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JUST THE FACTS

Policy governs quality management and limits it. The domain of quality management is efficiency, effectiveness and economy. Morality, ethics, justice and rationality are in the policy domain, not the management domain.

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Recognizing the limits of quality management and what you can control by Mohammad Jassem Bensalamah

If the problem concerns a process's efficiency, effectiveness and economy, it becomes the quality practitioner's problem. On the other hand, if the issue concerns morality, ethics, justice and rationality, it is top management's problem. It is up to top management whether to solve the problem.

When a problem arises in the workplace, the quality practitioner must ask: "Does this problem have to do with the efficiency, effectiveness and economy of a process, or does it have to do with morality, ethics, justice and rationality?"

BOUNDARIES



hen I first entered the workforce, management was an enigma to me. I worked as an engineer, and although obtaining the information for the technical part of my job was difficult, it was at least possible. On the other hand, the managerial part of my job was a complete mystery, and I did not know where or how to obtain information about it.

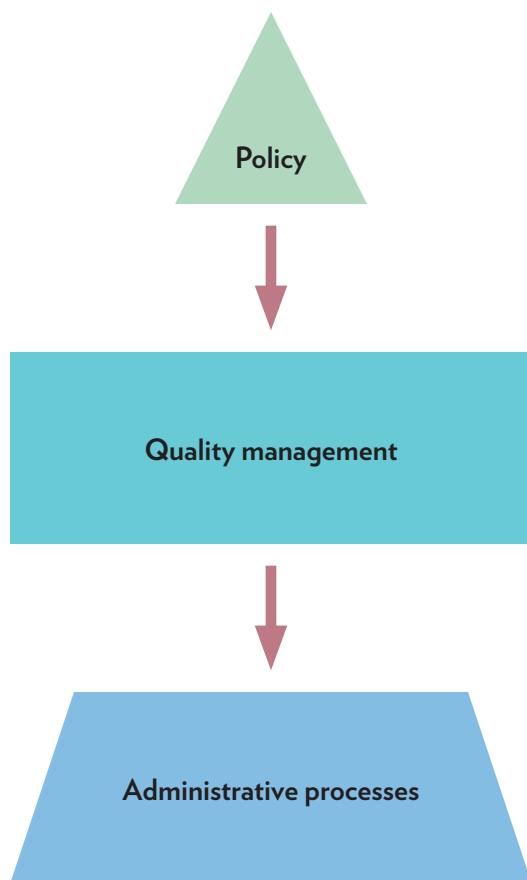
Similarly, the administrative processes were a “black box,” and I did not know what went inside. I tried reading management textbooks and other available commercial books about management. This helped a bit, but for the most part, matters remained a mystery, and the black box remained black. Naturally, the quality of my work—as well as my life in general—suffered because of this.

Consequently, you can imagine my enthusiasm when I learned about quality management. Quality management presented management practically and conspicuously. Everything was clear now: Management no longer was a mystery, and administration no longer was a black box. I was thrilled and felt as if I was given a present. It was bliss.

Like all people who feel blissful, I tried to share the cause of my bliss with the world. At the time, I thought because quality management was the answer to my problems, it must be the answer to all the world’s problems. This thinking made me want to spread the practice of quality management everywhere.

FIGURE 1

Quality management dictates the administrative processes in an organization but is subordinate to policy



I joined ASQ, participated in local and regional quality activities, obtained an ASQ manager of quality/organizational excellence certification, and actively promoted the cause of quality management.

After many years of practice, however, I realized that quality management was subordinate to policy (see Figure 1). A policy not only would dictate quality management's objectives, but it

also would affect the results of the quality management system (QMS). This realization happened as I learned that quality management has some basic assumptions.

If these fundamental assumptions were violated, quality management would either not work or would work to produce evil results. In other words, I was disenchanted and became aware that quality management was not a universal solution to all problems, and there are problems that quality management cannot solve.

What is quality management and what is a policy?

To understand their relationship, we must define the terms "quality management" and "policy." The following definitions are found in the online ASQ Quality Glossary.¹

■ **Quality management:** Managing activities and resources of an organization to achieve objectives and prevent nonconformances.

■ **Policy:** A plan (direction), statement of intent or commitment for achieving an objective.

Quality management always demands a policy. Quality management, however, does not make policies—it only executes them. It is evident from these two definitions that policy dominates quality management by setting its direction and stating its objectives. Also, a person might notice that a policy mostly involves planning, but people do this planning. What happens inside people's minds and hearts when they prepare policies? Figure 2 (p. 44) describes that.

When people prepare and plan policies, a conflict can arise in their minds and hearts. Just decisions are obstructed by personal or group biases. Private interests conflict with ethical choices. Finally, rational decisions are clouded by irrational feelings such as love, hate and jealousy.

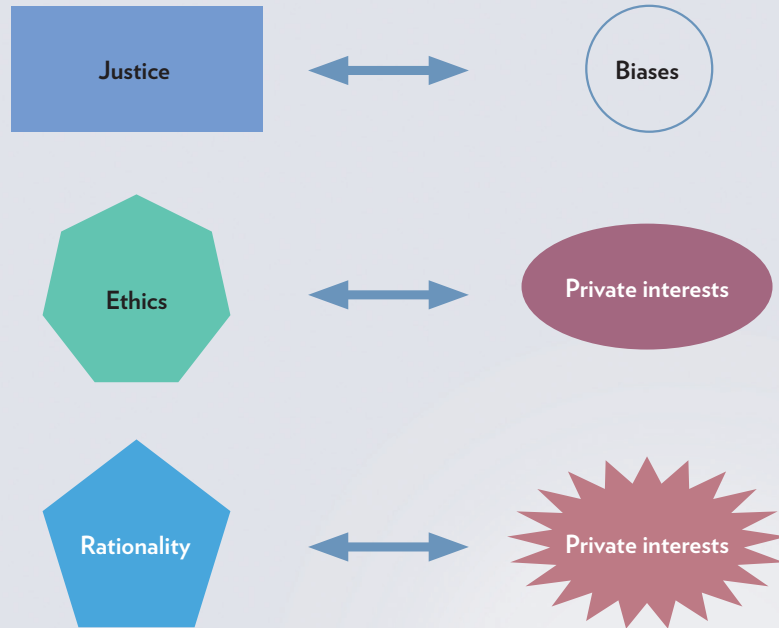
The produced policy, as well as its execution, is the final result of the previously mentioned conflict in the hearts and minds of the people who prepared it. Thus, it's not surprising to find practices that conflict with written policies and veer into mixtures of justice and prejudice, ethical practice and private interests, or rationality and irrationality.

A policy must be built on integrity, so planners must be moral, ethical, just and rational. On the other hand, quality management is concerned with efficiency, effectiveness and economy—and not with anything else. At best, quality management assumes the policy that guides it is moral, ethical, just and rational. Nevertheless, this is not always the case. When this happens, quality will either not deliver, or it will deliver evil results. The following are examples of both. We will start with the latter.

Evil policies executed efficiently: The government apparatus in Nazi Germany and Baathist Iraq carried out evil and immoral policies with excellent efficiency. Similarly, South Africa (before the 1990s) efficiently executed apartheid laws, which were irrational and unjust. In all the

FIGURE 2

What goes on inside people's minds and hearts when they prepare policies



previously mentioned cases, as well as many others worldwide, the policy gave management and administration either evil, unfair or irrational objectives. Then, management and administration did their best to achieve them.

Examples of problems that quality management can't

solve: The following are examples of problems that quality management cannot solve. In most of these examples, the managerial and administrative processes will deteriorate, and a QMS will be useless and become a burden.

1. **Nepotism:** When a business owner (or a significant shareholder) insists on putting his incompetent son in a management position, quality management should not be expected to solve the problems arising from appointing an inept person to a key management position.
2. **Favoritism:** When someone is appointed or promoted in an organization because of his connections instead of merit or qualifications, it is unfair to think that quality management can remedy the consequences of such an appointment.
3. **Conflict of interests:** When an insurance company's owners deposit the company's money in a savings account, a trust fund or another type of fund and deliberately delay the payments or on behalf of their clients, quality management cannot expedite payments. Similarly, when the CEO of a small company sells significant company assets to distribute phenomenal profits to the shareholders—only for owners of larger companies to pay attention to him and later hire him as their own CEO for better salary and benefits—quality management cannot be expected to save the first company from a future of low profits or even bankruptcy.
4. **Jobbery:** When a manager in the public sector deliberately makes the workflow in his department extremely slow, for example, and every transaction requires his signature because he wants people to “talk” to him and have more connections, applying ISO 9001 or other quality standards would be pointless.

As a reviewer of this article pointed out, “Organizations don't typically have written policies that indicate nepotism, favoritism, conflict of interest or jobbery. However, if these things are present in practice, that is an issue that is likely in conflict with the written quality policy.” The author agrees with the reviewer on this matter. In fact, most written policies nowadays, it seems, emphasize mainstream egalitarian values and ethical practices mandated by laws and regulations.

Organizations that only seek to have a quality certification without genuinely believing in quality values, however, tend to suffer from the previously mentioned conditions. With these organizations, the actual and often observed practice contradicts what is written in the quality policy.

Who causes policy problems in the management system?

Policy problems result from the top management of an organization or the ruling class of a country. In other words, policy problems come from influential people. While W. Edwards Deming wrote about eliminating fear from the organization, it is easier said than done. Confronting powerful people is not easy and can be costly. Yet, the problems these powerful people make must be solved by less-powerful people in management.

What would management do? To solve policy problems and avoid confrontation with a powerful person or group, management often establishes administrative processes or enforces regulations that would treat the problem's symptoms rather than its root cause. Sometimes, these solutions are cosmetic or would further complicate the management system and lead to its deterioration.

Morality, ethics, justice and rationality

Policy governs and limits quality management. The domain of quality management is efficiency, effectiveness and economy. Morality, ethics, justice and rationality are in the policy domain, not the management domain.

When a problem arises at the workplace, the quality practitioner must ask: “Does this problem have to do with the efficiency, effectiveness and economy of a process, or does it have to do with morality, ethics, justice and rationality?”

If the problem concerns a process's efficiency, effectiveness and economy, it becomes the quality practitioner's problem. On the other hand, if the issue concerns morality, ethics, justice and rationality, it is top management's problem. It is up to top management whether to solve the problem.

Quality professionals also must be aware that the actual practices in an organization might differ significantly from the official policy. Usually, this is a sign of an organization that does not believe in quality. **QP**

REFERENCE

1. ASQ, “ASQ Quality Glossary,” asq.org/quality-resources/quality-glossary.



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