

Impacting organizational learning: the training and experiences of quality award examiners and assessors

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Abstract

Aims to show that developments in the quality award assessment process in organizations can make a contribution, within a wider framework of organizational learning. The underpinning theoretical argument is that quality award models and associated organizational assessment processes can be used to achieve much wider benefits, than that of quality *per se*. The quality award assessment process has been applied in organizations since the mid-1980s until the present. The process uses models such as the Business Excellence Model and the Baldrige model. These models use an interpretation of quality, which is based on the holistic approach of total quality management. In parallel with the development of the assessment process there has been considerable development in the field of organizational learning with an emphasis on developing learning based skills in employees. Shows how the learning experiences and skills developed and enhanced through the assessment process can be applied within an organization's approaches to learning in other disciplines.

Introduction

The application of the Business Excellence Model (BEM) and the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence has created focus for creating performance improvement in organizations (NIST, 2001; Wrolstad and Krueger, 2001; Van Der Wiele *et al.*, 2000; Hendricks and Shinghal, 1999). Those organizations that used the models as organizational self-assessment tools have had higher performance improvements such as high levels of annual sales, market share and profits than those not utilizing self-assessment (Van Der Wiele *et al.*, 2000).

The quality awards process depends upon the support of volunteer examiners or assessors. These volunteers are the lifeblood of such award structures (Russo, 2001). They provide 60-120 hours per annum of their time with the support of their organizations. Many volunteers are there to learn about the process as their organizations use it for self-assessment or because they are going to enter an award and want to learn how to approach writing a rigorous submission document.

However, many also volunteer for what the training and experience can provide in terms of both extrinsic and intrinsic value. Many organizations are also aware of the benefits to their employees of acting as an assessor or examiner on such an award process. For example, "award criteria can be used to train and motivate individuals to follow best practices, striving to become leaders in their field or key figures in the world of quality" (Hagen, 2000, p. 33).

Wider benefits such as management development and organizational learning can be obtained. However, little has been made of these benefits that the quality awards process offers for management development and learning in organizations. Self-assessment

improves not only operational processes but also managerial and strategic processes. The ultimate aim of self-assessment is to identify areas for improvement and initiate action to incorporate these changes while being strategically aware of the business environment and becoming more proactive in regard to that environment. In this regard self-assessment has an impact on organizational learning, particularly that of double loop learning (Ford and Evans, 2001).

The aim of this paper is to show that developments in the quality award assessment process in organizations can make a contribution, within a wider framework of organizational learning. The underpinning theoretical argument is that quality award models and associated organizational assessment processes can be used to achieve much wider benefits, than that of quality *per se*. The first section of the paper discusses the quality award assessment process followed by a description of the research methodology and finally a discussion of the wider organizational learning benefits of applying the process in organizations.

The quality award and assessment process

Quality award volunteers are selected on the basis of experience, qualifications and expertise, not necessarily limited to quality management. A broad spectrum of knowledge and backgrounds are encouraged so that assessment teams can have a range of perspectives and professions. This multi professional approach ensures that teams can consist of at least one financial expert and one expert in the field of the organization to be assessed. The team leader will be an experienced assessor having participated in



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an assessment team in previous years and is expert in the specific award model and criteria being applied. The other members of the team will consist of professionals from different backgrounds to the organization being assessed, which will allow different perspectives to be viewed and therefore break the mould of status-quo thinking in that industry or sector. Having professionals from such varied backgrounds as marketing and purchasing provides expertise on those functions of the organization being assessed. This eclectic approach provides a highly experienced, qualified and cross-functional team and leads to the interactive development of new knowledge (Demerest, 1997).

In most situations those selected for the two to three day assessor training have already undertaken the training previously (usually 12 months previously). Therefore, they are familiar with quality award criteria, conducting self-assessment, working in consensus groups and practice of applying the assessment criteria on detailed and complex case studies. Thus, they have a detailed understanding of identifying areas for improvement, strengths and using guidelines for determining scores.

Once the team has been selected it consists of an assessment team with all the skills and abilities to conduct an assessment. However, at this point assessor or examiner (from here on are referred to as assessor) training has yet to be conducted. Examiners and senior examiners are required to go through training every year. There are a number of reasons. For one the criteria usually is amended and updated each year, usually in minor details, but also on a regular basis major changes are made such as the 2000 update of the BEM. Training is also necessary to create a consistency in the assessor's understanding of the criteria, its interpretation and scoring. Finally, in the case of some awards individuals are placed in a specific organization team from the start so that those training together will also be on the "live" team. This approach allows the team to have stormed, normed and formed and be a cohesive team able to work together quickly when they meet for the real "live" consensus. Such teams are in a unique position for sharing and instructing knowledge. This embodying process enables the team to "develop and use new mental models which support learning and innovation" (Madhavan, 1998).

Assessors are only allocated to the "live" teams when training is completed and the attitudes, behavior, leadership abilities and team-working skills of the trainee assessors

are evaluated. Therefore, by the time the team is selected for the live assessment a highly focused, trained, experienced and dynamic group has been formed and each individual has had the opportunity to have applied the four stages of the learning process.

The individual learning process considered as a four-stage cycle:

- 1 concrete experience;
- 2 observation and reflection which leads to the;
- 3 formation of concepts which leads to;
- 4 hypothesis to be tested in future action which in turn lead to new experiences (Klob *et al.*, 1991).

The assessors using a real or "live" Award Submission Document will then conduct individual assessments, this will come together to create consensus assessments and in some cases conduct on site assessments of organisations to finalize the feedback report and scores for the judges to review.

Specifically, assessors' training and development focuses on driving home the key pillars of award models and criteria such as:

- knowledge and ability to introduce and conduct self-assessment;
- understanding the holistic systems approach to organizations;
- the importance of strategy and leadership to successful management;
- focus on internal and external customers;
- identification of areas for improvement;
- gathering key information and using it to direct the strategy;
- creating consistent approaches and effectively deploying them to create specific impacts;
- the value and means of conducting ongoing and focused monitoring and measurement;
- the co-ordination of all organizational efforts;
- the necessity of sharing information.

However, other dimensions are emphasized in the training and assessment process such as:

- ethics and confidentiality;
- professionalism;
- mentoring of new assessors.

Assessors are also trained in skills such as conducting management meetings, and people skills. This extends to the organizations being assessed and is an important aspect of the training. There is a need not to be seen as "police" or even auditors. Quality Award assessors need to be aware of putting people at ease, and being open. They must consider how to address issues and questions, seeking out

information and communicating the fact that their role ultimately is to help the organization improve and to create a learning environment (Burgoyne and Reynolds, 1997).

Research methodology

Over the past ten years the authors have been involved with quality award model and assessment processes in the UK and the USA. In the UK the predominantly used model is the Business Excellence model (BEM- EFQM, 2002), while in the USA the Baldrige model is mainly used. The authors analysed assessment training and participation in the BEM and Baldrige Models on 20 courses and award processes where they were participant observers (Easterby-Smyth *et al.*, 1993). Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with senior managers from participating organizations to determine the organizational benefits. The findings were coded into the following headings (Remenyi *et al.*, 1998).

Learning approaches

Assessor training and experience provided for the four key types of learning orientations (see Table I), and it is by fulfilling all four types that makes the assessor training and experience useful to volunteers and their organizations.

The Assessor training used literature and lectures where necessary to communicate key values, terminology and the interpretation of the criteria and scoring mechanism. However, the majority of the training used complex case studies, group work, discussions and presentations. The focus was on “hands on” experience and sharing of information and analysis. This mix of learning methods and experience provided a wide range of practical and transferable skills. The main transferable skills (consistent with Open University, 1999, p. 21) were:

- *Communication*. Writing reports, giving presentations.
- *Group work*. Leadership, chairing, teamwork, co-operation.
- *Personal*. Independence, autonomy, self-assessment.
- *Interpersonal*. Influencing, mentoring, listening, interviewing.
- *Organizational*. Time management, project management.
- *Teaching and training*. Coaching, peer tutoring.
- *Learning*. Reading flexibly, note taking
- *Information gathering*. Locating sources, interpretation of data.

- *Problem solving*. Problem analysis, creative techniques, decision making.
- *Language*. Oral skills (use of a foreign language in the case of EFQM).
- *Information technology*. Word processing, databases, e-mail.
- *Entrepreneurship*. Taking initiatives, planning.

Assessors had the opportunity to work with professionals from other countries. Thus, they gained experience of other cultures, attitudes and perspectives, and if a site visit is conducted, visiting another country. Gurteen (1998) states that these activities contribute to the dissemination of learning and knowledge through: “dynamic interaction among learning networks.” It is important that the direction that learning takes is governed by one’s needs and goals. It is the responsibility of the assessor’s organization to aid in the direction of such goals rewarding the professional development and commitment. This is more easily applied in organizations that apply or use self-assessment. It also recognises the need for individuals to be self-actualized (Maslow, 1954; Deming, 1986).

In such cases the key steps of learning will have been directly linked from the individual to the organization through (Lahteenmaki *et al.*, 2001):

- building the ability to learn;
- creating collaborative settings for missions and strategies; and
- building the future together.

Assessor training inherently avoids the common problem of training without application as it incorporates practical training and the application of skills. It is also directly applicable to the workplace, especially so if the organization uses the relevant quality model for self-assessment.

Management development

The entire process of training and working as an assessor involved many hours of work and dedication and the benefits provide invaluable opportunities for management development. Team-working, leadership, the analysis of complex and detailed information, synthesis, verbal presentation skills, written assessment and the production of summaries and reports are just some of the skills and abilities that were developed. In addition, the ability to manage people, time, and resources and to communicate with other assessors, managers and line workers were tested. Assessors have the opportunity to work in other industrial sectors and

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Table I
Learning orientations

Orientation	Interest	Aim	Concerns	Quality award assessors gain
Vocational	Intrinsic	Training	Relevance to future career	Used by world class organisations Skills and knowledge can be directly applied in work
	Extrinsic	Qualification	Valued qualification	Valuable listing on resume and also recognized as continuing education and professional development, i.e. American Society for Quality accepts such training and experience as re-certification units. Certificates are provided at the end of the Award year
Academic	Intrinsic	Intellectual interest	Stimulating information	Detailed and complex case studies and analysis needed in training
	Extrinsic	Educational progression	Academic progress	Most assessors begin at local level and move up to national and international
Personal	Intrinsic	Self-improvement	Challenging material	The discussions and group work are challenging and broaden skills, abilities and confidence
	Extrinsic	Evidence of capability	Passing	Achievement and pride in being selected, passing training and completing the challenging logistics and work involved in assessing and providing site visits for an organization Assessors attend and are thanked at formal Award Gala Dinner
Social	Extrinsic	Enjoyment	Social contact, networking	Meeting peers in the wider business community, gaining networks and introduction to senior managers and executives. Enjoyment of working with dynamic professionals

Source: (consistent with Beaty et al., 1997)

network with a range of professionals. This approach utilizes learning across and within all areas of organizations. Management development of this nature has tangible impacts on organizational performance. As found by Winterton and Winterton (1997) direct management development results in improvements in individual performance. Such development provided increased personal confidence, an increased awareness of personal and organizational potential and a continuous improvement in general managerial skills and competencies (Winterton and Winterton, 1997, p. S71).

Management development also has a direct impact on organizational performance improvement through team working and more

strategic behavior (Winterton and Winterton, 1997, p. S72). It has direct impact on improving all prime measures of business efficiency (Winterton and Winterton, 1997, p. S72). Ultimately, developing people contributes to business success (Winterton and Winterton, 1997, p. S75). With such potential, organizations need to be aware of how these impacts can be strategically directed.

Links to knowledge management and organizational learning

The experience and training of being an Assessor provides exposure to world class practices and concepts of quality management which can aid in creating a new

“quality” minds set focusing on the customer and continuous improvement. The process also highlights the need for focusing information and making it easily and quickly available which is also a core element of knowledge management:

Proper knowledge management (KM) is more than collecting information . . . proper KM ensures that individuals at all levels of an organization have access to the information they need . . . within a relatively quick time frame that enables anyone in the organization to make the best informed decision (Shockley, 2000, p. 57).

In this regard assessors are knowledge assets (Wilson and Asay, 1999) since they have elicited expert knowledge and are transferring that knowledge to others with whom they work. Their skills should be recognized and knowledge harvesting (Wilson and Asay, 1999) used to transfer their insights. “Only developing managers, who are part of the learning process, can successfully manage change in those that they manage” (Choppin, 1998, p. 23).

Quality models also engender through the focus on strategic awareness, internal customers and processes and enablers (approach and deployment) a parallel with the learning organisation framework of “looking out”, “enabling structures” and “looking out” dimensions.

The experience of being an assessor developed five skills that are required in learning organizations (Garvin, 1993):

- 1 systematic problem solving;
- 2 experimenting with new approaches;
- 3 learning from one’s experience;
- 4 learning from other experience; and
- 5 transferring knowledge.

If organizations are using self-assessment and are linking it clearly to the corporate strategy then the assessor’s learning will have a direct impact since all four elements of the learning square will be aligned.

The four elements of the learning square for learning organizations are (Lindley and Wheeler, 2000):

- 1 continual learning;
- 2 using tacit knowledge;
- 3 shared vision; and
- 4 multi dimensional (strategic) goals.

The awards framework and assessor training underline the need for effective organizations to “put in place systems and measures to ensure individual learning and tacit knowledge is brought out, evaluated, shared and put to use” (Lindley and Wheeler, 2000, p. 326).

Conclusions

The training and experience that is obtained by quality award examiners and assessors is one of the most unique, rigorous, practical and worthy forms of professional development that one can participate in. Managers and others wishing to develop themselves professionally, but especially trainers and those in Human Resources should be aware of the benefits of becoming an assessor to the individual and through organizational learning to the organization as a whole.

In relation to the aims of the study it was found that the quality award and assessment process can produce much wider benefits than quality, provided the participant organizations recognise the potential and transferability of the learning process involved. Thus, organizations committing scarce resources to the quality model process can obtain synergistic benefits in other areas, especially organizational learning. The challenge is for organizations to recognize these opportunities and avoid treating quality and learning as separate initiatives. The theoretical and practical platforms of the quality awards and the assessment process are well established and can be readily applied in a wider context.

In particular, it was found that the award assessment process relates to organizational learning in a number of beneficial ways. First, the award assessment process is consistent with a number of different learning orientations within organizations. These orientations can be classified as vocational, academic, personal and social. The contribution from the award assessment process included making a contribution to building a suitable foundation for establishing organizational learning orientations and directly contributing to the learning orientations identified. However, organizational recognition of the opportunity was essential.

Second, the award assessment process was found to have synergy benefits by contributing to transferable skills within the framework of organizational learning, for example communications, groupwork and interpersonal skills. Thus, the contribution of the award assessment process within organizations has value added beyond the quality discourse.

Third, the award assessment process was found to be a de-facto management development programme that enabled participants to gain a much broader and deeper knowledge of how groups, individuals and processes within the organization

operated. There are parallels with the action learning approach to management development.

Finally, the award assessment process makes an overall contribution to developing learning within organizations. It is essential that this contribution is recognised and planned for within wider organization learning programmes in organizations. Thus the utilization of business improvement resources can be maximized, especially in regard to people skills and methodology.

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