



## SYSTEMS THINKING PROVIDES A BOOST TO QUALITY PROFESSIONALS

BY MARK ALPERT

The recently published Conference Board Research Report, *A Leadership Prescription for the Future of Quality*, noted that the quality function and the role of the quality professional are at a crossroads. Quality, which has been a critical part of the manufacturing process for three decades and transactional processes for two, is facing the test of new trends in globalization, customer sophistication, economic challenges, excellence in execution, customer loyalty, retention, and top-line growth.

These developments bring new layers of complexity for leaders. At the same time, they present a unique opportunity for quality professionals to contribute in new ways and advance to higher levels of the organization.

Of particular interest in the report is the highlighting of systems thinking as one of the key methodologies needed to address these new challenges. Although systems thinking has been around for a long time, it has not become a permanent part of the toolbox for many quality practitioners. Systems thinking is exactly what many organizations need to understand these emerging complexities and develop and execute strategic plans that will

positively impact the bottom line.

Systems thinking provides the lens to view the organization beyond the traditional sum of its internal parts; it positions the organization itself as part of a larger system. Using systems tools to understand the patterns and structures of that larger system can provide an enormous competitive advantage to any enterprise.

### Synthesis over Analysis

Seeing the organization in a different light requires new thinking. For years Russ Ackoff, Peter Senge, and others have encouraged us to change the way we think about organizations in order to improve performance. Ackoff would say that most thinking over the last 400 years has relied on *analysis*. We tend to take things apart, examine each piece, and then put them back together in an attempt to understand the whole.

The problem with that approach is that it does little to drive whole system improvement and may in fact be detrimental, as people focus solely on optimizing each part. Analytical thinking leads to a better understanding of how things work, but does not provide much insight into how things work together.

An approach that involves *synthesis* may provide better answers. Synthesis, the opposite the analysis, asks “what is this part of?” as a means to explain the behavior of the whole. From this perspective, performance is derived from the interaction of the parts and not the function of each part separately. For example, when engineers design a bicycle, they design the overall bike first, then the parts, not the other way around. The objective is to build the best bike, not the best part.

### Opportunities Ahead

Systems thinking offers a variety of tools and practices that can support seeing the whole over the parts and understanding the dynamics of a complex system. For quality professionals, these rich insights can help ensure that decision making addresses the organizational and performance challenges of tomorrow. The door is open, quality professionals; tune up your systems thinking skills and take advantage of the opportunities ahead. ■

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