a function of communication, such definitions generally emphasize the cognitive and affective components of human sensemaking (Harris, 1994; Sackmann, 1991).

Culture, argues Van Maanen (1988), "is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation" (p. 3). The focus upon representation or embodiment differentiates several conceptualizations of culture from those which describe it in purely social psychological terms. Trice and Beyer (1993), for example, refer to cultures as "collective phenomena that *embody* people's responses to the uncertainties and chaos that are inevitable in human life" (p. 2, emphasis added). For Geertz (1973), those phenomena are "historically transmitted pattern[s] of meaning *embodied* in symbols" (p. 89, emphasis added). Culture, for Rosaldo (1989) "refers broadly to the *forms* through which people make sense of their lives" (p. 26, emphasis added), and for Willis (1977), culture is understood "at least in part as the product of collective human *praxis*" (p. 4, emphasis added). Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, and Sanders (1990) make the point that the literature on corporate cultures overstates the case for shared values; they found perceptions of daily practices to be the core of an organization's culture.

With specific reference to TQM, Anderson et al. (1994, p. 475) contend that the Deming Management Method is specifically oriented toward the creation of "an

open, trusting, and cooperative culture . . . Some of [Deming's] 14 points recommend behavioral practices aimed at changing the organization's infrastructure and cultural system." And Waldman (1994, p. 525) refers to both norms and values, and to material practices, suggesting that

culture in TQM organizations has been referred to largely in terms of problem-solving and change orientations. Specifically, these orientations include predominant norms and values that emphasize taking steps to learn about problems and make appropriate changes, sharing information to facilitate cooperative or teamwork efforts to deal with problems both within and between groups, developing employees to deal with problems, and having a customer-focused orientation (see also Bushe, 1988; Hill, 1995).

Teams themselves, and the specific approaches to problem-solving and decision-making that are used by team members, while perhaps not unique to TQM organizations, must be considered fundamental components of quality-focused organizational cultures. And as Chiles and Zorn (1995) discovered, "perceptions of macro-level culture were often closely tied to employees' interpretations of communication with and from management" (p. 22). In their study of a large organization using quality management practices, perceptions of macro-level culture were the most significant influence on employees' sense of empowerment. It is to a consideration of the concept of empowerment in TQM that this discussion now turns.

*Empowerment.* The idea of encouraging participation and commitment among employees by providing a sense of autonomy or empowerment is among the



more controversial components of the TQM philosophy. Waldman (1994), for example, notes that “some people may perform better on a traditional assembly-line process with autocratic management, whereas others respond better to team-oriented assembly methods and high involvement of management” (p. 517). Thus, the appeal and benefits of empowerment cannot be assumed to be consistent across contexts. Nonetheless, there is both a theoretical basis and some empirical support for the claim that worker empowerment increases motivation and job satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1994; Locke & Schweiger, 1979; Miller & Monge, 1986; Monge & Miller, 1988), and that output quality may improve as a result (Dean and Bowen, 1994; Hackman & Oldham, 1980). In terms of commitment to change initiatives such as TQM, “the contributions that [self-directed] teams can make to enhance involvement have long been recognized” (Dean & Bowen, 1994, p. 401; see also Hackman & Wageman, 1995, p. 317), and Waldman argues that “autonomy may be defined as the degree of freedom or discretion a person has over the task domain regarding activities such as determining procedures and scheduling . . . [and that] work designed on the basis of autonomy can enable feelings of freedom and power to effect change in the system” (1994, pp. 527-528).

Although advocates tend to extol TQM's philosophy of worker empowerment (Westphal et al., 1997), detractors perceive it as a managerial legitimation strategy or the manifestation of an exploitative ideology (Hill, 1995; Tuckman, 1995). As Hackman and Wageman (1995, p. 337) put it, “there is in many TQM organizations a chasm between front-line workers' involvement and accountability, on the one hand,

and their actual decision-making authority on the other.” They contend that “the distribution of authority in organizations typically does not change much when TQM is implemented” (Hackman & Wageman, 1995, p. 337), and refer to the tendency among managers to engage in “pseudo-participation: Members are invited to join in discussions about decisions that already have been made or that will be made by someone else. Pseudo-participation is ill-advised, because people almost always are able to tell when they are being manipulated” (Hackman & Wageman, 1995, p. 333). Additionally, the preservation of traditional lines of authority “surely makes it easier to secure the cooperation of middle managers when TQM itself is implemented, since they need not worry about their own authority being eroded” (Hackman & Wageman, 1995, p. 337; see also Hill, 1995). Such half-hearted or deceitful approaches to empowerment might contribute significantly to the failure of TQM programs in organizations.

On the other hand, some critics (Kerfoot & Knights, 1995; McArdle, Rowlinson, Procter, Hassard, & Forrester, 1995; Tuckman, 1995) have suggested that making workers responsible for improvements in quality is a form of hegemony in which front-line employees become the agents of their own oppression. In Dean and Bowen’s (1994, p. 401) terms, “employee involvement is said to be a masquerade for getting workers to self-Taylorize their own jobs, and that teams are really a source of tighter, more oppressive control than hierarchy” (see also Barker, 1993; Deetz & Mumby, 1990; Mumby, 1994, 1997; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985; Webb, 1995; Wendt, 1994). This tension between employee autonomy and the hegemonic effects

entailed in the TQM philosophy of empowerment constitutes one of the focal points for data analysis in this dissertation, as expressed in the following research question:

RQ 3: Among organizations using TQM, what is the role of communication in establishing, and resisting, asymmetrical relations of power?

*Rewards.* There is little agreement on the most appropriate and effective approaches to providing incentives and recognition for team-based quality improvements. Particularly in a social and economic context that tends to extol competition and individual achievement rather than collaboration and group efforts, it is noteworthy that “TQ advocates, most notably Deming, maintain that performance is due mainly to system factors beyond an individual’s control and that, consequently, individual performance appraisals [and individual-based incentive pay systems] should be abolished” (Dean & Bowen, 1994, p. 402; see also Scherkenbach, 1985; Waldman, 1994). There are a number of justifications for this perspective:

One, organizations do get what they pay for, but sometimes they get only that (Kerr, 1975). Two, specific outcomes that are rewarded can become so salient that performers risk losing sight of the larger picture, for example, whom the organization exists to serve or what principles are supposed to guide provision of that service. Three, performance-contingent extrinsic rewards can undermine performers’ intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1971). Four, reward systems that place people in competition for rewards that are distributed from a fixed pool not only divert performers’ attention from customers’ needs but also undermine relationships among members and make it difficult for them to

work together on the collective tasks that are the organization's real work. Five, rewards necessarily are based on some measure, but few measures approximate the full dimensionality of the contributions that really are needed from organization members (Hackman & Wageman, 1995, pp. 328-329; see also Argyle, 1991; Scholtes, 1988).

I would add the idea that, for most organizations, failures can be more instructive than successes: to reward only successes may discourage the kind of experimentation that produces important information without delivering direct improvements in quality. "Skunk works"—teams that are expected to fail as a necessary part of learning— should be encouraged (Sitkin et al., 1994). As Waldman (1994, p. 530) notes, "traditional performance appraisal and reward mechanisms reward people who do well within the system. However, such procedures accomplish little in an attempt to improve the system." A better approach, albeit one that has "received virtually no research attention in management theory" (Dean & Bowen, 1994, p. 402), may reside in the use of symbolic and social recognition rewards that can be widely shared and that foster team and organization-wide commitment.

#### Summary

This chapter has provided an introduction to the dissertation, including a statement of the problem under investigation, a theoretical rationale for the study, and the necessary definitions and conceptual parameters for an understanding of the area under investigation. Three research questions were articulated:

RQ 1: Among organizations using TQM, what is the function of communication in satisfying customer requirements?

RQ 2: Within TQM organizations, how do employees communicatively create shared understandings of organizational activity and workplace relationships?

RQ 3: Among organizations using TQM, what is the role of communication in establishing, and resisting, asymmetrical relations of power?

The next chapter provides a description of the method through which these questions will be addressed.

## CHAPTER 2: METHOD

This chapter describes the method used to develop responses to the research questions. More specifically, this dissertation employs qualitative data and a form of content analysis for the development of grounded theoretical insights intended to inform our understanding of communication processes in TQM organizations.

In general, qualitative research is oriented toward the interpretation of experience and the intersubjective construction of meaning, rather than control and prediction (Denzin, 1994, 1996; Geertz, 1973, 1983). In order to more fully elaborate this orientation and the specific approach taken in this analysis, the following discussion is divided into four sections. The first section presents a historical and conceptual overview of qualitative research methods in general. The second section describes the data that form the basis for grounded responses to the research questions. The third section presents the analytical framework used in the interpretation of the data. The fourth section discusses criteria for ensuring and evaluating the credibility of the analysis. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

### Historical and Conceptual Overview

The present widespread acceptance of qualitative methods in social science research has its roots in the anthropological traditions of participant-observation and in-depth interviewing, which were adapted by U.S. sociologists to the study of American communities in the first half of the twentieth century (Lynd & Lynd, 1929; Whyte, 1943). The past 35 years, however, have been witness to a veritable explosion

in the conceptual refinement and application of qualitative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Lindlof, 1995; Spradley, 1979). Among the most significant developments for organizational communication researchers in particular was Geertz's (1973) semiotic conception of culture and his interpretive rather than functionalist approach to the analysis of human communication. His approach encouraged a proliferation of research concerning communicative action and the intersubjective construction of meaning. By the 1980s, organizational culture had become a theoretical breakthrough in sociology and management science (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Smircich, 1983), and an increasing number of organizational researchers began to incorporate qualitative methods into their study designs (Bantz, 1983, 1993; Putnam, 1983; Schwartzman, 1993; Weick, 1983).

Qualitative research should not be understood as a formal set of routine practices. Every venture into the field consists of a unique constellation of researcher interests and attributes coming to bear on constantly changing interactions among unpredictable human actors in widely varying social locations over irretrievable moments in time. As Punch (1986) explains, such research “involves an inexhaustible variety of settings and an endless range of situational exigencies for which ready-made recipes do not exist” (p. 26). As a result, methodological decisions unfold in a highly context-specific—and essentially non-replicable—manner (see Johnson, 1990 for a contrasting view). There are, however, general principles and practices that provide a methodological framework for qualitative research. As noted above, the

ethnographic approaches of participant-observation and interviewing constitute the core of the qualitative research tradition. We now turn to a brief consideration of these approaches.

### *Participant-Observation*

Qualitative research is often equated with ethnography, which itself is generally understood to mean the practice of participant-observation. The tradition of participant-observation has grown out of the romanticized tales of anthropologists living among isolated tribal groups and producing exotic descriptions of their lives and social practices (see Clifford, 1988, for an overview). With the adaptation of ethnographic methods to contemporary social groups, a range of conceptual refinements began to take place. Junker (1960) developed a continuum of researcher roles, with the "complete participant" at one end representing the greatest degree of involvement, and the "complete observer" at the other end, representing the lowest degree of involvement. The "participant-observer" is less intimately involved than the complete participant, and the "observer-participant" is somewhat more involved than the complete observer. Adler and Adler's (1987) distinction between peripheral member-, active member-, and complete member-researcher roles is similar in its attempt to connect researcher role with relational intimacy. Snow, Benford, and Anderson (1986), discussing the "derived" dimension of fieldwork roles, identified four characteristic researcher roles: controlled skeptic, ardent activist, buddy-researcher, and credentialled expert. By "derived" Snow et al. refer to the personal and situational constraints and possibilities from which these roles emerge and are



negotiated. Although Schwartzman (1993) advises organizational researchers to determine the role they will adopt before entering the field, there is an increasing awareness that such roles are co-constructed by the researcher and the subjects: "Together, the qualities and attributes of the fieldworker interact with those of the setting and its members to shape, if not create, an emergent role for the researcher" (Horowitz, 1986, p. 410). Although the motive for attempting to develop insider status is to reduce the chance that the researcher will be taken in by impression management strategies and misinformation (Adler & Adler, 1987), some researchers argue that difference cannot genuinely be overcome and that excessive identification with subjects may impede more than facilitate research (Horowitz, 1986). Gordon (1987), for example, found that openness and honesty, even when producing disagreement between the researcher and proselytizing groups who normally seek complete commitment, actually improved trust and rapport.

There are a number of methodological tensions discussed in the fieldwork literature. For example, even as researchers are being reminded to remain alert and to use all their senses (Adler & Adler, 1994) they are being warned to keep detailed fieldnotes. Fieldworkers are advised to sharpen their eyes for detail through a thorough familiarity with the literature and an explicit theoretical focus, but are also warned that reliance upon such preconceptions may jeopardize sensitivity to subjects' own terms and categories (Emerson, 1987). Research teams are arguably better than solo fieldwork by virtue of the multiple perspectives being brought to bear, and worse due to the amplified effects of researcher intrusion (Clifford, 1988). Perhaps the only

consistent technical advice reiterates the importance of extended immersion at the research site in order to confirm tentative conclusions with numerous observations from a variety of perspectives, and through the use of member checks (Fielding & Fielding, 1986). As an important subset within the domain of qualitative research methods, participant-observation is a useful and well-established method for gathering qualitative data. This dissertation, however, relies exclusively on data collected through the use of in-depth interviews, and it is to a consideration of interviewing as a research method that this discussion now turns.

### *Interviewing*

Many conceptions of research interviews consider them purposeful, structured conversations following a question-and-answer format intended to elicit information (Briggs, 1984, 1986; Douglas, 1985; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Mason, 1993; McCracken, 1988; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). On the other hand, interviews are often described as semi-structured—even as unstructured or playful—and are perhaps better understood as situational conversations in which data and meanings are co-constructed by questioners and respondents, rather than as face-to-face survey instruments (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Hall & Callery, 2001; Mishler, 1986; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973; Thomas, 1993).

The communicative competence of the interviewer and the relationship established between the interviewer and respondent(s) has a significant effect upon both the interview participants and the data that is developed during the process (Kvale, 1995). Aldridge (1993) argues that "to gain access and secure cooperation, to

achieve rapport, to gather sensitive information—all rely on the successful negotiation of the prestige relationship between researcher and informant" (p. 105). He suggests that open-ended questions and a familiar conversational style are necessary for genuine rapport (see also Hunter, 1993; Lofland, 1976; Wax, 1980). Davies and Dodd (2002, p. 285) contend that “applying a rigidly systematic approach to interview questions does not work and rigor needs to be rethought in the immediate context of the interview because the luxury of a ‘second go’ is not an option.” In a related caution, McCracken (1988) argues that active listening threatens to be as obtrusive as formal structure is directive; both mediate—and potentially distort—the communication of subjective experience.

Originally developed as a tool for market research, focus group interviews are useful for triangulation with other qualitative—and quantitative—methods, as well as for generating data unavailable through other methods (Greenbaum, 1993; Herndon, 1993; Morgan, 1988). Focus groups have been categorized by Morgan and Spanish (1984) as exploratory, clinical, or phenomenological: "Exploratory focus groups serve primarily as a means of generating hypotheses; clinical groups provide insights into participants' unconscious motivations; and phenomenological groups give the researcher access to the participants' common sense conceptions and everyday explanations" (p. 255).

In conclusion, interviewing provides a highly flexible and effective method for acquiring data from which valuable theoretical insights can be developed. The next section provides a description of the actual data used in this dissertation.

## Data

Data for this dissertation consist of interview transcripts assembled as part of a large-scale research project supported by the National Science Foundation (Grant #SBR-94-20461 and #SBR-94-96229). A three-person research team composed of professors from three different U. S. universities conducted nearly a hundred semi-structured interviews with representatives of ten organizations involved with successful TQM programs, yielding over 1600 single-spaced pages of data. Access to the data was granted by one of the primary researchers, who is also serving as chair of the dissertation committee. In order to preserve the confidentiality of the organizations participating in the study, I will refer to them according to the same pseudonyms employed by the original researchers (see Table 2.1).

The original studies for which these data were gathered were concerned with developing a contingency theory of TQM. Sitkin et al. (1994) had hypothesized that approaches to quality might vary in effectiveness, depending upon whether organizations were oriented more toward control and consistency in task accomplishment, or toward the need for learning and innovation in process improvement. Semi-structured interviews were oriented toward eliciting narratives of organizational successes and failures in implementing TQM.<sup>5</sup>

Table 2.1: Pseudonyms of Participating Organizations

Organization	Type of Organization
Communication Equipment	Video-conferencing equipment manufacturer
Elec-tonics	Integrated circuit and electronic component manufacturer
Family Publications	Printer of magazines and color inserts
Material Movers	Transportation (trucking)
Metal Fabrications	Sheet metal work, machining
Midwestern University	Public, 4-year university
Ritz-Carlton Hotels (no pseudonym required)	Hotel rooms, meeting facilities
TechPrint	Imaging and duplicating equipment manufacturer
U. S. Air Force (no pseudonym required)	Military service
U. S. Motors	Motor vehicle manufacturer

As described by Browning et al. (2000, p. 207),  
an initial round of interviews with the liaison person for the research in the organization . . . asked for (1) a description of the approach to quality the organization had embraced, and (2) for access to individuals who had worked on projects that represented the range of circumstances likely to provide data on our research question.

The resulting snowball or chain sample of interviewees is of recognized benefit to “inductive, theory-building analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28; see also Davies & Dodd, 2002; Hamel, 1993; Johnson, 1990). Follow up interviews were then conducted, and, “to assure that we had a wide context of details, we asked about the ‘story’ of the project to reduce the amount of diagnosis by the interviewees and to

encourage them to provide details they might otherwise deem trivial” (Browning et al., 2000, p. 207). The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Respondents included both males and females from across a range of hierarchical levels and task-specific divisions.

### Analytical Framework

This section describes the dimensions of the framework used in the analysis of the data. There are two components to the analytical framework: the unit of analysis and the coding scheme by which data were sorted and interpreted.

#### *Unit of Analysis*

The unit of analysis in this dissertation consists of the incident (Browning, 1978; Patton, 1990) or episode (Weston et al., 2001), terms which in this context are fundamentally synonymous. Patton explains that, “in qualitative studies, units of analysis may also be particular kinds of events, occurrences, or incidents. For example, a quality assurance effort in a health . . . program might focus only on those critical incidents in which a patient fails to receive expected or desirable treatment” (1990, p. 167). In Browning’s grounded theory project, incidents were defined as distinct and complete statements, “which made subject change the principle criteria for dividing the data. . . . Incidents var[ied] in length from one sentence to one paragraph” (1978, p. 94). For Weston et al., in their study of professors’ use of reflection in teaching, “the *episode* of reflection was finally chosen as the unit of analysis. . . . Episodes ranged in length from one line to several pages. Within an episode, we used the coding system to analyze by word and phrase, which allowed us

to be attentive to possible meanings assumed or intended by the speaker” (2001, p. 393). The *American College Dictionary* (1968) uses the term incident to define an episode, and the term episode to define an incident: to avoid confusion, I have chosen to use the term incident.

### *Coding*

Trujillo (1992) contends that three complementary interpretive frameworks—the functionalist, the romantic, and the critical—allow qualitative researchers to “explicate multiple senses of reality (including power and ideology) and to reveal the multiple (not just managerial) voices which assign meaning to these senses of reality” (p. 366). Martin (1992) discusses a very similar approach, based on “Habermas’ three-way typology of interests: technical (a structural-functionalist, managerial orientation), practical (the interpretive position of seeking to understand context-specific meaning), and emancipatory (seeking new ways of organizing that would be less oppressive)” (p. 191). Both Martin and Trujillo agree that the study of organizations may be fruitfully undertaken using any of these interpretive approaches to qualitative data, and that the question of which approach—or approaches—to select should be determined by the purpose of the research. No single one of these interpretations should be considered more truthful than the others; each may contribute to our understanding of the ways communication operates in TQM organizations. In combination, these complementary interpretations provide reasonable control over researcher biases, improving the credibility of the study, and all three served as dimensions in the data coding process, as elaborated below.

Incidents were first coded according to categories that were developed following a preliminary examination of the interview transcripts in conjunction with a review of the relevant academic literature. This sort of give-and-take between the theoretical literature and the data is consistent with Hall and Callery's (2001) suggestion that an "investigator's ability to use personal and professional experiences and the literature to see the research situation and data in new ways . . . maximize[s] analytic procedures so that potential biases held by the researcher are countered" (p. 263; see also Maxwell, 1996; Weston et al., 2001). The thematic convergence between respondents' statements and scholarly analyses of TQM yielded several analytic categories. Some, such as leadership and empowerment, were anticipated and identified with no difficulty. Others, such as resistance/opposition to TQM and specific quality problems, emerged largely as a consequence of their repetition by interviewees.

I began reading the transcripts with the fundamental principles of TQM in mind, as preliminary coding categories or opening reference points: Customer Satisfaction, Continuous Improvement, and Teamwork. Elaborations on these categories emerged as I familiarized myself with the content of the transcripts. Most of these elaborations resonated with the practices and techniques identified in Chapter One, and collectively served as the emergent framework for the open data coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The category "Customer Satisfaction" had the fewest such elaborations, with only one, "partnerships," being used to distinguish statements generally concerned with meeting customer requirements from those



which referred to some form of strategic alliance between organizations. Often, the key words “customers” and “partnerships” themselves signified into which category a datum would be assigned. In a similar fashion, “Continuous Improvement” expanded to comprise the “tools/techniques,” “metrics/results,” and “quality standards” categories. The “Teamwork” category included the divisions, “communication,” “meetings,” “training,” leadership,” “culture,” “empowerment/support,” and “rewards/benefits.”

Additional coding categories without previously identified topical analogues—one referred to as “specific problems,” and one called “resistance/opposition,”—emerged during this initial coding process. Specific problems as a category involved descriptions of social or technical difficulties faced by organizations using TQM, and resistance/opposition as a category involved data that demonstrated direct objections or other forms of interference with TQM change initiatives by organizational members.

Information from the transcripts that was not used for analysis went into an “unused” category. Respondent discourse falling into this category generally consisted of descriptions of organization-specific technical processes. For example, U. S. Motors paint shop employees provided detailed descriptions of equipment and techniques used to produce high quality finishes on automobiles, and Electronics employees provided some highly technical descriptions of the kinds of integrated circuits that they manufactured. These data were occasionally interesting, but were deemed essentially irrelevant to the present analysis.

Concurrent with the process of category formation, coding involves the process of determining the fit between a datum and a given category. Morse and Singleton (2001, p. 842) have described the process in some detail:

By examining data, piece by piece, the investigator ascertains if the qualities or dimensions of interest of two bits of data are in accordance or if a datum is similar to data within a category. In other words, fit has occurred when it is established that two entities have characteristics, qualities, or dimensions in common. Even when these characteristics, qualities, or dimensions are not actually identical but similar, fit allows these data to be associated, to be placed within the same class or category, or to be linked with one another. In this way, determining fit enables data to be sorted and subsequently reduced.

Following the initial coding, I constructed a simple analytical matrix using the topical categories of Customer Satisfaction, Continuous Improvement, and Teamwork as y-axis dimensions and the interpretive categories of Functional, Romantic, and Critical as x-axis dimensions (see Table 2.2).

All data excerpts within each topical category were reviewed for appropriateness of fit, and were then further coded according to interpretive categories. Unlike the relatively explicit content cues that guided initial coding and category formation, assignment to an interpretive category depended largely upon whether the data appeared to relate better to one of the research questions than to another. Data relating best to RQ1 was assigned to the functional category; data

Table 2.2: Secondary Coding Matrix

	Functional	Romantic	Critical
<b>Customer Satisfaction</b>			
Partnerships			
<b>Continuous Improvement</b>			
Tools/techniques			
Metrics/results			
Quality standards			
<b>Teamwork</b>			
Communication			
Meetings			
Training			
Leadership			
Culture			
Empowerment			
Rewards/benefits			
Resistance/ Opposition			
<b>Specific Problems</b>			

relating best to RQ2 was assigned to the romantic category; data relating best to RQ3 was assigned to the critical category. This connection between a given research question and a specific interpretive perspective may appear surprisingly convenient;

in fact, the wording of the research questions was to some extent contrived in order to facilitate coding and to permit the most comprehensive inclusion of informant testimony possible. In some cases, a datum might have been appropriately assigned to more than one category: in these cases, such a datum was assigned to multiple categories and made available for interpretation in each, as necessary. Through an ongoing process of constant comparative analysis, categories were refined and examples of data were selected for inclusion in the written report of the study.

### Credibility

The acceptance of qualitative research methods has occasionally been constrained by a perceived lack of scientific credibility. Advocates of qualitative research, however, have argued that positivist criticisms of the credibility of qualitative methods were based on the reliability and validity criteria of experimental designs and quantitative analysis, criteria that are not directly transferable to or compatible with the philosophical and methodological premises of qualitative research (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Hammersley, 1992; Leininger, 1994; Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlpine, Wiseman, & Beauchamp, 2001). Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle, (2001, p. 528) contend that, “[b]ecause qualitative research is often defined by uncertainty, fluidity, and emergent ideas, so too must be the validity criteria that give credence to these efforts” (see also Lincoln, 1995; Maxwell, 1992, 1996). In addition, the epistemological developments of postmodernism have provided support for the use of qualitative methods by challenging the alleged objectivity of quantitative methods: “It has by now been well argued that the

elimination of subjectivity in quantitative or qualitative research is impossible. . . . Knowledge can never be impartial, disinterested, or value free” (Davies & Dodd, 2002, pp. 282, 284; see also Haraway, 1988; Whitemore et al., 2001).

Qualitative research is arguably as much an art as a science, and a lack of flexibility and creativity “can threaten the artfulness and sensitivity to meaning that are essential to quality. . . . Adherence to methods is not an assurance of validity and in fact may impede the development of exceptional qualitative research” (Whitemore et al., 2001, p. 526; see also Thorne, 1997). Although the focus upon interpretation and the construction of meaning has allowed qualitative researchers to proceed without traditional scientific concern for the control of quantifiable variables (Foss & Foss, 1994; Lather, 1993), there has been an ongoing challenge to provide some criteria by which the credibility of qualitative studies could be assessed (Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Guba, 1981; Kirk & Miller, 1996; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996; Smith, 1990). Whitemore et al. (2001) have reviewed the debate over standards for evaluating qualitative research and have delineated the numerous key validity criteria that emerged over the past decade. Their summarization, intended to help maximize descriptive and interpretive validity, identifies “credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity [as] primary criteria, whereas explicitness, vividness, creativity, thoroughness, congruence, and sensitivity are considered secondary criteria” (Whitemore et al., 2001, p. 529).

Whitemore et al. (2001) group credibility and authenticity together in their analysis, largely in terms of the plausibility of the researcher’s account (see also

Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In addition, conscious attention to the representativeness of the account and the evidence used to support it (Thorne, 1997; Tompkins, 1994), and to the use of respondent validation, are encouraged to ensure authenticity. Respondent validation refers to “the comparison of data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from . . . the accounts of different participants” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 198).

Criticality is explained partly in terms of reflexive self-criticism (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Guba, 1990; Hammersley, 1992; Hawes, 1994; Marshall, 1990), referring to the need for constant critical reflection concerning one’s own assumptions, biases, and values. Hall and Callery (2001) explain reflexivity as “coming clean about predispositions so that readers can adjust proffered interpretations in appropriate ways” (p. 263). Other recommendations include the exhaustive documentation of procedures (Davies & Dodd, 2002; Kirk & Miller, 1996), and of claims with data (Fitch, 1994; Maxwell, 1996), and the inclusion of and accounting for contradictory or disconfirming evidence (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Davies & Dodd, 2002; Marshall, 1990; Maxwell, 1996; Weston et al., 2001).

Accordingly, I have endeavored in this report to present extensive informant support for each of three plausible accounts of the role of communication in TQM, providing respondent validation across organizations even to the point of redundancy in several cases. Conflicting or contradictory accounts have been included and, in concert with the use of three complementary interpretive frameworks, these accounts provide some

protection against biased or partial representation of respondents' descriptions of their subjective experiences.

### Summary

This dissertation employs qualitative data and a form of content analysis for the development of a grounded theory of communication intended to inform our understanding of communication processes in TQM organizations. This chapter, first, provided a historical and conceptual overview of qualitative research methods in general. Second, it described the interview data that form the basis for grounded responses to the research questions. Third, it detailed the analytical framework used in the interpretation of the data. The final section discussed criteria for ensuring and evaluating the credibility of the analysis. In the next three chapters, analysis of data from functional, romantic, and critical perspectives is oriented toward generating grounded theoretical responses to the three research questions.

## CHAPTER 3: FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Research Question One asks: Among organizations using TQM, what is the function of communication in satisfying customer requirements? In responding to this question, this chapter presents the functional or technical interpretation of TQM as an organizational strategy. The emphasis here is on how communication is used as a tool to continuously improve organizational processes and outcomes, and to satisfy customer requirements. The chapter first presents informants' identification of communication as an organizational problem. It then turns to a discussion of the role of communication in addressing the issues of continuous improvement and meeting or exceeding customers' expectations. Analysis of the data suggests that TQM provides a rationale for communication between organizational partners that encourages integrative or collaborative solutions to context-specific organizational problems. The chapter concludes with the theoretical implications of this analysis.

### Communication Issues

Communication issues exist both within organizations and between organizations. This section is divided into two parts. The first part presents data concerning internal or intraorganizational communication issues, primarily those involving communication between employees or between employees and management. The second part presents data concerning interorganizational communication issues, generally involving communication between a given organization and its suppliers and customers.



### *Intraorganizational Communication Issues*

Participants from virtually every organization identified shortcomings in communication as a fundamental problem. As an accounting supervisor at Material Movers put it, “Probably the weakest link that we’ve always had through this company is our communications. I think that’s common in any company.” An operations manager at Communication Equipment reported that “One of the complaints you always hear is, you know, ‘There’s not enough communication in here. We don’t know what’s going on.’” A similar statement was made by a quality supervisor at U.S. Motors:

Communication is the most difficult thing, even in this business. Our hourly workers complain about it that they’re not tied into the communication loop. Supervisors feel that they’re not part of it. In general it’s the biggest issue that we have. If we could communicate better, I think everything would improve.

Although it is not unusual for employees to express dissatisfaction with the extent to which they are included in communication “loops,” it is significant and somewhat less common that supervisors and managers acknowledge both the pervasiveness of concern about ineffective communication, and the importance of communication in improving organizational effectiveness.

How much employees need to “know what’s going on” is a long-standing subject of disagreement between workers and managers, but these data indicate that perceptions of open communication contribute to employees’ feelings of satisfaction with and commitment to the organizations and managers they work for. As one front-

line member of a Family Publications process improvement team stated, “Management is a lot more communicative, which was a big problem before. We feel more like we’re all in this together.” More open managerial communication is partly the result of TQM’s emphasis on customer satisfaction, and its conceptualization of employees as both internal customers and members of problem solving teams. Interestingly, it does not appear that providing employees with strategic or confidential information is of particular importance. Instead, informants suggested that shared understandings and the creation of a sense of common purpose are the most valuable dimensions of more open communication between superiors and subordinates. That such common ground is a potential problem was admitted by the operations manager at Communication Equipment, who acknowledged that the clarity of his organization’s vision was both vital, and subject to possible misunderstanding:

You’ve got to have a vision, where it is you’re going, and you’ve got to communicate that vision. You’ve got to frequently reiterate that vision, so that everything is done in that context. And so it may be there were times that I wasn’t consistent enough in communicating. You know, I knew exactly what I wanted to do, but maybe I didn’t communicate that adequately or frequently enough.

TQM appears to provide a foundation—both structural and cultural—for improving the likelihood of more satisfactory intraorganizational communication. In discussing the formation of cross-functional problem solving teams, the product planning manager at Communication Equipment reiterated the risk of

misunderstanding, and explained that, “The key thing here was to hopefully improve communication among departments, put some things in place so that you could have a common dialogue about something and say, ‘Where is this?’ and people would understand what different things are meant.” Teams provide a communication structure, and participatory decision making and group discussion processes occurring within team meetings constitute rituals, through which member satisfaction with communication may be improved.

Shared understandings of task requirements and organizational missions are enabled or constrained by the effectiveness of intraorganizational communication processes. It is important to realize that this is not simply a question of the rhetorical competence of managers, but is a function of interactional processes that may be either supported or undermined by the audience of subordinates. The operations manager at Communication Equipment, who appeared unusually sensitive to his possible shortcomings as a communicator, nonetheless recognized that, in meetings, some people

may be cutting up or a guy may be dozing off, but the standard complaint remains, “How come nobody ever tells us anything?” Maybe I’m not an effective communicator, or maybe they don’t have the same interest. I’m not sure which it is, but I’ve seen them do the same thing to other speakers. . . . You just have to keep hammering. Keep doing it and keep going back again and again and eventually it becomes part of a routine.

Front-line employees from several organizations indicated that they

sometimes feel alienated by repetitive and routine managerial communication, and that they desire a greater sense of collaboration with management and the sense that they belong to a cohesive organizational culture. Frustrations arise from ambiguities and contradictions in managerial and interdepartmental messages, and enthusiasm for change may wane if members hear the same uninspired points “hammered” in again and again.

### *Interorganizational Communication Issues*

Consistent with TQM’s practical emphasis on customer satisfaction, a number of informants also reported on interorganizational communication problems, something that may present even more difficult control issues than are encountered within a given organization. For example, the operations manager at Communication Equipment, in responding to the ways his own job has changed following the introduction of self-directed production teams, explained that, “Every day that I come in, I could be faced with something totally unforeseen. I’m basically here to deal with problems that they can’t handle on the floor . . . customer complaints, customer requests, production scheduling, new products, employee feedback requests, those types of things.” With the exception of “employee feedback requests,” each of these issues is tied specifically to communication with outside suppliers or organizational customers. Similarly, informants at Electronics and U.S. Motors discussed problems involving feedback to outside suppliers, and in providing timely information to customers concerning unanticipated difficulties in meeting production or delivery

requirements. For instance, one Electronics cross-functional team leader explained that,

To a degree, as you say, every customer is unique. . . . It might just be that we have to have the interaction and communication. Communication is becoming more and more a requirement, and I don't know what tool you bring to bear other than the classical tool of making the contact, follow-up, and document it.

In addition to such "classical" approaches to surveying customers, the new "tool" that all of these organizations have brought to bear on such communication-based problems—both within and between their organizations—is the cross-functional problem solving team.

Clearly, intra- and interorganizational communication difficulties interfere with effective process improvement and production goals. The next section turns to the importance of integrative or collaborative problem solving, considering, first, the ways in which cross-functional teams facilitate communication across organizational functions or departments, improving internal processes and organizational outputs. Second, it addresses the practice of facilitating dialogue between organizations, particularly the solicitation of customer feedback and the boundary spanning technique of including customers and suppliers themselves on process improvement teams.

## Communication and Integrative Problem Solving

As the previous section demonstrated, there is an increasing awareness among organizations involved in TQM that organizational difficulties are, to a great extent, related to communication problems. One of the fundamental contributions of the TQM philosophy is the idea that cooperation is essential to the identification of integrative (i.e. mutually beneficial) solutions. As an informant from the billing office at Midwestern University's dental school put it, "Actually it's good just to get together and talk about problems, too. Because we have people working on different things within the office. They realize how what they do affects everybody else. And that's a real education in itself."

In response, TQM organizations have turned to teams as a structured approach to improving communication, and the data indicate widespread—though not universal—enthusiasm for the team approach. One team leader at Elec-tonics, an organization that has won numerous awards for quality, including the Malcolm Baldrige Award, ties these indicators of success specifically to the effectiveness of its cross-functional teams:

In my opinion, the only way for a corporation as big as Elec-tonics to accomplish that in as diverse a portfolio in business as we have is through the cross-functional team. It has worked great. . . . There is a tremendous amount of data that we can collect to support the application of this management process in our industry. It was extremely effective.

Informants from every organization included in this study indicated that the

effectiveness of cross-functional teams is fundamentally a result of the diverse perspectives and collaborative communication processes brought to bear in the team context. This discussion turns now to the use of cross-functional teams as a way of improving communication and integrative problem solving within organizations. The chapter then presents a discussion of communication and integrative problem solving between organizations.

#### *Intraorganizational Team Diversity*

“So far,” contends an Electronics team leader, “I haven't heard any instance that the use of diverse teams has been overused. I've yet to hear the point made that people feel that the mix of teams as a means of solving these kinds of problems is not the solution.” Informants' descriptions of member diversity on cross-functional teams takes essentially two forms: including representatives from different divisions or departments within their organizations, and including representatives from different hierarchical levels within their organizations.

#### *Cross-functional Team Membership*

Including representatives from across functional divisions allows teams to take advantage of diverse understandings of possible causes and solutions to organizational problems, and to sensitize members to the specific concerns of members from outside their own particular functional areas. For example, the managing editor at Family Publications reported that

the different divisions, printing and publishing, work together better now because we are on task teams. People who you might have only seen in the

hall or in the copyroom before, now we're working side-by-side. I know what this person does on a day-to-day basis, and he knows what I do in my job.

Opportunities for collaborative problem solving increase along with the acquisition of such knowledge, as a result of both greater interpersonal sensitivity and the accumulation of organizational expertise. Informants from Midwestern University, which has made widespread use of both cross-functional and self-directed teams, frequently mentioned the inclusion of participants from across task-related areas and, interestingly, also include "disinterested" participants as a means of encouraging clarity in problem solving discussions. The administrative manager for oral medicine, pathology and surgery at the University's dental school described the composition of one of her teams as follows:

We started out actually on the team with six members. Two people from the billing office who are our billing experts. Two of us were from departments who provided patient services and . . . one of the team members was involved in a court department more or less, and so had really no input in any aspect of this problem, so she became our objective observer. She was the one who asked "Why" or "How do you do this? Explain this to us." So in that respect she was very valuable to us because she forced all of us to take a step back and very thoroughly describe what happens at each step of the process. And then the sixth member of the team is actually someone who works for Patient Services here in this school, which covers all departments in the school. And she was actually the charge entry person who would, at the computer, enter



what was done on any particular patient and which would generate a bill on that patient. So we all had slightly different takes. . . . But the team was essentially created around that problem. We were specifically chosen because the majority of us had some piece of the process.

This speaker explained that one of the ways in which such diversity benefited the team was through discussions in which participants “educated” each other with respect to their various specialties. By increasing the general awareness of the numerous elements that contribute to providing a particular product or service, teams are better able to understand both the potential sources of problems and the requirements for an integrative solution.

The data provided numerous specific examples of the ways in which cross-functional team membership enhanced integrative problem solving ability. For example, a member of an Electronics team specifically charged with opening a “just-in-time” warehouse to service a nearby U. S. Motors facility explains that,

We had engineering, planning, and marketing . . . we've got a credit guy on the team. . . we ended up getting an inventory guy on the team. . . .The team has become much more expanded as far as cross-functional job responsibilities. There probably isn't any problem that could be presented where we don't have a member or can't bring one in that could address that.

The leader of the Electronics delivery improvement team explained that the inclusion of members from across a range of functions has enabled many specialists to see specific problems from a larger, more systemic perspective. Where once

managers were more concerned with protecting their turf and maintaining boundaries, they now cooperate much more fully to support others and solve organizational—rather than merely departmental—problems.

For some organizations, crossing functions involves actual cross-training of team members, particularly when the teams are intended to be self-managing or self-directed, as well. The quality director at Metal Fabricators, for example, talked about changing from the use of individual work stations to a set of cross-trained, self-directed “cells.” The term “cells” was chosen to avoid the competitive implications associated with the word, “teams,” further emphasizing the cooperative intentions behind this approach to quality improvement:

In a cell concept, whether it be two, whether it be three, four, five people on a given process in there, all three, four, five people are cross-trained on all the other processes within that cell. . . they become intimately knowledgeable of that product, not just their given process.

When such cross-functional teams are also self-directed, informants indicated that individual, as well as organizational, concerns are addressed with greater effectiveness. Organizations are able to show improvements in efficiency as well as quality, and the interests and capacities of individual team members are addressed more effectively, often resulting in greater job satisfaction and commitment. As the operations manager at Communication Equipment explained,

People on the floor do their own inspection. They do their own vendor management. They write their own process documentation. If there's a

problem, whatever it might be, they solve it. They don't come to me with a problem. And what I found is that that kind of process does not come natural to a lot of people who work on the manufacturing floor. . . . Some people are absolutely not comfortable with it at all. . . . It's where they have to interface with more people is where they were uncomfortable. But by setting up teams, usually there's one person on a team who kind of wants to go talk to somebody . . . So the teams have really helped a lot in our success there.

The same informant also discussed the change from assembly line production (in which each person was responsible for a single operation—component assembly, cabinet fabrication, testing, packaging and shipping) to cross-functional, self-directed team production (three person, self-directed teams that built, tested, and packaged complete products). The resulting improvement in communication, coordination, and problem solving enabled a 50 percent increase in the size of the workforce to generate more than a three-fold increase in production.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Superior-Subordinate Collaboration*

In addition to functional differentiation, several organizations include representatives from across hierarchical levels on their quality teams. Managerial participants were unequivocal in reporting the value of input from employees who actually perform the productive work of the organization. As the quality supervisor at U. S. Motors put it, "Hourly participation's the key to any success that you have here. If you want a process to be implemented, involve your hourly operators." The reason most often cited for such success is that those who are directly involved in front-line

production processes are the most qualified to make meaningful suggestions for improvement. For example, a Ritz-Carlton bellman discussing the use of self-directed teams explained that team members “try to look at everything and look at what’s wrong and how we can improve it and then sort of like present it to the management and say, ‘We think that this could be improved this way.’” A U.S. Air Force nurse involved in a major facility improvement team argued that, “The people that work in the trenches have good problem solving, and they know what’s working and what’s not. It’s just a matter of good upward and downward communication. And I think years and years ago it was never good upward, it was only good downward.” The significance of this improvement in communication, especially in an organization so entrenched in hierarchy as a branch of the military, cannot be overstated. A member of an Air Force maintenance squadron linked these new communicative possibilities specifically to the TQM change initiative:

I was an instructor for quality applications, and the feedback that I would get from a lot of the airmen coming in, you know, they’d say, “I have so many ideas, but I don’t have the avenue to take that to the top.” And TQM is allowing that to happen. Sometimes, you know, there are road blocks, but eventually, I’d say 60 to 70 percent of ideas at lower levels are starting to float to the top because of increased communication, improved teamwork, things of that nature.

Another Air Force informant added, “It allowed people of low rank to have a say in the things that we do. . . . TQM gives you that forum to express their opinion on

things, and using the tools they were able to put together a process that's worthwhile. It's definitely proving that two heads are better than one."

Unusual as it may sound at first, even the Air Force chaplains have instituted a TQM program, and credited the use of teams with a degree of success that they themselves found surprising:

The one thing that stands out to me that I like about the quality process that we actually try to use in the chaplaincy is what I'd refer to as the concept of team. And that is that we involve everyone in the process. And we not only involve them in the process, but we give them pieces of the process and allow them—we call it empowerment—but it's using people and using their talents. . . . If you want to play the numbers game, we have a metric that we use to measure customer visitation satisfaction. . . . I can show you the data. It had been almost flat-lined . . . and almost immediately after we did this, it jumped up . . . I think about 11 percent increase in satisfaction.

Another chaplain added, "Attendance is going up . . . and the surveys that we got back from commanders showed a great increase in their approval rate of what we're doing, greater support."

At Family Publications, the inclusion of front-line employees on cross functional teams yielded improvements in costly four-color printing processes:

Employees were empowered to take a look at it. They would say, "This could be done better." There were processes that were done one way because they had been done that way for so long. . . . This has been in business for a long

time, and it is family owned, so it was stagnant. TQM changed that. . . They have been changed, and they're better.

At the Ritz-Carlton, the housekeeping supervisor uses statistical process control software to generate a report that scores her staff on quality. Statistically, she contends, housekeeping teams

yield us lower defects than individuals, down from 26 per room to an average of 8 per room. . . . But that may be skewed a little bit because, don't forget, they're using their same team techniques when they're working by themselves now. . . . Because they're in teams, there is some overwhelming benefits. For example, just from the customer's point of view, forget about productivity increases, the customer sees it's only taking 15 minutes to clean my room right now.

Clearly, the organization benefits from the use of housekeeping teams, as do the customers: the work is done both faster and better. But the housekeepers themselves appreciate the change as well. They are able to collaborate on improving quality, since, as one worker explained, "What she miss, I catch; what I miss, she catch." They have company and a chance for conversation while working, alleviating boredom. And the improvements have yielded a cost savings to the hotel, a portion of which is returned to the housekeepers in their weekly paychecks.

In each of these examples, TQM and the use of quality teams has improved organizational communication processes, encouraging front-line employees to contribute effective solutions and process improvements, and encouraging

supervisors to listen to their subordinates and act upon their inputs. These kinds of mutual gains were acknowledged by informants across nearly every organization, resulting in a widely shared commitment to the change initiative across organizational levels. As an Air Force team member explained, “I think also something that we’re seeing more and more of, by getting various parties involved with process, you’re gaining commitment. And when you have commitment . . . you get more compliance with the things that you’re trying to implement.” Direct evidence of this commitment was provided by the quality director at Metal Fabrications, who stated that, in order to keep the machines running, teams meet during scheduled breaks and at lunchtime. The company buys the lunch, and the managers claim that their crews do not mind using their breaks for team business:

They’re realizing that they now have a major impact on decisions being made in there. It’s not just the leaders, it’s not just the executives. But they are a part of it, and that enthusiasm itself drives them to want to participate. . . . Plus we implemented gain sharing this last year for the first time, and that’s been wonderful. We’ve seen a big increase in our bottom line, and everyone’s very conscious about how we spend our money.

When front-line employees are *not* included, some managerial informants argued that team effectiveness suffered. In one of the few criticisms of an Electronics cross-functional team, a delay in discovering and implementing an effective solution was attributed to the lack of worker involvement:

The cross-functional team typically is all management. For the individuals to go back to their appropriate work places and try and get these concepts implemented, it is just one more manager telling the worker bees what to do. I think the worker bees need to be involved in the cross-functional team . . .

After a year-and-a-half of working on barcode labeling, we still didn't have a crisp understanding of how it works out on the manufacturing floor. It just dawned on us eight months ago, why don't we make bar-coding part of how we move the product through our system as opposed to at the end of the line. If we'd had the worker bees and people out of manufacturing worldwide involved to begin with, we'd have had a better understanding up front of how it needs to work in our system.

As a way of punctuating this discussion, a statement from a front-line production worker at Communication Equipment indicated that she likes the self-managing part of TQM, particularly the opportunity of dealing with a specific vendor as her personal responsibility. "It makes me feel more like that they really care about me rather than just treating me like a slave." Her statement underscores the idea that quality teams facilitate integrative problem solving within TQM organizations, and provides a transition to the following discussion of communicative relationships between the members of distinct organizations.

#### Direct Contact Between Customers and Suppliers

The previous section discussed the mutual gains associated with intraorganizational team diversity, involving communication both across functional



divisions and hierarchical levels. The practice of drawing upon the different experiences and knowledge resources of diverse organizational members was acknowledged to provide important benefits to product and service providers. This section now considers interorganizational communication relationships among TQM organizations, demonstrating that direct contact between organizational customers and suppliers yields integrative solutions to problems faced by each. The necessity for such communication, particularly where quality improvement is a concern, was concisely established by a U. S. Air Force informant, who noted that variations in measuring satisfaction present difficulties in evaluating quality. "In some cases we found out it's the personality of the individual . . . what you consider good service and what he considers good service and what I consider good service may not be the same thing." Only by establishing and maintaining effective communication between product or service providers and their individual customers can genuinely integrative solutions to quality problems be encouraged.

Direct customer contact is a key practice in TQM, and many respondents reported that such contact was an extremely important organizational concern. Several Electronics informants spoke at considerable length about their customer relationships, often in unusually sensitive terms:

Part of our overall strategy, at least in my business of customer automotive, is to develop partnerships. . . A partnership means that you link with the customer to the extent where he shares with you his future needs, and you share with him what your future capabilities might be or the sense of direction

you are headed. . . Just working and talking to them we've found helps alleviate a lot of the perception issues we've had with them. . . We need a broader awareness of the fact that there are customers out there that don't think like we do.

In their descriptions of the relationships that they have established, these informants talked about “interdependencies,” “empathy,” “concern,” and “caring about them as people.” One manager “had two people assigned to me and, on a once every two or three day basis, I called them. If nothing else, just to talk about the weather. But, to listen to how they felt. Many times, they would share issues or concerns long before.” At Electronics, customers are invited to sit in on some cross-functional team meetings and encouraged to provide feedback, which according to several respondents led to specific changes in the way the organization viewed its problems and solutions.<sup>7</sup> “Listening to the customer,” said one, “is the best compass we have in terms of which direction to go.”

Every organization surveyed appeared to share such viewpoints. A member of a plant operations team at Midwestern University explained that his team sought input from its customers in the interest of improving custodial services:

I think the number one thing is our relationship with our customers. That has improved greatly. . . . We've actually sat down with them and discussed how we do things, and asked them for their input as to how we could do it better, as well as given them our suggestions for how we feel we could improve our service.

An production supervisor at Metal Fabricators explained that,

We make a real effort to stay close to our customers, and get involved with them as close to the front end as we can. . . .We know what they expect. We tell them what our plans are, what our future plans are, as to how they affect their products and so forth. We try to make as many joint decisions as we can. . . . So that allows us to pretty well predict in our own environment what we need to do to anticipate the change in requirements.

Part of Metal Fabrications' success is a result of putting front-line members of the self-directed teams in direct contact with their customers. Team members are encouraged to be

well-versed on what is your customer's expectations on his product. Not just his specifications, but what are his expectations. What are his desires? What does he really want? We know what he asked for on the print, but what does he want? . . . The individuals on the floor have that ownership and knowledge.

The vice president in charge of manufacturing at Communication Equipment talked about the need for

a very close alliance with partners. . . .We've got to work closely together. . . . They need to know our plans and we need to know their plans. It helps a lot. The old time way has been to negotiate down to the last red cent. And what we like to do today is work with [them], in the sense of, hey, we're in this together. . . . That's a strategic advantage for both of us. . . .We don't use a lot of sophisticated statistical process control. . . . I didn't think it fit into what we were doing here. . . . I've seen a lot of people focus on SPC but have terrible

quality. Everything inside looked good, but on the outside it wasn't as good.

So we really try to focus on what does the customer want from us. They want a quality product that works every time and arrives on time.

In light of the academic debate over the relative importance of statistics as opposed to communicative processes and relationships, this informant's comments seem especially noteworthy. Nor was his evaluation unique: two managerial members of Electronics quality teams also argued that organizations can persuade themselves with statistics that they are achieving quality objectives, only to find that their customers take exception. As one of them put it:

There is a real danger in getting too internally focused. . . IBM looked at our internal metrics that we measure ourselves by and said, "We don't care a hoot about what you think your internal quality is or what your outgoing quality is. What we care about is what it looks like when we bring it into our factory and stick it into our machines." U. S. Motors, to a large degree, is giving us a lot of feedback and information in that same vein. If you don't listen to your customers, you don't understand what the problems are that we're trying to solve. The value of having the time and the opportunity and the initiative to sit down and listen to your customers is the differentiation in the marketplace.

If these communicative dimensions of TQM can be agreed to yield benefits to the customers, they also provide solutions to problems faced by the supplying organizations as well. A quality supervisor at U.S. Motors, for example, explained that direct contact with customers has been instrumental in reducing complaints and

associated warranty repair costs: “We put a lot of value in customer feedback. . . . Usually, when you do keep the customer happy, you’re going to get a dollar savings, especially on warranty.” The same informant also discussed the composition of a U. S. Motors cross-functional team, one whose inclusion of outside suppliers resulted in a solution to a problem with brake component failures that had cost the company over \$800,000.00 a year:

It was a mixture of hourly participation, management at the top. Engineering people supported us and helped with the design changes. And we had some supplier reps from two of the affected suppliers. So we involved a cross sectional team. . . . We don’t want to leave anyone out. You want to keep everyone in the direct communication loop. . . That helps in that you’re involving the other sites in the same team.

Such an integrated approach to collaborative problem solving, as suggested in several of the examples above, represents something of a departure from traditional, more closely guarded organizational interactions. The willingness of one organization to involve itself in the concerns of another requires an exceptional understanding of the way customers and suppliers are interdependent. U. S. Motors appears to have been exemplary in this respect. An Electronics team leader, referring to the time and expense that U. S. Motors devoted to helping him with his own process improvement efforts, explained that he was

curious about why they were so philanthropic . . . so I asked them one day. They told me that they went on a long, multi-year survey of their warranty

returns, and they found that the root cause of 60 percent of their billions of dollars of warranty returns that they had every year were caused by their suppliers . . . They concluded that their best chance of survival was to offer improvement techniques to their suppliers to help themselves.

Among U. S. Motors' most fundamental criticisms was the failure of suppliers to inform them immediately of potential problems—everything from technological failures to delayed deliveries. In one noteworthy example, Elec-tonics discovered a problem and

did something unique: we notified U. S. Motors right away that we had the issue. They brought down four people, extremely senior: the head of purchasing and a couple of senior scientists, to sit with us and work through this process. . . It took us three months to get a grasp of what the problem was. We never did shut U. S. Motors down. We had them plugged into the things we were doing to respond to address the problem. In many cases, they gave concessions right there and then where they could help solve the problem. . . What we learned in the process was that, by taking U. S. Motors as a commitment ourselves as to how we service them to the hilt, we found out that we were solving problems that never would have been solved had we turned our backs on them.

The lesson has been carried over to other Elec-tonics supervisors, and resulted in a fairly consistent orientation toward collaborative problem solving, fundamentally linked to effective communication practices, as the following interaction illustrates:

Informant: I've found from my own experience that the more information I share with U. S. Motors and the sooner I share it, as much as that's painful or as much as it gets me in trouble, I'm always better off.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Informant: Because I'm not surprising them. If I've got 10 potential little problems that I share, if I share them with U. S. Motors, I've avoided one huge problem because they have time to respond to it and prepare for it. It's been worth it.

The lesson is not unique to Electronics and U. S. Motors among the organizations studied. A team leader with the U. S. Air Force, whose service is providing lodging and whose customers are visiting VIP's, flight school students, and flight instructors, believes that reducing customer complaints was linked to "telling them up front. What we found out that it boiled down, really, was the communication . . . actually communicating what the problems were." And the product planning manager at Communication Equipment stated that, "I'd rather call up a customer and say, "Hey, I'm sorry, your product's not working properly, and we're still working on it, and it's not going to ship today," than I would to ship the product and have it not, or not know whether it's going to, work." The consistent lesson here appears to be that timely, direct, and honest communication between organizational partners yields benefits to both. The familiar "shoot the messenger" mentality that often encourages people to conceal bad news does nothing to permit strategic planning or integrative

problem solving, and the trust necessary for effective long-term organizational relationships suffers, as well.

There are, of course, difficulties encountered even within TQM's structural and cultural inducements to integrative problem solving. A U. S. Motors informant talked about ongoing "adversarial" relationships that existed between departments, generally a result of being so focused upon ones own problems that "they didn't have time to even worry about what the other guy was doing." Informants from Metal Fabricators talked about problems with "single source suppliers . . . We're forced to buy from them, so it's very difficult to manage them when you're stuck with them. They're out of our control. It's been very unsuccessful. We just have to kind of work it the best we can." Another Metal Fabrications informant argued that there have been some successes in this area, but that negotiating compromises with such unwilling partners involves "a tremendous amount of time and frustration" And, even with the best of intentions and a history of success, it can be difficult to sustain collaborative communication. As one Elec-tonics informant explained, communication tends to move in cycles that reflect the ebb and flow of problems encountered by the participants:

We go through these cycles of good times and bad times with U. S. Motors.

As we were digging our way out of the bad times, we had a lot of frequency of communications, a lot of meetings, and a lot of direct interfaces. As things get better, those meetings start to become less and less. Before you know it, you're starting to slip, maybe because of the less frequent communication or



whatever. You start to slip back very slowly and very subtly into problem times. . . We've made mistakes before by just lessening that frequency of communication and that face-to-face communication.

Despite the difficulties, incidents documenting communicative successes predominated in these data, evidence perhaps of both the merits of teams as structured approaches to collaborative problem solving, and of extent of the penetration of a cultural shift among quality focused organizations. One final account of the significance of this shift will serve to conclude this discussion. An Elec-tonics team leader reported that one of her organization's elder statesmen, a former chairman of the board who was heavily invested in the TQM change initiative from the very beginning, made an appearance at a gathering of Elec-tonics executives:

I was at a class up at Elec-tonics University and he came in for a short amount of time. We were talking about benchmarking and sharing information with our competitors on how we changed our method of doing business. How we were so concerned about not letting things leak to our competitors. He said, "I don't expect you to let them leak." We went, "Yeah, we kind of thought that." He said, "On the contrary, I expect you to go to our competitors and tell them why we're the best." I thought I was going to fall off my chair. I consider myself pretty intelligent, and I couldn't put it together. He said, "Really, what I want you to do is go teach our competitors how to be as good, if not better, than we are. So it will continue to raise the benchmark for us." That's the

type of brain he has. He's 70-some-odd years old. He's semi-retired, but he still plays an integral part of our government.

This story is remarkable in that it communicates a depth of understanding about quality and commitment to a vision of collaboration that challenges the very notion of competition between organizations. Indeed it sounds at first—as it clearly did to the storyteller—almost absurdly idealistic, yet it carries the logic of total quality management to its necessary conclusion.

#### Theoretical Implications

A number of theoretical relationships can be inductively inferred from the preceding analysis and the extensive presentation of informants' discourse upon which it is based. These relationships are depicted in Figure 3.1, a “causal map” (Maruyama, 1963) of the functional role of communication in TQM organizations. Variables identified in informants' discourse are connected by arrows indicating the sequence of influences resulting in process improvements and enhanced customer satisfaction. Plus signs beside the arrows indicate a positive, or deviation-amplifying, relationship between one variable and the next; minus signs beside the arrows indicate a negative, or deviation-counteracting, relationship between one variable and the next. For example, commitment to participative decision making positively influences communication between organizational members, and between product and service providers and their customers.

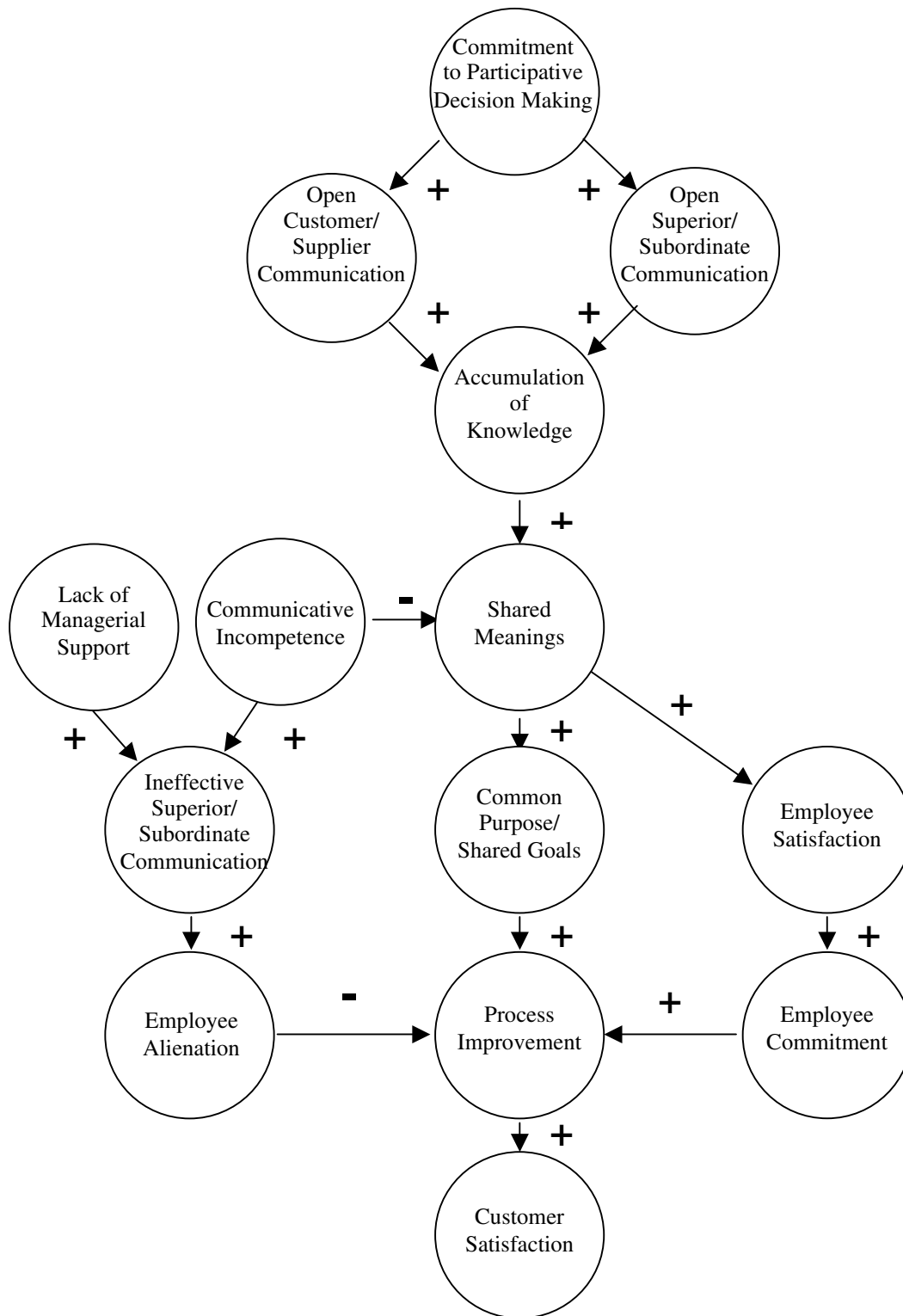


Figure 3.1 Causal Map - Functional

The improvement in communication results in an accumulation of knowledge and, consequently, improved understandings between participants that yield integrative solutions to organizational problems. On the other hand, employee alienation—itsself amplified by ineffective superior/ subordinate communication—negatively affects process improvements that contribute to improved customer satisfaction. Similarly, communicative incompetence exerts a negative influence on the creation of shared understandings, counteracting this influence that otherwise facilitates the achievement of process improvements.

The relationships presented in Figure 3.1 help to clarify the conception of quality as a discourse—and of TQM as an effect of that discourse—according to which organizational problems and possible solutions are identified. In one of the first statements that caught my attention when I began reviewing the interview transcripts used in this analysis, an Electronics quality team member offered the following response to a question about interorganizational communication:

Interviewer: What kind of value do you place on the learning you get from someone you are selling the product to?

Informant: There is a tremendous amount of value. . . This has helped us uncover major deficiencies or weaknesses, not so much in our technology, but the way in which we conduct ourselves.

This notion of knowledge about organizational conduct—arguably the fundamental concern of organizational management—resonates with Foucault's theory of governmentality (1988, 1991b). Foucault "proposed a definition of the term

'government' in general as meaning 'the conduct of conduct': that is to say, a form of activity aiming to shape, guide, or affect the conduct of some person or persons " (Gordon, 1991, p. 2). The basis for government in this sense is one of a variety of discourses, which refers to "language grasped as *utterance*, as involving speaking and writing subjects and therefore, also, at least potentially, readers and listeners" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 115). What is being addressed here is largely indistinct from the focus and scope of rhetoric, which historically has "examined the way discourses are constructed in order to achieve certain effects" (Eagleton, 1983, p. 205).<sup>8</sup> In terms of the present study, quality provides a new discursive framework through which managers govern the conduct of their employees and their organizations as a whole, and through which a new set of assumptions about organizational operations and relationships are made sensible. A noteworthy example of the way the discourse of quality operates in this fashion was provided by the former Electronics CEO who directed his executives to share proprietary process improvements with competitors as a way of raising the bar for his own organization.<sup>9</sup>

As a basis for government, a discourse provides both "a norm for evaluating the welfare of a population" and "the means for making the conduct of a population visible as a problem" (Greene, 1999, p. 6). There is considerable overlap between the concept of *population* in Foucault's theory of governmentality and the concept of *audience* in rhetorical theory. Burke (1969), for example, contends that rhetoric is "rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing

cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (p. 43). Tompkins (1987) explains that this need to foster cooperation or secure obedience is the common concern of both organizational and rhetorical theory. Sproule (1989) agrees, noting that the process of organizing, like the practice of rhetoric, is "oriented to what Burke would call the rhetorical motive—i.e., the gaining of advantage—since the two deal with recruiting support for action" (p. 258). Quality, as an organizational discourse, provides a way of problematizing the conduct of product and service providers, and of directing and mobilizing them in the correction of deficiencies that interfere with their welfare. Tomkins and Cheney (1985) offer an interesting illustration of the way quality as a discourse operates in precisely such a fashion. In their example, a former CEO of General Motors employed

the corporation's internal media to convince all employees that *quality* [rather than *quantity*] was to become the number one priority (decisional premise, in our terms) for all employees. He admitted meeting resistance, even disbelief, but vowed to make it clear even to plant managers that they could "shut down the line" in the interest of quality (p. 189).

This example both identifies what the discourse signifies as problematic about a workforce and what that workforce must do in order to become more prosperous. The problem was an overriding concern for quantity, a structured effect of workers' regular responsibilities, that operated at the expense of quality. An effective response depended upon the reordering of premises that formed the basis for organizational decision making, locating quality ahead of quantity in the logic of production, and

permitting employees to act in formerly proscribed ways. This “reordering of premises” is only reasonable—perhaps only conceivable—as a consequence of the new governing discourse of quality. As the principles, practices, and techniques of TQM were expanded and refined, numerous new approaches to regulating organizational conduct emerged—including (but not limited to) the formerly forbidden practice of shutting down an assembly line for anything short of preventing a serious injury.<sup>10</sup> As analysis of the data in this chapter has demonstrated, many of those approaches were explicitly communicative in nature, involving not only new premises, but new interactive processes, as well. Customers and suppliers—and even, in some circumstances, competitors—become understood as partners, and integrative problem solving becomes the basis for ongoing interaction.

#### Summary

This chapter has presented the functional or technical interpretation of TQM as an organizational strategy. The emphasis here has been on how communication is used as a tool to continuously improve organizational processes and outcomes, and to satisfy customer requirements. The chapter first presented informants’ identification of communication as an organizational problem. It then turned to a discussion of the role of communication in addressing the issues of continuous improvement and meeting or exceeding customers’ expectations. Analysis of the data has suggested that TQM is a structured effect of a shift away from a prevailing discourse of quantity and competition and toward a new discourse of quality and cooperation as the basis for organizational management or government. As a discourse, quality presents a

rationale, and TQM provides the structural and cultural bases, for communication between organizational partners that encourages integrative or collaborative solutions to context-specific organizational problems.



## CHAPTER 4: ROMANTIC ANALYSIS

Research Question Two asks, within TQM organizations, how do employees communicatively create shared understandings of organizational activity and workplace relationships? In responding to this question, this chapter presents the romantic or practical interpretation of TQM as an organizational strategy, focusing upon team members' socially constructed meanings and shared understandings of new working conditions. The chapter first considers the relationship between communication processes and employees' sense of empowerment. Second, it considers team cohesiveness as an effect of team members' rhetorical framing devices and interactional strategies. The third section discusses the largely symbolic incentive and reward techniques by which team effort is acknowledged. Analysis of the data suggests that TQM provides a context for organizational members to communicatively create and sustain uniquely supportive work relationships. The chapter concludes with the theoretical implications of this analysis.

Chapter Three discussed the use of communication in cross-functional teams for the purpose of integrative problem solving. The inclusion of diverse viewpoints from across functional divisions and hierarchical levels is intended to generate optimal solutions—or at least multiple alternatives—to specific organizational problems. In many cross-functional teams, however, the choice of a particular course of action remains within the purview of top management decision makers; the contributions of non-managerial team members may be solicited, but may or may not directly influence managerial decision making. This chapter highlights the use of self-

directed work teams, in which managerial participation is not so privileged, and decision making is largely vested in front-line employees. Fundamental to the concept of self-directed work teams is the idea of employee empowerment, and thus it is to a consideration of empowerment that this discussion first turns.

### Empowerment

Membership on a self-directed work team provides the opportunity for many employees to exert greater influence over their day-to-day worklives, resulting in an agreeable sense of autonomy or personal empowerment. Among the organizations studied, Midwestern University has embraced the use of self-directed work teams—as distinguished from cross-functional teams that include managerial participation—more than most of the others. Two members of a plant operations work team charged with cleaning and maintaining facilities at Midwestern University discussed their responses to self-direction:

Informant One: We have more pride in the work because you're responsible for the total process. . . . To me, who knows the building better than us? We're there every night. We're in the crevices.

Informant Two: I thought it was something that I could really get into, because being self-directed means that I can use my own mind. I don't have someone over me telling me, "Do this and do that." . . . I think the enjoyment of it is that you're not coming in and being a robot, you're able to use your mind.

Interviewer: And for you personally, how important is that? If we had a

hundred percent on the page here and you were able to say, “My ability to use my mind accounts for X percent of my satisfaction and enjoyment of my job,” what percent of that 100 would your count up to be, of saying, “I want to be able to use my abilities and my mind in my work.”

Informant Two: I’m going to have to say almost 100%. I might say 99%. It’s up there. It does, because I’m not stupid. I can go in a room and see what needs to be done. I don’t need somebody telling me, “You need to get this and this and this and make sure you get this and this and this.” I can see.

These employees consider themselves not robots or idiots, but experts, which means not only are they able to execute their tasks competently, but they are capable of identifying task requirements and motivating themselves without supervision, as well. Hackman and Lawler (1971) define *autonomy* in terms of just such personal responsibility, and Chiles and Zorn (1995) would agree that this perception—that they have both the competence to work effectively and direct control over their own work lives—constitutes the experience of empowerment. But empowerment, as defined by Chiles and Zorn, is not only the perception of competence and control; it also involves the process of creating the conditions for such perceptions. Sometimes this amounts to the delegation of authority by superiors,<sup>11</sup> but more importantly it entails procedures that employees themselves are able to influence or direct. For example, in response to a question about multi-voting, a Midwestern University accounts payable team member suggested that the process encouraged support even from those whose opinions were not shared by the majority of the group: “Um, to me

it seems like it gives everybody, um, a vote. I mean, everybody gets to, you know, we go through the whole process, and it's just kind of a buy-in from the whole group. . . . Even though, um, you know, maybe that person didn't vote for it, they feel like it's fair." Even when specific outcomes are not what a particular team member may have desired, the fact that each individual has the opportunity to express his or her arguments and preferences results in a sense of procedural fairness that fosters cooperative participation and the perception of empowerment.

Although members of self-directed work teams were particularly enthusiastic about having a voice in decision making, employee voice was often connected to a sense of empowerment and romantic interpretations of quality initiatives even among teams that included managerial participants. A clerical worker who participated on a Midwestern University Dental School clerical team—one that included supervisory personnel—reported that,

A lot of my level people would always say, "Well, gee, if they had listened to us, you know, in the first place, this wouldn't have never happened." So that was kind of enticing to us, 'cause here, you know, we're gonna help make some of the decisions. We're gonna get a voice, and think what actually does happen, because we are the actual ones who are doing the job, and who better to ask, you know, if you see something wrong. The person who does that thing the most often is the one that you should ask, you know, what's going on.

Two members of a TechPrint research group spoke about their corporate quality training program in very similar terms:

Informant One: Now one of the things that's done inside the company, which has affected, in a good way, our ability to do certain kinds of things, is that you can get people who really have the problem involved in solving it. So there's really been a certain sense of empowerment down at the bottom which we have been able to tap into, because we take very seriously in this group the notion of systems and practices and the interaction that goes with it. And we really want to get the people involved. We found that local sense of empowerment . . . means management has to take quality improvement programs seriously. That's been very useful.

Informant Two: All of this, in my mind, is centered around communication, and I mean something fairly broad by that. I mean a sharing of goals and concerns, as well as the normal sharing of information. . . One of the reasons that I think [TQM] was a good thing . . . is that it was empowering to many people who had, in many cases, disempowered themselves, who didn't speak up because they didn't have a voice. And that kind of thing is self-confirming.

Sometimes, managerial participation on self-directed teams can encourage subordinates who have “disempowered themselves” to communicate. Several Electronics informants referred to one team leader as “magical,” in part because of his ability to create a safe environment for open discussion, which was credited with producing a level of team effectiveness that was the envy of the corporation:

Informant One: The way he manages the team is that there are no level of management that is treated any differently on the team than anybody else. It is purely a team and everybody is an equal member. . . Nobody is hesitant to think, nobody is hesitant to give their thoughts.

Informant Two: If you've got an environment where participants can bring up the issues without any kind of personal fear or risk of somebody attacking you personally over the issue, then it's a pretty healthy environment. You can lay the issue on the table, have constructive dialogue on what we should do and how should we prevent it, then the execution.

Other informants, however, preferred it when no supervisors or upper-level managers were included on quality teams because, as one Air Force team member explained, “When you get a lot of upper-level management in there, you have problems trying to make decisions and trying to work on those decisions because they [*nonmanagerial* personnel] feel . . . that [*managerial*] presence doesn't allow them their openness of communication.” A TechPrint researcher was even more explicit about the problem:

One way managers discourage open discussion is, as soon as you mention a problem they will say, “Well, what's your solution? What are you going to do about it?” And I think that's a really bad thing. Because there are certain problems that the manager is getting paid to figure out. And if you can't mention a problem without having already thought up the solution yourself

. . . It's a way of getting people not to criticize without ever having to say you don't like being criticized, or ever suggesting a way in which the criticism could be made more palatable. . . . It's just a way of getting people to shut up.

Empowerment, then, is essentially synonymous with job autonomy, and is associated by informants with the perception of personal competence and the freedom to actually make and implement decisions. In addition, however, for many, empowerment is connected as much to voice as to instrumental action, and the romance of self-directed team membership is related to either the absence of communicative intimidation, or the inclusion of team leaders who listen to and support the communicative contributions of their subordinates.

#### Cohesiveness

Cohesiveness among members is widely considered a necessary component of team effectiveness, and although participation can be both a contributor to and an effect of cohesiveness, participation is no guarantee of cohesiveness; dissatisfied or alienated team members may participate actively, and disrupt team cohesiveness in the process. Many informants, however, discussed their satisfaction with the team experience as more than an empowering chance to participate in decisions. They often spoke about their teams and coworkers using metaphors that demonstrated very positive interpretations of workplace relationships, and that showed a degree of commitment to each other that goes well beyond that which is customary or expected. For example, a Midwestern University plant operations team member stated that,

Self-direct is like a marriage. You work at it to keep it there and not divorce, so you have to work at it. There's times I want to, when we have our meetings I want to say, "This is it. I ain't going to be on this team no more." But then I say, "No, I want to be on this team so I'll put up with the little aggravations sometimes." Because in the long run it is worth it and it's like a marriage . . . in the long run it is worth it.

Another informant from a different University department provided a similar description, reporting that, "There's been bumps along the way. There's always going to be. But I feel in my heart that I have developed another family. Because that's just the way we kind of treat each other." An Electronics team member referred to the "family kind of atmosphere around the team," and argued that "a lot of the success factors are very soft in nature." A team leader in the same organization explained that she possesses "a mindset that keeps me centralized to the goals and the family structure of that team. I know that I don't want to do anything that won't be accepted in the family." When asked by the interviewer to clarify how the team was like a family, the same informant explained that,

You think when you do things, how does it affect the family? You know the family's goals. The goal is to stay together and do the best thing for the customer. Also, if you screw up or make a bad decision, you know you're not going to be ostracized. You have that support. It does allow you the freedom to go out on the edge on occasion. You know you can go back and mom and dad are not going to beat the crap out of you.



Their use of marriage and family metaphors both reflects and contributes to team members' sense of cohesiveness. The crucial component in the use of these metaphors is the often explicit assurance of mutual support for members of the team. A TechPrint researcher suggested that improved social support among team members was an important effect of TQM:

I think the whole notion of group process having some—almost any—kind of process in which people learn about each other and learn about their similarities and their differences is very useful in terms of building group support for people. So in terms of helping research, the most important things about [TQM] are learning how to be supportive, learning that other people have the same kind of problems that you do.

A Ritz-Carlton informant clarified the communicative requirements for establishing and maintaining team cohesiveness of this sort:

You need a lot of understanding of people when you work in self-directed teams. You know, patience. . . The only way I can see the team achieving this level [of effective self-direction] is by keeping the same people, the same staff, through a long period of time and letting these people get to know each other. They need to know each other above and beyond the workplace. They need to be friends. They need to, you know, know their lives, and they need to be willing and they need to want to work with each other. . . And for most people, the only way you can achieve that level of patience is saying, "Okay, I know these people. I know their strengths and weaknesses. And whenever I,

you know, am faced with one of their weaknesses, I'm going to take a step back and, you know, just understand.

His comments here tie self-directed team effectiveness to mutual understanding, compassion, friendship, and patience—all terms readily associated with the requirements of cohesiveness. The same informant elaborated on the importance of team cohesiveness understood as social support:

There are times when the work can be a little frustrating, the work as a bellman . . . we rely on gratuities and tips, and when that's not going according to what, you know, we expect, that, you know, ruins the morale of the whole team. . . When you are not happy, when you are not making money, you know, when things are tough or the hotel is very slow, then I guess you have your friends there, and that kind of compensates.

Two members of a Midwestern University plant operations team spoke about interactional processes following the implementation of quality teams, and the ways they improved working relationships. One explained that team communication training has “helped me in dealing with other people. Since I'm a very outspoken person, I will say what comes to my mind. And I'm learning that I can't do that. I'm learning about people's feelings and it's helping me. It's not hurting.” A second informant reported that, “To get to know the personalities, I mean, we actually went out together after work and went bowling to get to know each other's personalities better, you know, off the job which helped us to relate on the job.” This is not to suggest that friendly relations with coworkers are a definitive or unique effect of

TQM; the data do suggest, however, that the effective use of quality teams encourages cohesiveness among workers who might otherwise have little inclination to move in that direction. The benefits to the workers themselves and, consequently, to their organizations and the customers they serve, are demonstrated in the following exchange between an interviewer and two Midwestern University team members:

Informant One: I've been there when it's only been three people and bummed out, tired, and at the end of the shift wasn't so bad anyway, you know. We came together as a team and it worked.

Informant Two: I think for me it would be the quality of work that we can get done. The enjoyment of being able to come to work and enjoy your work. That and the camaraderie of being with my coworkers. That's something that's important.

Informant One: It's less stressful. When you're sick, you don't have to worry about, "Well, I'm going to call in today because I'm sick." I can go into work sick and I know I have seven other people to help me out. I know I'm just not out there by myself. I have seven other people that will say, "Hey, relax. Do what you can do and we'll do it for you." And that's real nice.

Interviewer: So you trust each other enough to say it when someone's not feeling well that you'll pull part of the load. That's a pretty big thing for team members.

Informant Two: And we come in in a bad mood too, okay? We come in in a bad mood and say, “Don’t even bother me today.” And that’s fine. You’re by yourself today.

Interviewer: Since you have some sick days, why do people come in when they’re not feeling well?

Informant Two: Because it’s more relaxing to work. You enjoy your work. I really enjoy ...

Informant One: I do too. That’s my social time.

Informant Two: We really enjoy coming to work because we have the camaraderie of the people getting together. And if you don’t feel well or you may just come in and say, “I just don’t want to work by myself today.” And somebody’ll say, “Oh great, come on. Let’s go.” So we can do it.

This exchange implies a complex relationship between social support, team cohesiveness, and member empowerment, a set of relations that will be considered in more detail in the concluding section of this chapter. For the moment, it appears that the ability to count on one’s teammates and to be willing and able to allow them to count on you constitutes a meaningful measure of cohesiveness, and this sense of cohesiveness allows work to be performed with a greater sense of competence and control than might ordinarily be the case.

#### Incentives and Rewards

As opposed to traditional monetary and individually-allocated incentive and reward systems, TQM organizations tend to employ largely symbolic and team- or

organizationally-allocated forms of recognition for quality improvement. Although the use of fiscal bonuses and gain-sharing was discussed by some informants, the preponderance of the data concerning incentives and rewards emphasized the use of culturally meaningful symbols and expressions of recognition and approval. For example, the sense of camaraderie or cohesiveness that Midwestern University team members spoke about above operated as an incentive to come to work, even when disposition or physical health considerations might ordinarily discourage it. And an Elec-tonics team member linked camaraderie to a regularly occurring practice of recognition that many team members understood as a reward for a job well done:

There is also a sense of camaraderie and recognition for when somebody makes an incremental step forward. For the first year, year-and-a-half of the cross-functional team, it was appropriate and ignited by . . . one of the [leaders] in the room that when somebody got up and presented a success, there was a spontaneous breakout of applause. The recognition got to be applause and encouragement, and "Hey, you're doing a great job".

The value of such symbolic rewards was documented by another Elec-tonics team member: "The reward system within the team is more of a mental thing. It is a perk that makes you feel good. . . As it is more and more recognized, it makes you feel good so you work harder and harder and you get more and more recognized. It has helped create itself." Informants at both Elec-tonics and U. S. Motors noted that a few moments of contact with appreciative superiors contributed greatly to their sense of satisfaction with TQM. One reported that "We met the [company] president and a

few of the team got to shake his hand. You don't get much higher in U. S. Motors than that." And another explained that, "It is fun to be involved at that level too, and meeting some of the U. S. Motors people, higher up than you would normally be dealing with in my daily dealings. That is part of the end reward."

Even when more material forms of recognition were provided, their symbolic value far outweighed their expense to the organization. A Communication Equipment production worker explained that,

They reward you by feeding you dinner and lunch. And, you know, it makes you really feel good. Because I know when I used to work at this one company, we'd work there until eight or nine and you wouldn't get dinner until you went home. . . . And we have this thing that they pass out little [CE] magnets, and they have, you know, like I say, [CE] on them. . . . I mean, it makes you feel good inside. You know, when they give you a [CE] it makes you feel like somebody actually is really seeing what you're actually doing. . . . That makes you feel like you're worth something.

Elec-tonics informants referred to the use of similar symbolic rewards in very similar terms. Their personal and team-building significance was mentioned by several, as in the following example:

Informant: For a while there, they were giving small awards of a humorous nature. It was like a doll, or a fifty cent toy that was apropos of something. So, there's a lot of levity in the team, too. That helps, I believe.

Interviewer: I've heard that. What does this plaque mean to you?

Informant: Actually, here's my plaques; they are all in here. This one is the only one I display. I think it meant a lot to me as a manager. It is the first one I got with the team; it makes you feel good. It makes you feel like you're contributing.

Such symbols of appreciation, and the kinds of social approval and public recognition described by these informants, are important sources of employee commitment, job satisfaction, and motivation (Deming, 1986; Hackman & Wageman, 1995).

Ritz-Carlton and Metal Fabricators informants also referred to the use of forms of financial gain-sharing, although data on such practices was sparse, and not discussed without qualification. Symbolic incentives and rewards appeared to generate far more enthusiasm, perhaps because they are more fairly—even generously—distributed. Direct financial rewards, on the other hand, were not always perceived to be distributed equally or equitably. The quality supervisor at Metal Fabricators, for example, identified a problem with the generally successful gain sharing system:

Some of the teams really shined because of the nature of their given department . . . they could do minimal process improvements with major impact on cost savings. Whereas, another department, more labor intensive than high-tech, it would take massive process improvements for them to make any kind of a major impact financially. So they got discouraged . . . you know, “They’ve got an advantage over us.”

Hackman and Wageman (1995) note that employees may initially take pride and pleasure in contributing to organizational process and product improvements, but they also suggest that, “eventually . . . members of profit-making firms will realize that *somebody* is making more money as a result of their greater contributions, and it is not them. At that point, they may begin to withdraw their commitment to the enterprise, and signs of a motivational backlash may even be seen” (p. 336). These data revealed little “motivational backlash” among members of quality teams—and none directly associated with forms or structures of compensation. Nonetheless, the risk, occurrence, and effects of motivational backlash and resistance to TQM are subjects that will be covered in more detail in the critical interpretation of the data in Chapter 5.

#### Theoretical Implications

A significant implication of this analysis resides in the relationship, inferred from the testimony of these informants, between the communication of social support, team cohesiveness, and member empowerment. Figure 4.1 presents a “causal map” (Maruyama, 1963) of these relationships. Plus signs beside the arrows indicate a positive, or deviation-amplifying, relationship between one variable and the next; minus signs beside the arrows indicate a negative, or deviation-counteracting, relationship between one variable and the next. For example, informants drew a clear link between the communication of social support and team cohesiveness, but they also contribute insight concerning a link, identified by Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002), between social support and empowerment. In a study of a nonprofit



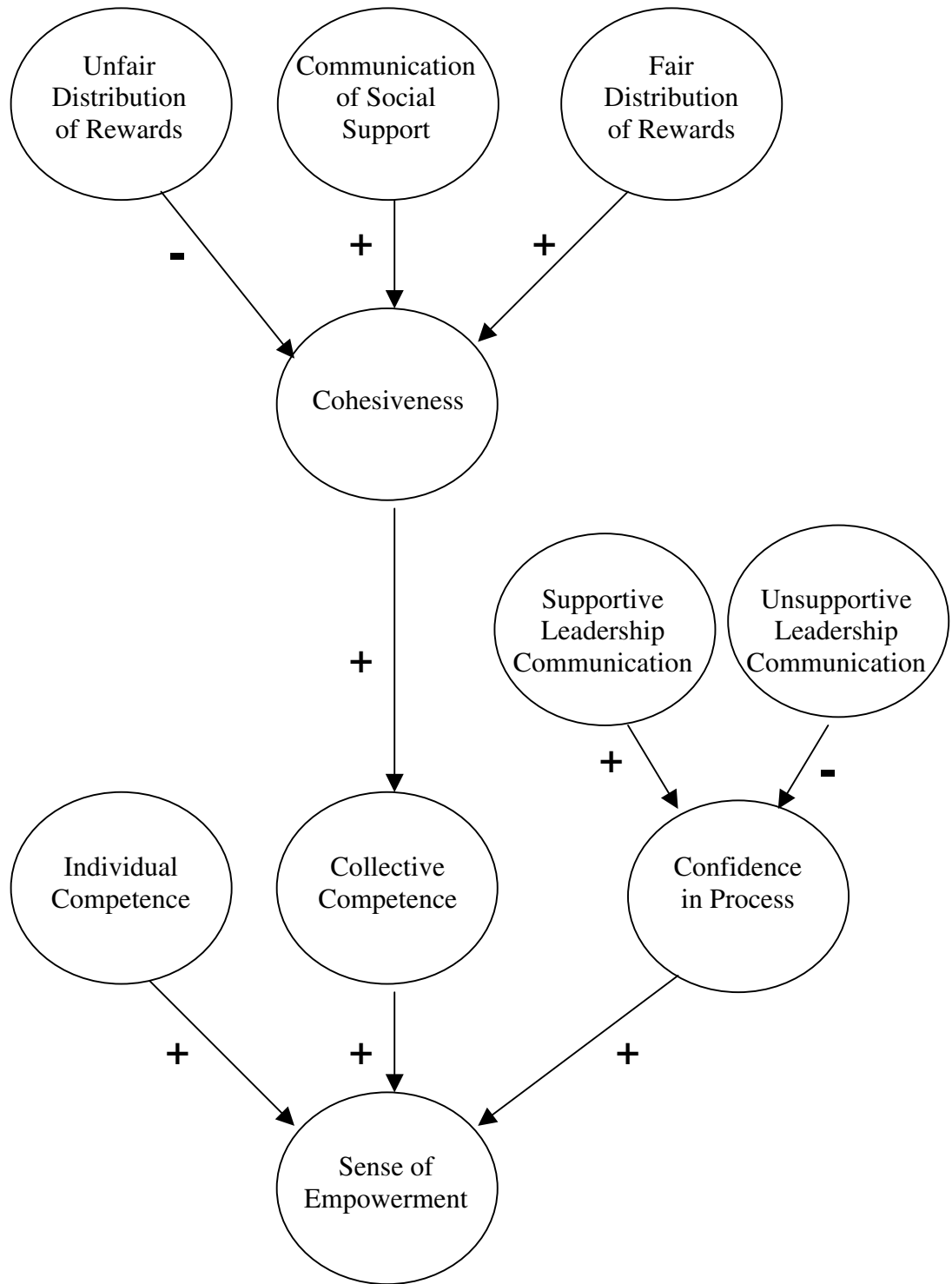


Figure 4.1 Causal Map - Romantic

organization providing shelter and counseling for domestic violence survivors, Ashcraft and Kedrowicz concluded that empowerment meant more than autonomy, at least to organizational volunteers. They advanced a “feminist” interpretation of empowerment as an outcome of organizational social support: Volunteers experienced social support from paid staff members as “empowering,” but, contrary to conventional wisdom, the volunteers found paid staff members’ efforts devoted toward maximizing their autonomy and increased participation as disempowering.

Their findings suggest that, at least with respect to very particular task requirements in which personal competence may be limited—such as that experienced by volunteers working with domestic crisis survivors—social support enables employees to feel better able to respond to challenging task responsibilities. Much of the literature on the communication of social support has focused upon comforting behaviors (Burlison, 1994; Burlison, Albrecht, & Sarason, 1994), although Tardy (1994) highlights problem solving in addition to emotional adjustment as a basic function of social support. In organizational contexts, the communication of social support has been linked to job satisfaction (Albrecht, Irely, & Mundy, 1982; Argyle, 1992), satisfaction with one’s organization (LaRocco & Jones, 1978), and reduced job strain and workplace stress (Blau, 1981; Miller, Ellis, Zook, & Lyles, 1990; Ray & Miller, 1991). However, as Zimmermann & Applegate (1994) have indicated, there is an ongoing need for more research attention on the relationship between organizational members’ instrumental and relational communicative goals.

Within TQM organizations, the data suggest that cohesiveness among quality team members was directly linked to the communication of social support, and that it was the resulting sense of confidence and collective competence that added to members' sense of empowerment and willingness to participate. In other words, social support among team members improves team cohesiveness, and belonging to a cohesive team may be personally empowering for its members; cohesiveness thus mediates the relationship between social support and member empowerment.

For the sake of clarity, Figure 4.1 distinguishes between supportive and unsupportive leadership communication, and between fair and unfair distribution of rewards, even though these distinctions may be understood as opposites on a continuum. Informants indicated that supportive communication from team and organizational leaders, and a fair distribution of rewards and recognition, positively influenced team cohesiveness and confidence in quality improvement processes. Unsupportive leadership communication and unfair reward distribution, however, negatively influenced team cohesiveness and employee confidence in quality improvement processes. Among the organizations studied here, team members tended to share goals and support one another even in the face of risky decisions and individual failures, clear evidence of cohesiveness. And the recognition that they can count on each other as members of a cohesive team encourages them to push the boundaries of their roles as decision makers and problem solvers, equally clear evidence of empowerment.

## Summary

This chapter has presented the romantic interpretation of TQM as an organizational strategy, focusing upon team members' socially constructed meanings and shared understandings of new working conditions. The chapter first considered the relationship between communication processes and employees' sense of empowerment. Second, it considered team cohesiveness as an effect of team members' rhetorical framing devices and interactional strategies. The third section discussed the largely symbolic incentive and reward techniques by which team effort is acknowledged. Analysis of the data suggested that TQM provides a context for organizational members to communicatively create and sustain uniquely supportive work relationships. Of particular significance is the finding that cohesiveness among quality team members was directly linked to the communication of social support, and that it was the resulting sense of confidence and collective competence that added to members' sense of empowerment and willingness to participate. In other words, social support among team members improves team cohesiveness, and belonging to a cohesive team may be personally empowering for its members; cohesiveness thus mediates the relationship between social support and member empowerment.

## CHAPTER 5: CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Research Question Three asks: Among organizations using TQM, what is the role of communication in establishing, and resisting, asymmetrical relations of power? In responding to this question, this chapter presents the critical interpretation of TQM as an organizational strategy. The emphasis here is on how communication operates in the exercise of, and resistance to, managerial power and organizational control. The chapter first considers the relatively limited—but nonetheless available—use of bureaucratic control strategies in the context of TQM. Second, it considers the more widespread and ideologically consistent use of concertive control strategies. Third, it discusses employee resistance to the additional burdens and responsibilities accompanying TQM. Analysis of the data indicates that TQM provides a discursive basis for employee participation in unobtrusive forms of organizational control. The chapter concludes with the theoretical implications of this analysis.

### Bureaucratic Control

Although the principle of employee empowerment is a cornerstone of TQM philosophy, and paradigm exemplar W. E. Deming (1986) specifically extolled the necessity of “driving out fear” in order to facilitate vital employee participation, several informants at TechPrint’s research and development facility reported that their quality change initiative involved a degree of managerial coercion and intimidation inconsistent with Deming’s fundamental precepts. As one TechPrint researcher put it, “The worst thing about [TQM] is the way in which it was handed down, with this

‘You shall think this way,’ kind of thing.” Another reported that managerial commitment to the program was translated into a disempowering insistence upon organization-wide conformity:

We learned that there was going to be this cascade of training. It was going to be compulsory. It was supposed to be the case that the fact that it was being done from the top down was an indication of how committed the upper management was to it. I experienced that in a very contradictory way. I mean, things mandated—put in a compulsory way from the top down—to me are *not* empowering. It does not help that the senior managers have already done this themselves. . . . I immediately experienced it as a most extreme and blunt expression of the hierarchy of the corporation.

This kind of compulsory or coercive approach to control is consistent with what Edwards (1981) described as bureaucratic control, in which established rules and hierarchically arranged relations of authority are used to reward employee compliance and punish noncompliance. A third informant explained that resistance to quality training among a group of TechPrint researchers was due in part to a lack of information concerning the purpose and scope of the training, and he provided a clear example of the way management employed bureaucratic control to respond to such resistance:

Informant: When they tried to introduce [TQM] at TechPrint, it was just not very successful, and I think there's a couple of reasons that can be cited. First of all, it wasn't motivated when it came. They just said, "All of you will attend

the class at a certain time," and in these classes, they never said the problem that they were trying to solve. . . So there was no idea of what this was for. So the company attitude here is: you will attend [TQM training] or we'll fire you. In fact, they fired a guy because he didn't want to go to [TQM training].

Interviewer: Really?

Informant: Yes. It was a guy that took us a year to hire, a really hot shit technical guy. And it took a year of persuasion to get this guy to sign up, and they said, "You will go to [TQM training]," and he just refused and they fired him. . . So anyway, there was a heavy attitude of coercion about doing this thing.

This example of explicit punishment for noncompliance was unique among the reports provided by informants in this study, probably because the TechPrint research personnel were themselves rather distinct from most of the other groups studied. They were particularly well educated (most held a Ph.D.), and considered themselves expert, professional problem-solvers; they were mostly nonmanagerial workers involved in research for which no "customer" in the traditional sense of the word could be clearly identified and, accordingly, quality criteria in the sense most relevant to TQM did not clearly apply; and they were personally, socially, and culturally not well disposed to conform to change initiatives that appeared poorly tailored to their unique professional requirements. Their inclination toward active, direct noncompliance was unusual, and, as a result, coercive, bureaucratic control strategies were "forced" upon organizational administrators.

## Concertive Control

There are essentially two discursive responses to the kind of bureaucratic control that is discussed above. Employees may resist change initiatives that they see as detrimental to their own interests—as some of the TechPrint researchers did—or they can rationalize and justify such changes as the way things must or ought to be. The subject of discursive resistance will be more completely covered in the next section of this chapter; this section focuses upon the ways employees rhetorically assist in their own exploitation.

As noted in Chapter Four, Midwestern University was a particularly enthusiastic advocate of self-directed work teams, primarily among blue-collar work groups such as building custodians, grounds keepers, maintenance workers, and mechanics. As one University representative explained, the self-directed teams “were supposed to be as self-sufficient as possible, and self-paid. . . The object was, so that they could stay together, they needed to pay a fair share of their salary.” Self-directed quality teams were one result of a University-wide attempt at reducing expenses, in which the tasks these workers performed were to be opened up to outside contractors and awarded to the lowest bidders. The various colleges within the University would be expected to hire their own service staff, using their own limited budgets. Many blue-collar University employees were thus suddenly placed in the position of having to recast themselves as independent service vendors instead of members of the University community. And most, as indicated in Chapter Four, responded to the



challenge by framing it as an opportunity for self-determination, albeit accompanied by a greater degree of personal responsibility.

From a critical perspective, much of the rhetorical effort used to frame self-directed work teams as personally empowering is tantamount to endorsement of the conditions of one's own exploitation. As one Electronics team leader put it, "One of the aspects of this team's success is the willingness to be chartered to go do something that is really not your daily responsibility." Generally, this rhetorical work is conducted without explicit recognition by the rhetor of its actual significance. For example, two custodial team members from Midwestern University, who were unequivocal in their support for the self-directed team concept, spoke with personal satisfaction about the additional responsibilities that accompanied the new approach, even framing their additional duties as evidence of increased personal freedom on the job:

Informant One: Before I could not leave my area . . . Now, if I see something on another area that's not even my area, I can take care of that. I've been on areas where I've run into a customer and he says, "Oh, could you do this for me?" It's not my area and normally I wouldn't have to do that, but with the self-direct, I can do that. I can go take care of that problem right then, and then went on about my business.

Informant Two: We consider the whole building to be all of ours. . .What we're going to start doing, we were discussing at our last meeting, we're going to have a training program amongst ourselves. So we all will be on the

same page.

Informant One: Anything someone doesn't do reflects on all of us, not just that person that didn't do it.

Not only do these workers readily assume responsibility for broader custodial responsibilities, they proudly assert symbolic ownership of the worksite, and willingly monitor and correct the performance of their coworkers, in effect assuming responsibilities ordinarily held by management. In terms coined by Tompkins and Cheney (1985), this is an example of “concertive control.” The conditions for its appearance read like a partial checklist of fundamental TQM principles: “teamwork and coordination,” “flexibility and innovation,” “‘flat’ hierarchy,” “a common understanding of values, objectives, and means,” and “appreciation of the organization’s mission” (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985, p. 184). Control results from employees’ willing adherence to a shared value system—in this case, one in which terms like “empowerment” and the absence of direct supervision figure prominently—and is, consequently, relatively unobtrusive. It is also, paradoxically, more rigorous and constraining, despite being less obtrusive (Barker & Tompkins, 1994). As Barker (1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994) discovered in a study of self-directed teams at a high-tech firm, “workers in a concertive organization create the meanings that, in turn, structure the system of their own control . . . [and] peers have the authority to demand the workers’ willing compliance” (p. 412; see also Hackman & Wageman, 1995, p. 327). In the light provided by this perspective, the significance of the preceding comments by the two Midwestern University informants becomes

clearer: Satisfying customer requirements, even if they entail additional duties, becomes a personal responsibility, and individual failure to fulfill that responsibility reflects negatively on all team members together. To ensure compliance with team-based rules, long-term members train newcomers so that there will be neither misunderstandings, nor valid arguments if responsibilities are not met. As a supervisor at Communication Equipment explained,

It takes time for them to understand, “Hey, we’re not out to beat you over the head with this. We’re not going to beat you over the head at all. In fact, you’ll probably beat each other up more than management’s going to beat on you. We’re out to improve the process, and it’s the process that we’re focusing on, not the individual.” And so it took a while to get that understood, well understood. Because they had come out of organizations where there was a lot of fear. In fact, management introduced regular peer evaluations and self evaluations—mechanisms that permit, if not actually invite, beating up on yourself and your coworkers.

Concertive control thus operates hegemonically, encouraging subordinates to endorse, and even actively assist in, the creation and enforcement of the conditions for their own exploitation. Nor is concertive control limited to such explicit self-disciplinary practices. An additional consequence of making front-line employees responsible for their own control is the elimination of low-level supervisory positions and middle managers (Barker, 1993). This “flattening of the hierarchy” is entirely consistent with the rhetoric of TQM. As a Ritz-Carlton informant put it:

The idea about self-directed teams was to eliminate the supervisor. . . to become a team so effective that we don't need any supervision at all. Two of the bellmen—one gentleman and myself—we sort of took over a lot of the tasks that were left from the manager, the immediate supervisor, and the office coordinators, because the office coordinators were eliminated as well. So we were left with all that weight over us, and we didn't do it as well because we had to pay attention to our, you know, bellman duties as well.

The effect of such a change is to solidify top-managerial privilege and authority, while placing the burdens of day-to-day problem solving upon lower-paid front-line employees. As the Ritz-Carlton bellman involved with a self-directed team further explained,

Ultimately they [top management] are the ones who have the final word. There are a few things we can do without their consent . . . in the way the team functions. For instance, if we see a day that's busy in certain hours, we can usually schedule people for that time, and we don't need any approval for that. There's a person on the team that does the scheduling. He is empowered to just move people around as much as needed.

This expresses a relatively limited conception of empowerment, although it is rhetorically quite effective in creating for the employees an understanding of self-direction. As several theorists (Cotton et al., 1988; Locke & Schweiger, 1979) have pointed out, empowerment is not an absolute condition, but one that varies according

to the content of, and degree of access to, decision-making options. Anderson and Englehardt (2001) take this position a step further, arguing that,

If we were to seek an authentic program of empowerment, we would look to changes in the fundamental character of the ordered relationships that constitute the organization. Such changes do not appear in the much ballyhooed empowerment programs. They may make us feel better about ourselves, but the work is still the work of the master. (p. 263)

Sometimes, the shortcomings in employees' rhetoric are surprisingly self-evident, but as workers they are in a position from which there is little to be gained by admitting the truth. As another custodial worker at Midwestern University stated, the quality change initiative "is better for the customer and it's better for us, all the way around." When pressed, however, he seemed unable to provide a compelling explanation:

Interviewer: Why is it better for you?

Informant Three: Well, I don't wait for somebody to tell me that something needs to be done. I look for it. I try to kind of see the building through my customers' eyes, instead of sit back and wait for [my supervisor] to come up and say, "Hey, what about this?"

Interviewer: Are you happier? I mean, you seem to be kind of . . .

Informant Three: Well, I know that it has been a long road. And there was some times . . . well, the four stages of group development, we definitely have gone through all of that:: form, storm, norm and perform. And I think we're kind of on

the norm stage now. Maybe occasionally still in the storm. You kind of go back and forth there, but it's working . . . This is a much better way of working, I would have to say.

This response fails to show why the self-directed team is better for anybody except the supervisor, whose responsibility is somewhat mitigated by the informant's self-discipline. His invocation of the periodic phase model of group development (Tuckman, 1965) reveals the recurrence of group conflict, yet he concludes that his self-directed team is "a much better way of working," nonetheless. Nothing in his testimony indicates that work outcomes are qualitatively superior to what they were before, or that customers are actually more satisfied, and, despite the fact that he isn't subjected to continual supervision, it isn't evident that the informant himself has gained in any substantive way—yet he somehow perceives that he has.

In yet another response to the changing financial situation at Midwestern University, two custodial team members reported that the quality of service they provided was acknowledged by their customers to be the best available, but they were forced to consider the possibility that quality performance might not guarantee future service contracts:

Informant Four: You can talk to any of the customers in my area and they will tell you . . . that we are the number one service provider on campus. And no matter how much more money they're paying for our services, they know we're worth every penny.

Informant Five: What's kind of a scary thought though . . . maybe we're still offering the better service than they are, but sometimes, if you have fifty cents in your pocket for a loaf of bread and that's all you have, well, I can't buy Wonder, I'm going to have to buy Blasto bread.

Informant Four: Yeah, right.

Informant Five: And then, you know, that's kind of a scary thought. Because if you're my friend and it comes right down to the nitty gritty, well you can't be my friend anymore, because I can't . . .

Informant Four: . . . afford you.

As these informants clearly indicate, they have endorsed TQM as a better way of working, one that even customers appreciate as an improvement. They nervously skirt the issue of cost, however, recognizing but fearing to admit that their customers may be forced to turn to less expensive service providers, even if that means accepting a reduction in quality and a termination of relationships. One can only wonder, since these data do not address the question, whether their scholarly customers actually value well-swept floors and emptied wastebaskets—to say nothing of friendships with maintenance staff—as much as these workers would like to believe. Nor can we say whether these workers are so dependent upon their current jobs that they would willingly maintain their service quality and *reduce* their charges in order to preserve them, a decision that the University's TQM program leaves up to them. Sometimes, under such circumstances, employees themselves cannot sustain the rhetoric that facilitates their exploitation, and they turn to attempts at resistance or opposition to TQM.

## Resistance/Opposition

As noted above, employees whose responsibilities have increased as a result of quality team membership may engage in hegemonic rationalizations of the changes, or they may attempt to resist those changes. Those who rationalize and endorse their new responsibilities are often able to generate a surprising degree of enthusiasm and group cohesiveness. The effect among those who resist is precisely the opposite. For example, the managing editor at Family Publications reported that team members lacked enthusiasm for the process, since they were aware that they also lacked the authority to implement decisions:

It was frustrating because we felt our hands were tied because we didn't have the empowerment. If we had come up with a fabulous solution, we wouldn't have had the empowerment to implement the solution. We knew that from the beginning. We were all spinning our wheels, and we were just another team activity. Because of that, we all trudged into the meetings.

Informants at Communication Equipment told essentially the same story. In the words of one software engineer,

We also didn't have complete buy-in from senior staff. We were empowered to come up with the process. When push came to shove, we found out that we weren't really empowered, but that they came in and at the last minute didn't like what we had done. . . . I can't specifically remember what the objections were.



The resulting lack of enthusiasm demonstrates a relatively mild and covert form of resistance to the TQM change initiative, what Anderson and Englehardt (2001) refer to as “distancing” (p. 197). In contrast, the TechPrint researchers were defiant, exhibiting overt resistance to TQM training, which many saw as poorly suited to the nature of their tasks and degrading in its lack of sophistication. As one informant put it,

The problem solving methods. . . . were way too simplistic, especially for people who do a certain kind of problem solving and reflecting on problem solving for a living . . . It looked like [TQM] embodied a value, you know, a different value which is, from our point of view, was very superficial, and therefore violated our sense of how we operated in the world.

Another informant was far more vocal in his opposition to the TechPrint training program:

In the whole of this organization, I was the one who was the most vociferously opposed to [TQM] or anything to do with it. In fact, I told my manager then, and I mean this and would stick to it: If anybody told me I had to undergo another week like that, I'd resign first. I will not ever do that again. I consider it to be a profound insult to anybody who is asked to submit to it.

The basis for this informant's objections was a perceived lack of theoretical sophistication on the part of both the trainer and the TQM change initiative itself. He took particular exception to the definition of quality as “customer satisfaction,” comparing the trainer to Humpty Dumpty, who tried to make words mean simply

what he wanted them to mean. In concert with other disgruntled trainees, he created distractions and disruptions that humiliated the trainer and stripped the training program of nearly all possible value for the others—although one participant admitted that he found the entire experience “entertaining.”

Somewhere between the grudging cooperation of the Family Publishing team and the defiance of the TechPrint researchers, was the strategic subversion of TQM exhibited by the crew that was responsible for servicing and maintaining Midwestern University’s fleet of motor vehicles and groundskeeping equipment. These workers found that the added responsibilities of self-direction interfered with their ability to effectively perform their primary tasks. Two equipment mechanics discussed the difficulties in assuming managerial responsibilities in addition to their regular jobs, and highlighted the resulting interpersonal tensions as a further distraction—and a barrier to achieving quality on the job:

Informant Six: I’d like to talk about the role of the team leader. I think we’ve had some problems with identifying what that person’s job really is, and I’ve seen a couple of times where it looked like it was rolling back into a management position instead of a team leader. And I think we’ve had trouble getting a grip on what the team leader really should be and, as soon as the team leader started assigning work, then the rest of the team said, “This is how it was when we had a supervisor here. What’s the difference, except that we’ve accepted this responsibility?” So I think that’s been a source of a pretty good problem, sounds like.

Informant Seven: Plus, what's the advantage to us, to be working under a system where we used to have this external person, and now one of us takes it on and we trade it around? So we're just uncertain of what's the value in it for us.

Informant Six: Another observation that I've had of the team is, when they were together with a supervisor, they were just a group of folks working together. They didn't necessarily have to interact with each other. They did, but they never had to solve problems together. Now, we've taken the supervisor out of that position, who was the problem solver, and put them all together and said, "Here you go. You all have to solve these problems by yourself. We're out of it." Interpersonal problems that were always there have just magnified. Now, all of a sudden, everybody has to get along? No. How are you going to do that? [The hired facilitator] has tried to help us out with that in conflict resolution. I'm not sure that we've resolved a whole lot of things, but there's no bloodshed yet, I guess. [Laughter.] But there's not a level of happiness, there's a high level of discomfort. . . [It's] just overwhelming.

It is, in fact, far from clear how these workers benefit from the University's change initiative. Even the service manager who encouraged them to try the self-directed team concept acknowledged that the team is being asked to do more with fewer resources, and that no equitable or direct compensation changes accompanied the additional burdens the team members were being asked to assume:

One issue that I think the University as a whole is going to have to decide about is proper compensation for self-directed work teams. Because right from the start this group said, “Well, what is in it for us? We're already empowered,” because they felt they were fairly well empowered. “So now you're going to give us other responsibilities, but there's no financial reward.” So they were skeptical about that. And we've right now, within the entire University, have no ability to reward a self-directed work team directly. We can do indirect things, like we were able to get them some money for uniforms. We were able to purchase some tools and equipment that probably wouldn't have gone their way otherwise. But I think *that*, in my opinion, until the University decides what they're going to do, will always be a stumbling block for self-directed work.

It is important to understand the differences between the kind of symbolic rewards that seemed so effective in helping Electronics cross-functional team members sustain their enthusiasm, as mentioned in Chapter 4, and the allocation of funds for uniforms and tools, as described above. The Electronics teams were composed of engineers and managers, well-paid professionals who were in a financial position that allowed them to appreciate peer recognition and symbolic rewards. Midwestern University's blue-collar workers would find it much more difficult to appreciate as rewards money spent on tools and equipment, which, after all, remain organizational—not personal—assets; and uniforms, which essentially depersonalize employees and mark them as working-class staff members in a context that otherwise

caters to individualism and intellectual elitism. Browning et al. (2000), in fact, interpreted the mechanics' ponderous approach to choosing their new uniforms as "a statement about the absurdity of programmed team spirit" (p. 213).

Rather than seeing TQM and the use of self-directed teams as empowering, the mechanics saw it as a burden. They no longer had a supervisor devoted to ordering supplies, scheduling tasks, handling customers, and dealing with the numerous other administrative duties facing such a work group. In response, interpersonal conflicts between the workers escalated alarmingly, customers were spoken to abusively, and timely service and production quality suffered. Their resistance to the program was so debilitating, that the department head who initiated it has decided to return to "more traditional management, a managed group, I should say, with some further supervision." Paradoxically, the mechanics refusal to accept the self-directed team structure as a form of workplace empowerment was itself an assertion of self-determination. They resented the intrusive addition of responsibilities they felt poorly qualified to assume, and which detracted from the exercise of their true competencies. Their intentional subversion of the system—and their presumably unintended incompetence at communication between themselves and their customers—is likely to result in a return to the conditions under which they were best able to perform their jobs, from which they gather a measure of satisfaction and self-esteem.

#### Theoretical Implications

The concept of employee empowerment is both a cornerstone principle of TQM, and a rhetorical foundation for the concertive control and exploitation of the

workforce. The appeal of this rhetoric varies, however, depending on organizational members' perceptions of their existing state of autonomy or empowerment. Figure 5.1 presents a "causal map" (Maruyama, 1963) of the relationships between job autonomy, TQM rhetoric, and methods of workforce control. Plus signs beside the arrows indicate a positive, or deviation-amplifying, relationship between one variable and the next; minus signs beside the arrows indicate a negative, or deviation-counteracting, relationship between one variable and the next. For the sake of clarity, Figure 5.1 distinguishes between high and low job autonomy, even though these distinctions may be understood as opposites on a single continuum. These data suggest an inverse relationship between empowerment or autonomy on the job and support for TQM: the more autonomous or empowered an employee feels, the less inclined he or she may be toward accepting the rhetorical claims and additional responsibilities associated with TQM.

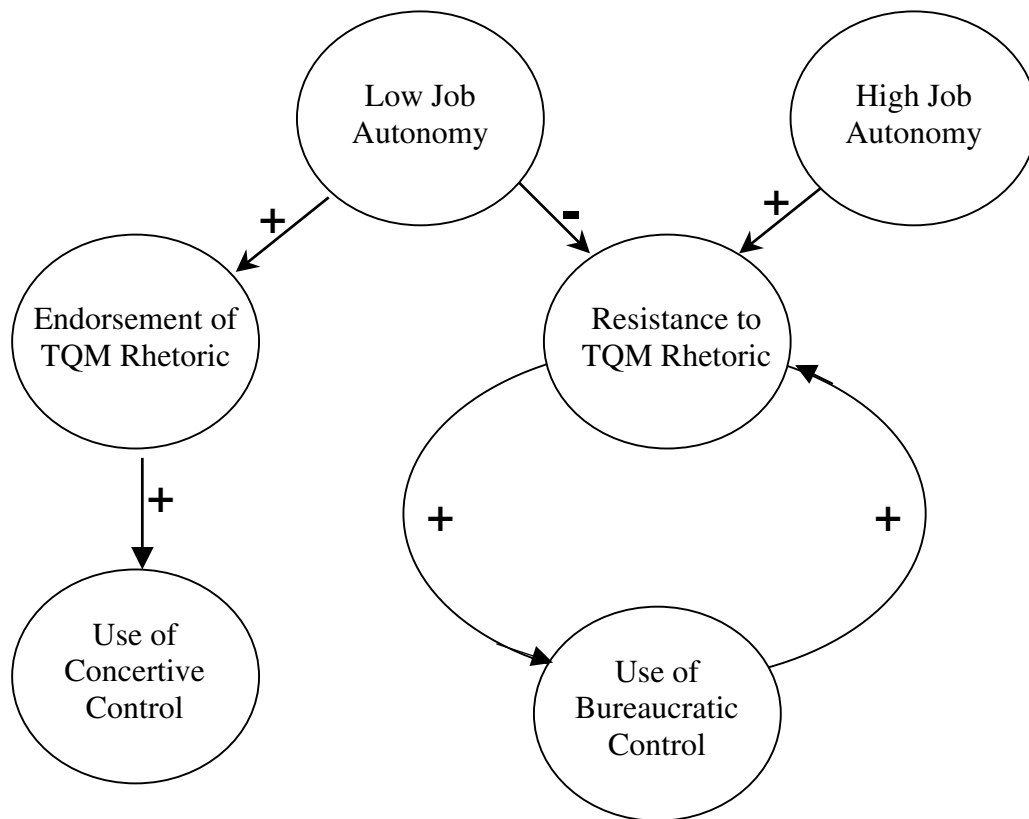


Figure 5.1 Causal Map - Critical

Consider, first, that the most vociferous opposition to TQM came from the highly educated research staff at TechPrint, intellectual workers whose professional expertise and generally autonomous job responsibilities equate well with established definitions of empowerment; these are workers who have both the competence to perform complex tasks, and a fairly high degree of influence over their working conditions. Although a few referred to the social and communicative benefits of the TQM training initiative, most believed that the program was beneath them, contributing nothing new or substantive in terms of task competence or workplace control. Their opposition to TQM compelled TechPrint managers to employ

bureaucratic control measures which, despite forcing a degree of compliance, nonetheless escalated communicative opposition and resistance among employees, depicted in Figure 5.1 as a deviation-amplifying feedback loop.

Opposition to TQM from supervisors and middle managers, as a result of the dilution of their authority, has been recognized in the TQM literature, and appeared in the discourse of a number of the respondents participating in this study. Team members from across several of the organizations studied here referred to the reluctance or unwillingness of managers to actually empower quality teams to implement the decisions or solutions they developed. For example, several U.S. Air Force informants observed or experienced difficulties in delegating authority to subordinates. As one explained, “those who are able to give up control to the people who work for them and trust the people who work for them, I think, are far better able to support the idea of quality than those who have to be in control.” She acknowledged that this is relatively rare in the Air Force, since military leadership personalities are predominantly oriented toward maintaining control.

More middling resistance to TQM was demonstrated by the Midwestern University vehicle and equipment mechanics, whose professional prestige may be less than that enjoyed by researchers, engineers, and managers, but whose self-perceptions of expertise and autonomy were at least comparable. The data indicate that the ability to diagnose and repair complex machines is a source of professional pride and personal satisfaction for many mechanics, and that their work is most often done individually rather than as part of a team, often with limited interpersonal



interaction. As one informant explained, they already perceived themselves as empowered and their work as empowering, and saw the added responsibilities of self-management as an interference instead of an opportunity. Their resistance appears likely to result in a return to a more traditional, bureaucratic method of workforce management.

The greatest support for (and the least resistance to) TQM was exhibited by the least skilled workers engaged in tasks that lent themselves better to collaborative, rather than individual, accomplishment. The Midwestern University custodial staff, for example, indicated great enthusiasm for the self-directed team concept, something that, in their case, increased both their sense of professional competence and independence. In contrast to the engineers and managers at Communication Equipment and Metal Fabricators, who expressed some reservations about TQM, front-line employees were far more enthusiastic, appreciating the opportunity to escape from assembly line production and to learn new skills while working on self-directed teams: cross-training yielded improvements in worker competence, and they were afforded far more control over their working conditions as members of production teams than they could have experienced as assembly-line workers. At the Ritz-Carlton, the bellhops do not pool tips, and their work is essentially unskilled and individual, not team-based. They showed some enthusiasm for TQM as a result of their increased (albeit quite limited) supervisory independence, but their support was more constrained than that of the housekeepers, whose actual duties lent themselves better to team accomplishment than did the work of the bellhops.

There appears, then, to be an inverse relationship between autonomy on the job and endorsement of TQM; those organizational members with the least power have the most to gain from TQM's principle of empowerment—albeit at the price of greater responsibility—and those with the most power may have the most to lose. The greatest apparent exception to this hypothesis appears in the high level of support for TQM showed by the team leaders at Elec-tonics. This may be explained by distinguishing these highly autonomous upper-level managers from less supportive mid-level managers, as producers, rather than consumers, of their organization's TQM rhetoric. Sorting out the intricacies and subtleties of this theoretical assertion provides one direction for future research, a subject to be considered in the concluding chapter of this dissertation.

### Summary

This chapter has presented the critical interpretation of TQM as an organizational strategy. The emphasis here was on how communication operates in the exercise of, and resistance to, managerial power and organizational control. The chapter first considered the relatively limited use of bureaucratic control strategies in the context of TQM. Second, it considered the more widespread and ideologically consistent use of concertive control strategies. Third, it discussed employee resistance to the additional burdens and responsibilities accompanying TQM. Analysis of the data indicated that, although TQM provides a discursive basis for employee participation in unobtrusive forms of organizational control, an inverse relationship exists between empowerment or autonomy on the job and support for TQM: the more

autonomous or empowered an employee feels, the less inclined he or she may be toward accepting the rhetorical claims and additional responsibilities associated with TQM.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

By way of providing a conclusion to this study of communication in Total Quality Management, this chapter first presents a summary of the preceding chapters and noteworthy findings. It then considers the limitations of the study, and closes with suggestions for future research.

### Summary of Findings

During the 1980s and 1990s, widespread concern about quality among U.S. organizations, as a result of Japanese competition, provided the discursive foundation for a new technology of workplace governance. The work lives of hundreds of thousands of U.S. employees and the economic futures of thousands of organizations were directly affected by the institutionalization of total quality management (TQM) programs. Yet, by the close of the 20th century, quality initiatives were finding less and less support in U. S. manufacturing and service organizations.

A number of researchers have wondered why TQM has proven to be less effective than promised and has encountered such a precipitous decline in popularity. Most have focused upon implementation difficulties, including lack of managerial support (Choi & Behling, 1997; Hill, 1995; Wilkinson & Willmott, 1995), ineffective positioning of change initiatives relative to organizational contingencies (Sitkin et al., 1994), poor deployment of statistical process controls (Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Zbaracki, 1998), and partial—versus complete—implementation strategies (Douglas & Judge, 2001).

One area that has received little attention is the role of communication in TQM programs, although the use of group communication processes and team-based problem-solving are fundamental TQM practices. Communication is central to the articulation of problems, to the constitution of programs of action, and to the judgments made about problem analysis and responses. Yet, with very few exceptions, organizational communication theorists have been conspicuously absent from the scholarly discussion of TQM. According to Allen and Brady, “theoretical and empirical articles discussing communication within TQM organizations are almost nonexistent” (1997, p. 322). Since an understanding of communication would seem to be fundamental to the theoretical and practical development of organizational quality initiatives, and since quality must be considered among the worthiest of organizational—and theoretical—concerns, this dissertation has been predicated upon the need for a close examination of the role of communication in Total Quality Management.

A review of the literature revealed that most conceptions of TQM are based upon three fundamental principles: customer satisfaction, continuous improvement, and teamwork. Quality itself is most commonly defined in terms of customer satisfaction (Reeves & Bednar, 1994), and three associated practices have been identified as instrumental in providing customer satisfaction: direct contact between product and/or service providers and their customers; the collection of specific information about customer requirements; and the inclusion of information provided by customers in the design and delivery of products and/or services.

The second fundamental principle associated with TQM is continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is generally presented as the key to customer satisfaction, and is understood to comprise both technical processes and human resource considerations. Two techniques that are predominantly associated with continuous improvement are the use of benchmarking and the use of statistical process controls.

The third fundamental principle generally associated with TQM is teamwork. The TQM literature consistently identifies teams as the context and teamwork as the necessary requirement for effective problem analysis and decision making with respect to continuous improvement and customer satisfaction (Dean & Bowen, 1994; Hackman & Wageman, 1995). Tuckman (1995), in fact, has argued that it is the emphasis on group process techniques and customer satisfaction that distinguishes *total* quality management from early forms of quality assurance that relied exclusively on statistical process controls.

In the interest of contributing insight into the role of communication in TQM organizations, this dissertation has been guided by three research questions:

RQ 1: Among organizations using TQM, what is the function of communication in providing customer satisfaction?

RQ 2: Within TQM organizations, how do employees communicatively create shared understandings of organizational activity and workplace relationships?

RQ 3: Among organizations using TQM, what is the role of communication in establishing, and resisting, asymmetrical relations of power?

Data for this dissertation consisted of interview transcripts assembled as part of a large-scale research project supported by the National Science Foundation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of ten U. S. organizations involved in successful TQM programs. Data were coded and responses to the research question were generated using grounded theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and a three-part analytical framework featuring functional, romantic, and critical interpretations of participants' discourse (Trujillo, 1992).

From a functional perspective, quality operates as an organizational discourse that problematizes the conduct of product and service providers, and directs and mobilizes them in the correction of deficiencies that interfere with the achievement of customer satisfaction. TQM is an effect of this discourse, comprising a range of techniques for improving product and service quality. Commitment to participative decision making, for example, positively influences communication between organizational members, and between product and service providers and their customers. This improvement in communication results in an accumulation of knowledge that, consequently, improves understandings between participants, facilitating the development of integrative solutions to organizational problems. Previous research that has considered TQM from a discursive perspective (Kerfoot & Knights, 1995; Munro, 1995; Tuckman, 1995; Webb, 1995) has either neglected the practical and material implications of quality as discourse, or failed to provide empirical support for such implications. This study thus contributes to an understanding of the nature and penetration of the discourse of quality in actual

organizations, and provides detailed examples of the way that discourse is materialized in the practices of organizational members.

From a romantic perspective, the data indicated that cohesiveness among quality team members was directly linked to the communication of social support, and that the resulting feelings of confidence and collective competence added to members' sense of empowerment and willingness to participate. In other words, social support among team members improves team cohesiveness, and belonging to a cohesive team may be personally empowering for its members; cohesiveness thus mediates the relationship, first suggested by Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002), between social support and member empowerment. Among the organizations studied here, team members tended to share goals and support one another even in the face of risky decisions and individual failures, clear evidence of cohesiveness. And the recognition that they can count on each other as members of a cohesive team encourages them to push the boundaries of their roles as decision makers and problem solvers, equally clear evidence of empowerment. This dissertation both clarifies the relationships between cohesiveness, social support, and empowerment, and contributes to the ongoing scholarly debate about empowerment in organizational contexts.

The concept of employee empowerment is a significant, albeit somewhat controversial, component of TQM programs, providing a rhetorical foundation for the concertive control of the workforce. The appeal of this rhetoric varies, however, depending on organizational members' perceptions of their existing state of empowerment. From the critical perspective, these data thus suggest an inverse



relationship between empowerment or autonomy on the job and support for TQM: the more autonomous or empowered an employee feels, the less inclined he or she may be toward accepting the rhetorical claims and additional responsibilities associated with TQM. This dissertation thus contributes to an understanding of the contingencies affecting the form and effectiveness of TQM implementation efforts (Sitkin et al., 1994), identifying organizational members' perceptions of job autonomy as a factor influencing the potential success of organizational quality improvement efforts.

The use of multiple interpretive frameworks is consistent with postmodern challenges to the construction of grand narratives or covering laws of human communicative behavior (Best & Kellner, 1991; Lyotard, 1979; Rosenau, 1992). Accordingly, it has not been my purpose to develop a general theory of organizational communication, but to describe communication as it occurs with respect to TQM in diverse organizational contexts and to advance communication inquiry through theoretical insights grounded in actual human discourse. Does communication improve organizations' integrative problem solving capacities? According to most respondents, it often does, but not always. Do employees act as though teams were families, and do they experience teamwork as empowering? Sometimes, but not always. Is TQM a managerial legitimation strategy assisted by employees' own discursive strategies? It appears so, but only from a particular and partial perspective.

Nonetheless, these three interpretive perspectives complement each other; diverse academic and organizational audiences may find one or another interpretation more appealing than the others, but no single interpretation should be construed as

more accurate or truthful than the others. When considered collectively, however, they yield a set of relationships between variables that enhances our understanding of Total Quality Management from a communication perspective (Figure 6.1). Specifically, TQM comprises a set of techniques for the management or governance of organizations. Those techniques are made sensible as a result of a shift or disruption in organizational discourse, away from a logic of quantity and competition and toward a logic of quality and cooperation. Figure 6.1 presents a “causal map” (Maruyama, 1963), summarizing the key variables and relationships identified in the preceding chapters of this dissertation. Plus signs beside the arrows indicate a positive, or deviation-amplifying, relationship between one variable and the next; minus signs beside the arrows indicate a negative, or deviation-counteracting, relationship between one variable and the next.

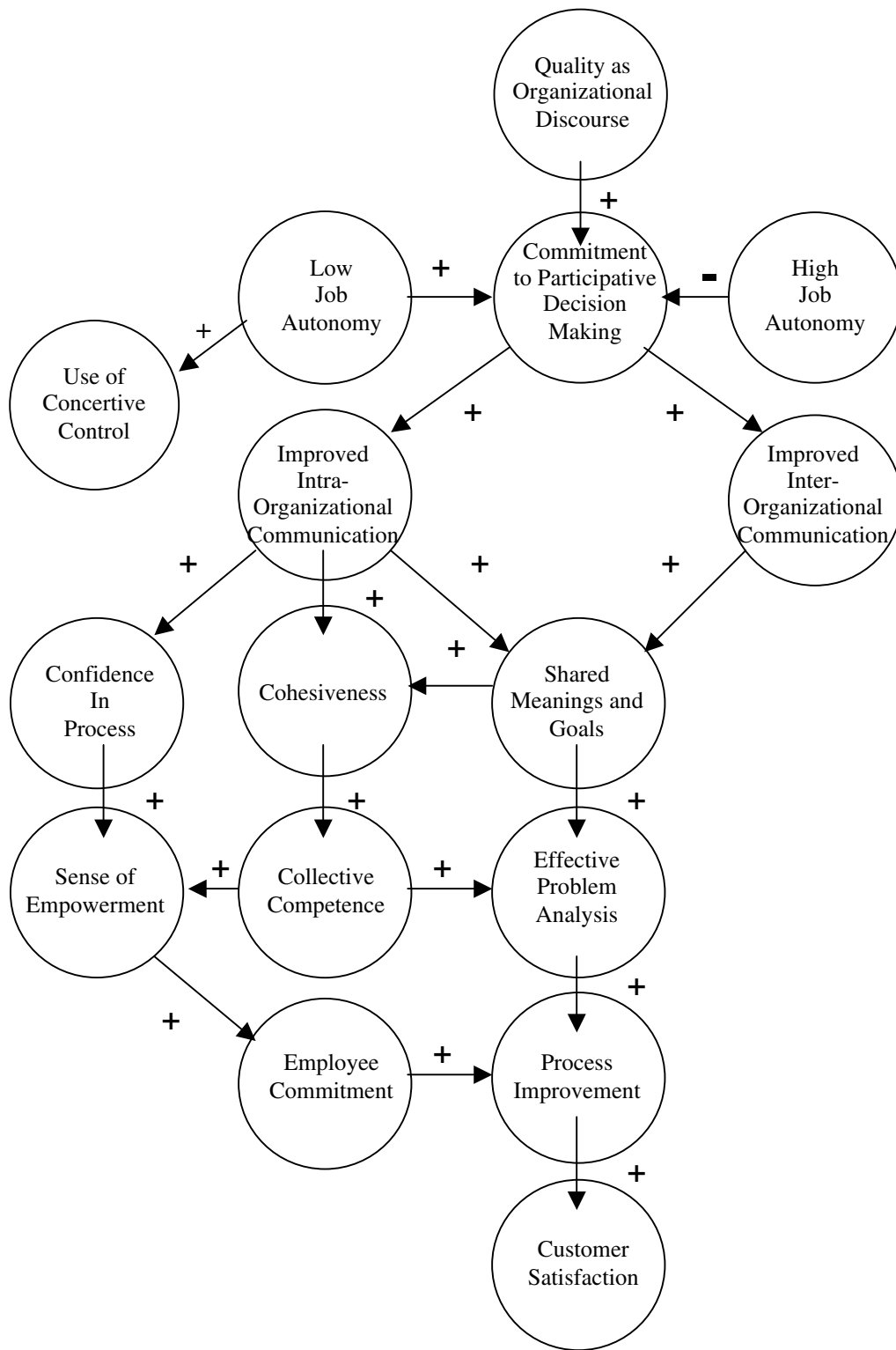


Figure 6.1 Causal Map - Collective

Improvements in communication and concertive control yield benefits in terms of team cohesiveness, member empowerment, and problem analysis, that result in organizational process improvements. Ultimately, output quality, understood in terms of customer satisfaction, is enhanced.

#### Limitations of the Study

Interpretive methods such as grounded theory are generally better suited to the generation of creative insights, hypotheses, and research questions than to the unequivocal advancement of theoretical propositions. In this case, it is equally true that communication operates functionally to improve organizational problem solving capabilities; that communication enables employees to socially construct meaning and positive understandings of organizational activity and workplace relationships; and that communication is implicated in the use of power, both for the control of the workforce and in employees' resistance to organizational interference with their own personal and economic interests. Such varied and contingent insights force us to appreciate the fact that all claims advanced here about the function of communication and the meaning of TQM are grounded, not only in the consistent assertions of those for whom TQM is a fact of organizational life, but in the inconsistencies and contradictions in their discourse, as well. As problematic as the concept of quality appears to be, it may be the "T" in TQM that raises the most significant problems with its conception and implementation. As Sitkin et al (1994) have suggested, "Although the idea of a universally applicable TQM approach may have been instrumental in fostering its acceptance, it also may be a root cause of many of

today's TQM problems" (p. 556). Neither the theory nor the practice of TQM—nor our understanding of the communicative behaviors that permeate it—can be advanced as though they were consistently applicable across diverse organizational contexts.

Since the role of communication in TQM was not the primary focus of the original study for which these data were collected, the most apparent limitation associated with the use of these data is the absence of an opportunity to pursue a line of questioning outside the concerns of the original researchers. On the one hand, this lends a particular significance to informants' explicit statements and insights regarding communication, since they emerged in response to non-directive questions during the course of the interviews. On the other hand, there is no assurance that the basis for a comprehensive understanding of the role of communication is provided by the data available; potentially relevant questions may not have been asked, nor was there a reliable follow-up procedure for clarification of statements specifically about communication.

One way in which this limitation is manifested is in the proportion of data available to support specific claims from across the ten organizations. Certain claims, such as the merits of diversity and the effectiveness of team-based problem solving, were clearly explicated and broadly supported in the discourse of informants from across every organization. Other claims, however, were more difficult to support as clearly and broadly. For example, although communication issues were identified as a concern by some representative(s) of each organization, few informants were as explicit about the nature of communication issues within and between organizations

as the operations manager at Communication Equipment. Although I have endeavored to advance representative claims about communication in TQM organizations, it was not always possible to provide equally compelling support for such claims with data from every organization, or from multiple informants within a given organization.

Another limitation of the present study concerns the currency of the data set itself, since the interviews were conducted between 1994 and 1998. Not only have changes occurred in the extent to which TQM is used by U. S. product and service organizations, but even broader changes in business practices and the economic climate raise a legitimate question about the relevance of these organizational members' comments about TQM. To some extent, the timeliness with which data appear in scholarly analyses is a fairly widespread concern, not limited to the present study. In the absence of significant revisions to the fundamental concepts and practices of TQM, the opportunity to perform a detailed textual analysis on such an extensive collection of informant responses should still be seen as theoretically significant. In addition, the breadth and depth of the data set certainly provides a basis for advancing claims about TQM, even if such claims must be situated in a specific historical context. More specifically, these data provide a reasonable picture of the way communication operated in TQM organizations in the very recent past, and arguably reflect prevailing conceptions of TQM in the numerous U. S. organizations that continue to use this approach to quality assurance.

### Suggestions for Future Research

Although interpretive research may not serve as well as other methods for the testing of hypotheses in the traditional social-scientific sense, it provides an exceptional method for generating hypotheses and research questions grounded in the direct experience and discourse of organizational members.

After a close consideration of informants' discussion of the effectiveness of TQM, one is left with the overriding question of why interest in TQM seems to have waned. Although there were noteworthy exceptions, the preponderance of the data suggest that product and service quality, and job satisfaction, both improved across organizations implementing TQM, even taking variations in implementation strategies into account. Of course, as indicated in Chapter One, surveys indicate that executives feel that TQM failed to produce *expected* results. In this regard, it is worth recalling the statement made by the product planning manager at Communication Equipment, who, despite formidable reductions in cycle time and product defects, contended that TQM was a failure because process improvements failed to keep pace with his increasing expectations. Future research might well consider the reasons for disproportionately escalating expectations; communication researchers, in particular, might investigate the rhetorical processes by which process improvements are interpreted as shortcomings or failures. Since the support of top-level management appears crucial to the perpetuation of TQM programs, their expectations and interpretations of success and failure are of fundamental practical concern.

Questions also remain concerning the effectiveness of group communication training methods, and the propriety and competence with which such skills are applied, in the TQM context. Most criticisms of and objections to TQM change initiatives revealed in the data focused upon inadequacies in organizational training programs, and shortcomings in critical thinking and problem analysis in group contexts have been a focus of theoretical reflection in communication research for many years. Systematic empirical research in organizational problem solving groups remains relatively sparse, however. These data generally concern team members' reflections on group processes; direct observation and analysis of team-based problem solving discussions in TQM organizations would shed light on the nature and extent of members' communicative competence as a factor influencing team effectiveness.

In a related suggestion, direct observation of quality teams at work could be oriented toward the study of leadership from a communication perspective. Waldman (1994) has already suggested that "a TQM organization might provide an excellent setting to examine the effects of transformational leadership because such a context would tend to rely on work performance characterized by extra-role behavior" (p. 529; see also Dean & Bowen, 1994). Data provided by Electronics informants highlights the relevance of this suggestion: informants specifically referred to the "willingness to be chartered to go do something that is really not your daily responsibility" as a crucial component of their quality team's success, and explained such willingness as the result of one team leader's "magical" abilities. Although the data also indicated that this magic consisted partly of the leader's ability to create an



encouraging climate for group discussion, there is ample opportunity for future researchers to identify and explain the communicative processes that distinguish such effectiveness from the numerous cases in which team leadership was noticeably less effective.

Chapter Five concluded with the claim that an exception to the hypothesis that an inverse relationship exists between autonomy on the job and endorsement of TQM appears in the high level of support for TQM showed by the executive-level team leaders at Elec-tonics. It was suggested that this may be explained by distinguishing these highly autonomous upper-level managers from less supportive mid-level managers, as producers, rather than consumers, of their organization's TQM rhetoric. Sorting out the intricacies and subtleties of this theoretical assertion provides another direction for future research. Particularly in light of the high expectations and declining enthusiasm for TQM among many top-level managers, the Elec-tonics executives' support appears to be a somewhat unusual aberration.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A number of writers (Munro, 1995; Tuckman, 1995; Webb, 1995) have been especially critical of the political implications of constructing employees and co-workers as internal customers in TQM discourse.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson et al. (1994) argue that “scientific evidence on this proposed relationship, however, appears to be scarce. What does exist is evidence of a positive relationship between customer perceptions of quality and customer satisfaction” (p. 496).

<sup>3</sup> The difficulties associated with gaining widespread acceptance of statistical methods among organizational members are a recurring theme in many discussions of the failure of TQM change initiatives (Hackman & Wageman, 1995; Zbaracki, 1998). Zbaracki (1998), in particular, argues that statistical methods are crucial to quality improvements, but that managerial and employee rhetoric contribute to a distortion of the technical realities of TQM that undermine proper implementation efforts.

<sup>4</sup> Dean and Bowen (1994) nonetheless acknowledge limits to and substitutes for leadership (see Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Pfeffer, 1977), and conclude that “firms implementing TQ may be provocative sites for studying the relevance of leadership” (p. 399; see also Waldman, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Other published works using this data set include Browning et al. (2000); Dillard, Browning, Sitkin, & Sutcliffe (2000); and Sutcliffe et al. (1999).

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the product planning manager at Communication Equipment concluded that the TQM/product development team process was a failure, although he acknowledged a significant improvement in the most recent product

development cycle time (two weeks behind schedule v. 18 months), and a huge reduction in defective products (from over 50 percent to below 5 percent). In accounting for his paradoxical conclusion, he said, “So it seems to be what’s happened is, while our quality of doing things is increased, our quality of expectations is increased even more.”

<sup>7</sup> One informant, however, believes that there are still considerable boundaries between Elec-tonics and U. S. Motors, and suggested that, with even greater communication between the organizations, even greater successes might be possible:

If we really got together for the long haul, rather than just inviting them in periodically, if we made members from each organization permanent, I think that after a while we’d open up and really start getting down to root causes on both sides. Really a mesh of systems, to get to the solution. A lot of times, we’ll go off and solve a problem not really knowing what U.S. Motors wants in a solution. We have an idea of what they want, but if you don’t hear it from them first hand, are you really going in the right direction?

<sup>8</sup> If one were to consult the index to Hart's (1997) *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* for references to the word 'discourse', one would, in fact, be directed to "*See Rhetoric*" (p. 364).

<sup>9</sup> In a subtle but significant statement that supports this interpretation, it is worth noting that the informant who was telling the story concluded her account by stating that this former CEO was “semi-retired, but he still plays an integral part of our *government*.”

<sup>10</sup> Burawoy (1979) and Hamper (1991) provide evidence that not even the prevention of injury was unequivocally accepted as justification for stopping production under the discourse of quantity.

<sup>11</sup> There is obviously a paradox or contradiction in the idea that supervisors can empower subordinates: If control can be given by someone, it can also be taken away. This distinction in access to and the basis of control distinguishes empowerment from simple participation in decision making (Cotton, Vollrath, Froggatt, Lengnick-Hall, & Jennings, 1988; Dachler & Wilpert, 1978).

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