

Perceived Quality as

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Today, I am recalling an early morning chat that I had at a blue beach resort in Mauritius in the month of July, 2000 with one internationally famous quality consultant and founder of the QCI International and Quality Digest from America, Mr. Donald L. Dewar. He is twenty years older than me and more experienced and well recognized in the field of quality. With a sip of black coffee, I asked him a very funny question, "Don, can you tell me what is meant by the term quality?" The morning Indian Ocean's cool breeze was mocking at me for the question. As usual, Mr. Dewar smiled gently towards me and replied calmly. Now it is more than a decade now, but the unwavering voice of the elderly scholar is still echoing in my ear.

"Dinesh! I was working for Lockheed USA in early 1970s as an engineer and got the chance to go to Japan to learn their quality control system. I and returned back from there with the knowledge of Quality Control Circles and Total Quality Management which I tried to implement at my company. This was most probably the first trial to implement TQM in any US companies. Since then, I am trying to define quality and found it so hard to come to some conclusion. After I left Lockheed, I concentrated my work on providing consulting services of team building and quality assurance to famous US companies and even started the famous Quality Digest journal which publishes article and opinions of various quality professionals, academicians, engineers and managers. In one issue of the quality digest last year in 1999, I even put a blog in its website asking the readers of the digest, "How to define quality?" I got answers, more than thousands- all most all logical, valid and full of inquisition. We understand and eve can feel from our heart the term quality but explaining it to others with simple definition is really an arduous job."

Since then, I am asking the same question to quality academicians and professionals working at various sectors whom I use to meet regularly in the international forums. I use to get the same type of responses as Mr. Dewar told me that morning. I learned enlightening knowledge on quality from Dr. Noriaki Kano, Japan, Dr. James H. Harrington and Dr. Syed W. Ali, USA, Dr. Gregory H. Watson, Finland, Dr. Mohamed Zairi, Dr. Richard Ennals, and Mr. David Hutchens, UK, Dr. Wen K. Chang, Chinese Taipei, Dr. Yung-Hu Suh, Korea, Singapore, Mr. Hesameddin A. Kashfi, Iran, Dr. Hayal Koksai, Turkey, Ms. Cristina E. Fransisco, Philippines, Mr. Sunil G. Wijesinha, Sri Lanka, Dr. Kamran Moosa, Pakistan, Dr. Vikram Nabar and Mr. Janak Mehta, India, Mr. Khairul Bashar, Bangladesh, Mr. Shan Ruprai, Australia and many others. I learned a lot from Nepalese quality experts and business professionals in Nepalese context, too.

It is difficult to define and learn quality in a holistic manner. However, it is not an impossible work to try. Quality when observed with wider perspective has multidimensional definitions. When we talk about quality, one usually talks on quality of a product or a service either with suppliers' perspective or with customers' perspective. And, state looks from regulators' perspective. The perspective of the civil society as watch dog looks quality for the side effects at the people's life quality through the processing or consumption of product and services. Thus, the definition will have different dimensions. It is but natural that when players are working with

different objectives, and they carry different perspectives and they define quality differently. Everybody assumes he knows, but no one has complete pictures on Quality and actually very few know.

Here, one might be reminded of a story of four blind men touching an elephant and each reporting different description of what the elephant is. One touches the trunk and tells that the elephant is a huge pipeline. Another touches the tail of the elephant and argues that it is like a thin rope and not a pipeline. The third touches and feels the flat stomach and describes that the elephant is a huge wall. The fourth one goes round elephant and touches the legs and argues that all others are wrong, the elephant is pillars. Each believes his experience to be correct. People tell the stories from their own perspective.

What then quality is? How people perceived quality as?

1. **Quality as craftsmanship:** Even before the industrial revolution, people were making quality products. The person who has imagination, aesthetic vision and unique craftsmanship use to produce quality products. Look at the Pyramid of Egypt, Tajmahal of India, Pagoda temples of Nepal and many other modern day's handicrafts and jewelries from different countries. How much appreciation it gets from all who enjoy with it?
2. **Quality as standards:** Each country is trying to develop standards for products they manufacture with an objective of protecting customers' right and regularizing the market. Many countries have their own standards for different products. Some examples are- British standards, Japanese standards, American standards, German standards, Indian standards and Nepal standards.
3. **Quality as measurement:** Product's specification guarantees customers to buy without hesitation. Conformance to specification is one of the Guru's mantra for quality. The conformance with specification can be made with the help of hundred percent measurements to verify with the specification of products. Measurement of length, area, volume, ampere, volts, flow are some of the examples which are calibrated..
4. **Quality as functional use:** Customer buys any product for his or her use. If the product has very low functional use, then the market cannot sell the product anymore and it is said that the product has no quality. Product must satisfy the functional characters for which it is designed, made and sold. If a mobile phone cannot be easily carried and communicate at a far distance and if a car cannot roll in the road, what will happen?
5. **Quality as value creator:** Suppliers of any product want to create value for his investment through selling his or her products and generating profit. Customers want to get value for the money he or she spends for the product. Without creating value on the product, suppliers cannot make profit as well as customers will not spend money. Most of the time value is synonyms with quality.
6. **Quality as delighting customer:** In the competitive world, quality is the only weapon to attract customers towards supplier's products or services. And, the product should be able to make customers happy or enjoy with the products or services. Many movies were made in Hollywood, Bollywood and Kollywood. The recent movies of 2011 like "The artists", "Dirty picture" and "Loot" delighted many cinema viewers.
7. **Quality as consistency:** Once customer is satisfied after purchasing and using a product, he or she wants the same product with no variation on its characters. Variation is unavoidable from

the supplier's side, however customers want consistency without variation. The consistent product is considered a quality product. A medium size buyer feels that a medium size shirt whenever and where ever he buys should fit to his body.

8. **Quality as inspection and control:** In a mass production, hundred percent inspection and control of quality is not possible. Hence, suppliers carry out sampling of final products for inspection and control and sell to customers. Since the beginning of 20th century, Statistical Quality Control methods are applied to control defects in the products. The third party quality inspection is one example of getting quality to customers.
9. **Quality as supplier's assurance:** Customer demand assurance from suppliers for any product he is buying. Especially, the institutional buyers ask assurance from suppliers regarding the quality of regular supply of parts and products. Statistical process control is adopted to inspect and control the processes for producing quality and provide assurance to customers regarding quality.
10. **Quality as product warranty:** Suppliers give warranty for replacement and repair of the products if some manufacturing defects occurred after sales. This gives relief to the customers to purchase and use the products and they consider the product will be of good quality. Suppliers of electrical and electronic products, cameras, household equipments, etc. promote their products to be of quality through providing warranty.
11. **Quality as price effective:** In 1980's when Philip Crosby talked about quality is free; there were *hues and cries* in America. For good quality product and services, it is thought that we have to add more cost. However, it is now well established that cost can be economized through adding more quality features and reducing defect rates in the process of improving quality. Many mobile and electronic gadgets are the examples of this phenomenon.
12. **Quality as innovation:** The research and development on new quality features of products and services to capture the mind and pocket of customers are making more and more innovations. Consumption rates accelerate together with development of innovative quality features of products and services. The ICT exploration is one great example of rapid and customer catching innovations.
13. **Quality as customer's excitement:** Customers are hardly loyal to one specific service provider or manufacturer. If some attractive quality feature as explained by Noriaki Kano can be added to the same brand, customers will say "Wow!, now my brand has given me this new feature. I will not go anywhere, I will use this". The examples can be found in many automobile companies, hotels and restaurants, fashion designers, and so on.
14. **Quality as employee's empowerment:** For the first time, After the World War II, Edward Deming asked Japanese managers to empower employees for quality improvement. Then it spread all over Japan. With this concept, Japanese products gain the market all around the world. The famous Quality Control Circles (QCC) is one example where employees are empowered by giving decision making power to solve the problems of quality at the floor.
15. **Quality as collaboration:** Collaboration among suppliers, customers, regulators and civil societies for developing a larger size of market pie is talked these days keeping unified goal of quality. All stakeholders, if collaborated for economic development in a sustainable manner without hampering environment and society, a win-win qualitative environment will be created for all.
16. **Quality as empathy:** It is well understood now that if suppliers supply their products and services with the mindset of empathy that is understanding not only the requirements of

customers but also the feelings and emotions of customers, the business will be sustained for a long term. The example of wearing shoes of own production whether it pinches or not is the glaring examples of thinking quality as empathy.

17. **Quality as organizational sustainability:** It is well understood now a days that the organization who keeps quality in its priority strategy can only be the winner in a long run. The organization which develops long and short term plan with mindset of “quality first” and implements accordingly can be sustainable in a long run. Toyota, Sony, General Motors, Tata and others are some exemplary companies working on this philosophy.
18. **Quality as top management commitment:** If some company produces defective or low quality products it is said that the top management of the company should take eighty percent of the responsibility. Only twenty percent of the responsibility remains with workers or employees of the company. Top management’s commitment and direct involvement in quality planning and evaluation is necessary to produce quality.
19. **Quality as transparency:** Information collection and deployment to all internal and external stakeholders of any organization are important to make high acceptability of any products and services by all. The ingredients printed on the food packages and the detail pharmaceutical molecules printed on the medicines are few examples of transparency for quality.
20. **Quality as performance excellence:** The most famous Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) of USA is established in 1980s to tell the Americans that quality brings performance excellence in organizations, whether it is a product manufacturing or service providers. Quality as organizational performance excellence is well established in present day business scenario, everywhere in the globe.
21. **Quality as leadership:** Leadership is one of the most important components of quality. Quality cannot be sustained without the involvement and interest of leaders. Similarly, Quality leadership is important for the sustained growth of any organization. Leader here refers to the floor level leader, department leader, organizational leader, society leader and national leader, too.
22. **Quality as people’s mindset:** Quality products cannot be manufactured and quality services cannot be delivered without the involvement of quality people. The mindset of people involved in the process of manufacturing and delivery of services should be of pro-social. The person who has pro-social personality will be good as well as smart and then can realize the importance of his/her as well as other’s interest.
23. **Quality as spirituality:** We know that the whole paradigm of a person has four dimensions- body to live, mind to learn, heart to love and soul to leave a legacy. The human values motivated by all types of religion of the world are similar. These values are the outcome of spirituality. Quality of life is directly proportionate to the spiritual values like truth, non-violence, compassion and so on.

Defining quality is really an arduous job. However, if we start looking at various perspectives of different stakeholders involved on producing and enjoying quality, and also protecting all from the side effects of bad quality, we will be clear on understanding the total paradigm of quality and define it to its near edge.

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