A STUDY OF QUALITY CULTURE
IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT

BY
WONG FOONG LAI

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ABSTRACT

As Malaysia stands poised to meet the challenges of the 21st century, it is ever mindful of the need to keep in sight basic traits which have given it the strong foundation to compete in the international arena. There is a need to reconfirm with renewed vigour our quest for quality in whatever we do. In fact, quality is expected to be used as a competitive tool ever more aggressively in the coming decade. Within this order of things, the public sector will be increasingly called upon to play the role of facilitator and pace-setter in national development. To fulfil these demands, there is a growing urgency for it to reassess current situations and chart new goals. With the impetus given by technological advancements, the public sector is set to transform itself into a new-age leader.

One thing remains unchanged amidst these developments, that is, culture as the foundation of excellence and success. With the adoption of Total Quality Management (TQM) as the new management philosophy, it is expected that there will be a change in the way public sector employees go about doing their work and the way they perceive customers and suppliers. Though physical implementation of TQM principles has been satisfactory, its impact is still uncertain regarding the extent to which there has been a culture change or in other words, the extent to which a quality culture has been internalised as a way of life for the employees of government agencies.

This study is not aimed at studying culture change but it will assess the extent of a quality culture in the organisation. In this regard, it aims to shed some light on the extent of the internalisation of quality values among civil servants. It has selected the Department of Environment, Ministry of Science, Technology and
Environment to be the focus of the study and it is hoped that the findings of the study can be extrapolated to the public sector and help to focus government's attention on those areas highlighted for improvements.

The study examines three main dimensions of a quality culture. It investigates how employees of the department perceive the existence of quality aspects in the organisation, how they understand the key quality concepts, and how they practise the concepts. In addition, it has also included in the study analysis of several implementation features of a quality culture. In this respect, it analyses some of the factors that are said to contribute to the emergence of a quality culture and seeks respondents' perception with regard to their importance. It also analyses several sources which have provided respondents with information on quality aspects and it examines factors that are said to hinder the practice of quality principles. Furthermore, the study also tries to capture respondents' opinion as to why they say that some of the quality principles are not practical.

The findings show that the department does indeed have a quality culture as testified by employee perception of the existence of quality aspects in the department. Findings also show that members of the organisation do practise quality principles in their daily work almost as much as what is declared by management. However, findings reveal that the level of understanding of quality concepts is high for half of the quality concepts and low for the other half indicating an average level of understanding for overall quality concepts. When this is linked to the relatively high level of practice, there arises the possibility of incorrect application of concepts. Towards this end, the study has identified areas for improvement and made several recommendations to address these issues.
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