

HOW THE Q LOST ITS TAIL



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This is the story of how, once upon a time, the quiet Q rose to become mightiest of all letters. In the process, the Q profoundly transformed the way in which people do business. Yet, in the deepest of self-sacrifice, the Q ultimately gave up its tail so that all organizations could become even better. But I am getting a little ahead of myself. Let us, together, go back in time and learn how the Q lost its tail.

In the late part of the 20th century, the Western nations of the world were quite powerful. Their economies were strong and their people were secure. But, some time in the 1970s a challenger arose from a small island across the wide sea. It was a challenger with whom the West was familiar. They knew this nation had once been a powerful force, and it was clear that again it was rising in the East. This situation scared many in the West and they sought help.

It was at this very moment that a great doctor emerged in their midst. This doctor, it was said, had taught the challenger in the East about a great source of economic power. Evidently he had even taught some in the West, but most there had been too busy to hear what the doctor had to say. Now they were ready. Many sat at the feet of the great doctor and listened with keen interest as he told them how Q was the secret to the powers of the East. Q, it turned out, was quality.

At first, the very notion that Q was the source of power in the East was bothersome to those in the West. For they

thought that they had understood Q and cared for it better than anyone did. But the Q of which the doctor spoke was a great and mighty Q never before seen in the West. Soon organizations all across the countryside were extolling the power of Q. Even as they did this, the great doctor warned that Q was not the only answer. Nevertheless, the West sang mantras of Q. "Q is job one." "Q is everyone's job." "Q is the future." These prayers were hung from the ceilings of workshops and placed on the letterheads of all companies, great and small. For so many firms, their lives became wrapped up in the blanket called "total quality management."

Years passed, and the doctor who had first spoken of Q was no longer the only one speaking. Others, who spoke louder, drowned out his words that, in fact, Q was only a part of the means for building a great organization. But the doctor was old. And although he stood by the Q and tried to explain what Q could and could not do for companies, great and small, he was but one voice. The doctor was of great age by now. His large frame began to sag and his booming voice grew soft. Soon after, he was gone. And the Q was left all alone.

Without the doctor, the Q knew that it would drift into a wild mix with all of the other letters vying for their place in the fight to help organizations in the West. At first, the Q was sad. But from its place high above the offices and shop floors of the West, the Q could see what the doctor had been saying. More than just

Q would be needed to transform the organizations of the West. And so the Q formed a plan.

Late one night, many years after it had been introduced to the West, the Q turned itself upside down. It hung like a piece of fruit from the ceilings of workplaces. Here, like a caterpillar's chrysalis it quietly pulled deep within itself all of the words it had heard the doctor speak for all those years. It hung quietly. Soon, no one spoke of the Q.

The Q waited patiently. It knew that change was occurring inside of itself, at its very core, just as it was in the organizations of the West. It waited for several years while these firms took the teachings of the doctor and others and changed them into their own words. When the sun dawned one morning, after the stars had all disappeared, the time came for the Q to reveal itself. Its new self. Its true self. It was finally the time to share what the great doctor had been saying for so many years.

Suddenly, from the rafters of workplaces around the West, the Q cut off its own tail. It severed its exclusive association with the concept of quality. Everywhere the letter O was now raining down upon the masses. In the brilliance of the crystalline O, the workers had a new insight. O meant that the entire organization was the source of strength of which the doctor had spoken. A new song began to rise that echoed the doctor's thoughts. Q was not the only resource to be managed. Total quality management was only a part of the answer. In its place,

chants of T.O.M.—Total Organizational Management—began to rise. A song of creating value for everyone—employees, customers, shareholders, and society at large.

Today, firms and institutions across the globe are looking inward just like the Q did in the not so recent past. They are moving from managing quality to managing the total organization and its vast, surrounding environment. The O is for everyone and the Q knew this is what the great doctor had meant. That is the story of how the Q lost its tail. And in the

process, it is the story of how people everywhere gained insight into how managing the organization in its entirety is its true objective.

*Concepts and practices related to Total Organizational Management can be found in the book, *Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance*, by Lori L. Silverman with Annabeth L. Propst, published in 1999 by ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI, 1.800.248.1946.

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