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# Metaphysical Quality:

## The Next Quality Battleground

Steven R. Rayner

It was in 1986 while I was meeting with a group of executives from NEC corporation—the mammoth Japanese electronics firm that builds everything from semiconductors to personal computers—when I gained an insight that forced me to rethink everything I had ever known about quality. One of the NEC executives looked at me carefully and then began to speak very slowly and deliberately. What he said had nothing to do with zero defects or parts per million calculations. He didn't utter a word about addressing system and process problems. There was nothing referencing pareto charts or statistical analysis. What he said didn't reflect anything I'd read from the quality gurus. It was a deeper, more profound concept of what quality could mean—far beyond anything I had previously imagined.

“What we are trying to do is create products that meet the *subconscious* wants and needs of our customers. We want the customer, upon seeing our products, to say, ‘this is exactly what I always wanted. I cannot imagine not having it.’”

What I learned in Tokyo that day was a concept I have come to call *metaphysical quality*. It is not the concept of quality I learned back in the early 1980s, with the emphasis on producing defect free products or efficient and friendly service. It is a concept of quality that falls into an almost spiritual realm. It means creating a product or providing a service that *profoundly affects the customer*. It is not only defect free, but it is exactly what the customer has always desired.

If this is starting to sound a little flaky, consider the impact the Mazda Miata had on a friend of mine. Upon seeing an ad for the Miata in a magazine he immediately called a dealership and ordered one. He had never seen the actual car and was willing to pay full price for it. “I'm a very rational, logical person,” he noted, “but this was it—it was exactly what I had been looking for. My hand didn't even quiver when I wrote the check without so much as a test drive.”

Through numerous interviews with sports car enthusiasts who had owned the British or Italian sports cars from the 1960s, Mazda discovered a number of surprising things people remembered about these cars of yesteryear. The hum of the engine was one. So Mazda modified the exhaust system so it would be louder than the original design had specified. People also liked the old fashioned analog speedometer and tack gages, and the sleek styling and cramped quarters of the old MGs, Triumphs, Fiats and Alfa Romeos. Again Mazda obliged. The customer reaction was overwhelming.

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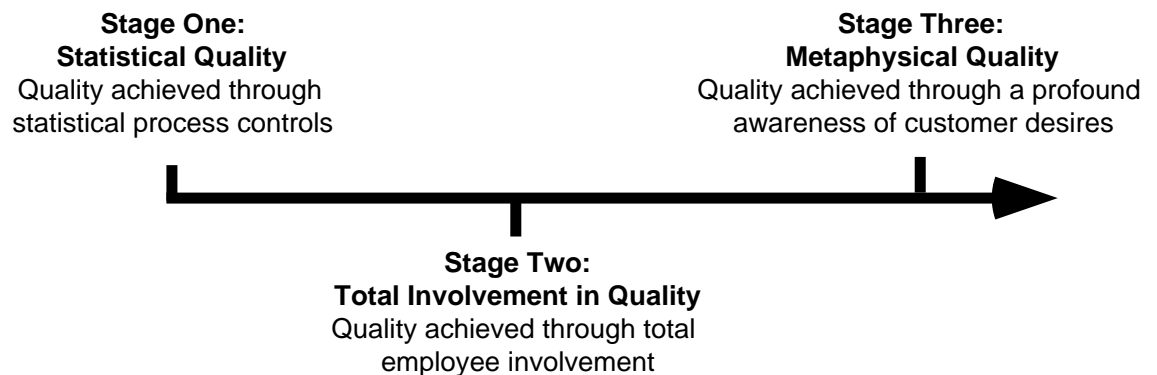
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*In the future, the great companies will be those who anticipate the subconscious needs of their customers and fulfill them before they are asked to do so.*

What was different about the Miata from other new car introductions was the way it made people *feel*. Sure the car was high quality in the traditional sense—it was a virtually defect free. But the car was also high quality in a metaphysical sense—it addressed customer desires for fun, nostalgia and youth.

The North American quality revolution which began in the late '70s has focused on the first two stages of the quality continuum. Stage one—statistical quality—emphasized getting the product or service done right. This typically meant documenting and standardizing processes and then using a variety of statistical tools to assure the product or service was conforming to specification. In stage two—total involvement—the efforts focused on getting the whole organization involved in assuring quality. The Japanese were the first to emphasize employee involvement through the use of quality circles. Many U.S. and Canadian firms have taken the idea even further with high performance work teams that are responsible for virtually all aspects of quality assurance including problem solving, decision making and work redesign.



Metaphysical quality represents the next stage in the evolution of quality. Quality will no longer be organization centered as it is in stage one and two. Rather, it will become customer centered. There will be such widespread knowledge of customer desires that every step of the development of a product or service—from conception to actual delivery—will be centered around anticipating and meeting customer wants, needs and desires.

It is important to consider that an organization cannot simple leap frog over the first two stages in the quality continuum—they are the building blocks on which the progression to stage three ultimately stands. There are, in fact, a number of critical factors that must first be in place before an organization should even consider pursuing metaphysical quality:

- Strong senior management support for quality as demonstrated by their actions
- Clearly stated quality specifications
- Quality targets and goals
- Being well versed in problem solving techniques and tools
- Having a highly involved workforce that continuously contributes improvement ideas and has the authority and responsibility to execute them
- A reward system that emphasizes quality
- Direct access to customers and/or key customer information by all levels
- Continuous training and development efforts

Ultimately the great differentiator between companies will not be whether they build a product or provide a service that is defect free. In fact, some companies have already achieved such status. At Motorola 99.999999% of the products coming off several of its production lines are defect free. Sony has factories that have, quite literally, gone years without shipping a bad product. And when was the last time Federal Express delivered a package to you a day late? In the future, a defect free product or a service that is delivered according to its claims will be the norm. The next battleground of the quality revolution will be in creating products or providing services that so profoundly meet the customer's desires that they exclaim, "You have given me exactly what I have always wanted!"

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### About the Author

Steven R. Rayner is the founder of the consulting and training firm Rayner & Associates, Inc., which specializes in helping organizations implement high performance work systems.

Rayner is the author of *Team Traps: Survival Stories and Lessons from Team Disasters, Near-Misses, Mishaps, and Other Near-Death Experiences* (John Wiley & Sons, 1996). He is also the author of *Recreating the Workplace: the Pathway to High Performance Work Systems* (Oliver-Wight Publications, 1993) and co-author of *Tips For Teams* (McGraw Hill, 1994).

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