TOWARDS EFFECTIVE FUNCTIONING OF QUALITY CIRCLES

QCs offer much scope for improvement in organisational functioning on a number of counts—— humanisation of work, participative work culture, self-development, job satisfaction, recognition, team work, effective communication, quality improvement, cost reduction, etc. All these positive possibilities and success stories have encouraged many organisations (of varied types) to launch and experiment with QCs. Though many organisations have taken enough care vis-a-vis the problems associated with launching and operationalisation of QCs, there are a good number of cases when the initial excitement has waned over a period of time and many QCs have become defunct.

The major barriers that come in the way to effective operationalisation and maintenance of QCs in any organisation have been discussed in some detail in a separate chapter earlier. Effective functioning of the QCs in an organisation needs removing or minimising the impact of such barriers and, for that, creating a conducive organisation climate. Based on the appreciation of the literature in this field available in India and the findings of the empirical survey, the researcher has offered some specific
suggestions (given below) with a view to making the functioning of QCs effective.

1) Understanding of the concept of QC and meaningful support from the top managerial personnel

One of the important barriers to the development of participative culture through the functioning of QCs is lack of or inadequate understanding of the concept of QC and/or absence of meaningful support from the top management. The senior executives in an organisation have a definite role to play in this regard. Apart from understanding, they need to have faith in the concept and should have commitment and then only they can extend whole-hearted support to the operationalisation of QCs. Their support must also be visible and reflected in a number of ways, e.g., occasional participation in the QC meetings, informal talks with the leaders and the members of the QCs, attending the presentation sessions and regularly participating in the Steering committee's meetings. All the facilities necessary for sustaining the QC activities should be provided by the top management without any hesitation.

2) Removing doubts regarding the efficacy of QCs in the minds of the middle managerial personnel

Middle-level executives are very often found to be sceptic regarding the utility of QCs. They generally
apprehend that functioning of QCs may bring certain deficiencies to the surface much to their embarrassment and may lead to dilution of their authority and importance. A sizeable section of them apprehend that the superiors would find fault with them for not finding solutions to certain problems earlier. These misconceptions at their level, which apparently look like genuine fears, have to be taken care of by the top management by advising and counselling them on operational problems, exposing them systematically to the concept and operational aspects of QC and attending regularly the case study presentation sessions. Top management of an organisation should help the middle-level executives dispel such fears vis-a-vis working of the QCs. In fact, the message should be that effective operationalisation of QCs would make them more successful in their work areas and bring credit to them and they would find more free time necessary for important and higher-level jobs.

3) Launching Pilot QCs

Launching and operationalisation of QCs should be a gradual process. It is important that the top management in an organisation is careful enough to select the division/department/section where the pilot QCs will be
launched. One consideration could be to start the QCs where the reluctance or resistance will be minimum or where selection of the project(s) will be easier for the QCs and the benefits are expected to be visible to the employees in the other departments/sections.

4) **Launching training programmes**

Competence of the members has a bearing on the effectiveness of a QC. Proper training, in this connection, for the top managerial personnel, facilitators, leaders, deputy leaders and members of the QCs in an organisation prior to the launching and during the functioning of the QCs is imperative. Top managerial personnel must first be trained so that when the implementation phase begins, the QCs' members will get proper direction because the top managers' style of functioning after adequate training is expected to be compatible with the requirements of making the QCs behaviourally effective. It may be of much use to train the trade union representatives also so that they can appreciate what a QC is all about. In fact, training is the key activity vis-a-vis effective functioning of the QCs in any organisation.

5) **Establishing the Steering Committee**

The QC programmes should be under the overall
supervision of a Steering Committee in an organisation. That committee should be formed prior to the implementation of the QC programmes for the purpose of formulating the relevant policies and guidelines. Preferably the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) should be made the Chairman of the Steering Committee which has the responsibility of establishing monitoring systems in order to assess, on a regular basis, the QC activities.

6) **Active involvement of the facilitator**

One of the important barriers to effective functioning of QC activities is the facilitators' absence in the QC meetings. Lack of or inadequate involvement of the facilitator would not only be construed as lack of management support but that also adversely affects the morale of the QC members. He should, in essence, function as a teacher, a guide, a catalyst, and one who would help the QC obtain the necessary support and assistance from others whenever required by the members.

7) **Holding QC meetings regularly**

One of the problems to be taken care of while operating QCs is the irregular holding of QC meetings. It should be given due attention. Holding of QC meetings on specified days and times should be ensured
by the facilitator and the leader/deputy leader of the QC. Likewise, the co-ordinating department should ensure that the meetings of the Steering Committee and the presentations before the top-and middle-level managers are held regularly as per the schedule.

8) **Applying simple techniques for problem-solving**

One of the major objectives of QC is people-building and that would be diluted if the QCs' members are not encouraged to identify and resolve problems analytically with the help of specialists, if necessary. This is possible only if they make use of the simple techniques which are to be taught to them during training programmes. Because of the low level of education of the lower-level employees in India, assistance and guidance regarding application of certain simple techniques need to be provided to them by the facilitators and other managerial personnel associated with the QCs.

9) **Use of familiar language**

Very often language becomes a problem because the QCs' members may be from different linguistic communities, speaking different languages. However, the QC activities
can be carried out with the help of any language. For effectiveness, it is necessary that every QC member gets the opportunity to use any language he is familiar with. Facilities for interpretation/translation of any language into any commonly understood language may have to be provided when some QCs have to present their case studies in a language with which the audience (on the whole) at any seminar/conference/convention is not familiar.

10) Adequate provision for time and facilities

Effective functioning of the QCs is largely dependent on the proper allocation of time and the facilities to the members of the QCs. At least, one hour in each week must be earmarked for a QC's activities. A decent meeting room is important although the management may feel that a meeting/discussion can be held anywhere. Adequate provision for time and resources will reflect the commitment of the managerial personnel. Other necessary facilities, apart from the room, are also important for which adequate provisions must be made.

11) Improving the communication system

Launching QCs and making QC activities effective are highly dependent on adequate and effective communication.
The employees who are found to be reluctant to participate in the QC activities are often those who fail to appreciate what QC activities are all about. The communication system in vogue need to be reviewed from time to time and improved. Both the formal communication (through the vertical, horizontal and diagonal channels) and informal communication mechanisms have to strengthened and this would take care of, inter alia, rumours and distorted versions of the QC activities.

12) Developing a system for status reporting and review of QC activities

This is necessary for appraising the Steering Committee of the status of the QCs' activities to enable it to review and take corrective actions, if necessary, as well as to decide on the policies and guidelines, wherever required. The Steering Committee will meet, at least, once in two/three months. The co-ordinating department shall give a brief account of the progress of the QCs in the plant to the Steering Committee based on 'Activity Level' reports received from the facilitators and the feedbacks obtained through interactions with the QCs' leaders. The facilitators shall give a brief resume of the QCs activities in their respective areas to the Steering Committee. The co-ordinating department shall
conduct an opinion survey on the intangible gains accrued as a result of the QC activities in such areas where QCs are in existence, at least, for a year by administering questionnaires to the cross-sections of the non-members, members and middle-and top-level managerial personnel.

13) **Proper implementation of the recommendations of QCs**

Delay in or non-implementation of the recommendations of the QCs obviously generates frustration among the persons concerned. This aspect has to be particularly taken care of whenever there is a possibility of delay in implementation or it is not feasible to implement the recommendations made by the QCs' members for some reason or the other. The QCs' members must be taken into confidence and should be communicated promptly, giving convincing reasons.

14) **Involving trade unions in the process of launching QCs**

Trade Unions do play a vital role in organisational functioning. However, due to multiplicity of unions in many of the organisations in India, sometimes it becomes difficult to bring all the trade unions in one platform. Again, sometimes, the trade unions are found to be a bit
sceptical regarding the functioning QCs. However, the members of QCs are members of one or the other trade union. Thus, involvement of the trade unions is a must in the process of launching QCs in the Indian context.

15) **Effective use of rewards and recognition**

In order to make QC activities more effective, managers must sincerely try to reinforce the outcome of the completed projects. The Japanese organisations have found that publishing the results through the organisations' in-house bulletins and asking the members of the QCs to make presentations before others are useful ways to provide recognition to the members. Again, Korean employees have found to prefer monetary awards. Thus, there is a definite need for appropriate positive reinforcement.

16) **Undertaking morale-building exercises**

Occasional appreciation of QCs' members (for good efforts put in by them) by the facilitators, the heads of the departments, etc., help boost their morale. Gatherings, get togethers, etc., of QCs' members and concerned officers also help improve communication among them.
17) Developing positive organisation climate

The organisation climate has effects on the motivation of the employees working in the organisation. While friendliness, candid behaviour, consideration, close support, group identity and cohesiveness could be improved through social interactions, pride can be built only if the employees feel that their organisation is a better place for them and that is why they are there and that they are adequately recognised for their contributions. Human relations need to be emphasised and the distance between managerial personnel and the lower-level employees should be narrowed down. Organisation climate very much matters in determining whether certain things learnt, as a result of QC activities, can be really transferred to the working situation.

18) Fostering process-oriented approach instead of result-oriented approach

Some managerial personnel often worry too much if there are no tangible gains as a result of QC activities. This is because of the traditional approach followed by many managements. Japanese managements, perhaps, have become successful because of their long-term planning and process-oriented approach. QC
activities also require a lot of patience on the part of the managements till the attitudinal changes in the employee start generating tangible results.

19) **Campaigning for productivity-and quality-improvement**

Very often, employees do not see any need for QCs because they apparently do not find problems that need to be solved. An organisation-wide productivity-and quality-campaign would be useful to help raise the general level of understanding vis-a-vis the need for QC programmes. Keeping this in mind, the organisation should gradually develop a TQM system in order to reap the full benefits from the QC activities.

20) **Publicising the role of QCs**

Publicity regarding the performance of the QCs has played an important role in Japan, Korea and Taiwan. Organisation-wide presentations can be organised to give publicity to the QC activities, e.g., organising a 'Quality Circle Day'. Such type of programmes, however, are possible only when the organisation has a substantial number of QCs. While publicity is necessary to make the employees aware of the relevance of QCs, the organisation should avoid too much publicity which may become
counter-productive or may help generate certain false notions.

21) Other essential requirements

Other essential requirements on the part of the managerial personnel are mentioned below.

The list, however, is only indicative and not an exhaustive one.

i) understanding
ii) patience
iii) sincerity of purpose
iv) determination
v) mutual trust
vi) tolerance
vii) receptivity
viii) leadership skills
ix) openness and humility

All these should be at such level that will result in effective functioning of the QCs.

Due to Japan's remarkable economic growth, many countries have shown great interest in the basic features of the Japanese organisations. The paternalistic features
of the Japanese organisations, viz., life-time employment, seniority-based wages and promotion, and enterprise unions have received much attention of researchers all over the world. Among the most studied features of the Japanese organisations like co-operative labour relations, QC, group-working, on-the-job training, job rotation, the 'Kanban' system, etc., only QC has widely spread to the countries outside Japan. But the success rates are varying and this is mainly due to the variations in culture. Thus, before introduction of QCs in any organisation, the environment is to be made congenial so that QCs are accepted for effective growth, keeping in mind that quality is an attitude of mind.

Many of the causes of failure of QCs arise because of false ego and self-centred attitude of many employees, particularly the senior ones. These negative attitudes come very much in the way to effective participation, employee motivation, team work, communication, productivity improvement, overall development and well being. The organisation should direct its efforts to create a 'climate' in which people shed their false ego and self-centredness and work for the common good.