Adopting quality management concepts in public service reform: the case of the Malaysian Public Service

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**Abbreviations**

- **DAC**: Development Administration Circular
- **INTAN**: National Institute of Public Administration
- **MAMPU**: Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit
- **QCC**: quality control circle
- **TQM**: total quality management
- **US**: United States
Summary

The concepts of ‘customer service’ and ‘teamwork’ have been the focus of many public service reform programs in the nineties (OECD 1996; Gore 1993; Bunning 1992; Offner 1993; Morgan and Murgatroyd 1994). These concepts have their theoretical roots in the discipline of quality management (Deming, 1986; Juran 1989; Crosby, 1979). This article examines how the Malaysian Public Service has adopted quality management concepts in reforming public service organisations. Within this objective three main operational mechanisms adopted by the Malaysian Government to implement quality management are reviewed, and the perceptions of two selected groups of public service officials obtained through a short structured questionnaire. The findings show that a well-established quality management framework exists in the Malaysian Public Service. Interviews with selected groups of public service officials revealed a generally positive perception of the impact of quality management on employees’ attitudes, improving performance and service delivery of public service organisations.

Introduction

Quality management in simple terms could be expressed through the meaning of the term ‘quality’. According to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English, the word quality means the ‘characteristic or feature of someone or something’ or, the ‘standard of excellence of something, often a high standard.’ Hence, a quality product means a product of high standard or quality. The same meaning is conveyed in the context of service delivery. Quality management in an organisational context then, is the application of certain practices and techniques which ensure that the end product or output of an organisation, whether a product or a service, is of a high standard. At the organisational level, the variables that affect the quality of the product or service comprise those factors that influence the organisation internally as well as externally. Variables such as the work process, human resources, and the management of the organisation could be included as factors internal to the organisation, while variables such as the organisation’s approach to the customer or the recipients of the product or service could be considered as external factors that can have a direct impact on determining the quality of a product or service. Accordingly, quality management in simplistic terms represents a managerial discipline that fosters the transformation or restructuring of all of these internal and external variables that impact upon the organisation. This change has to come about in relation to the requirements or needs of the customers, as the judge of a quality product or service is the user of that product or service.

The literature on quality management indicates that the contemporary application of quality management concepts has its roots in statistical quality control methods developed in the United States and Europe, with the onset of the industrial revolution and mass production (Bendell, Boulter and Kelly 1994:14; Lindsay and Petrick 1997:62). Over the past decades, quality management has become a managerial discipline that has
been hailed for its many achievements (Green 1994:1–4). It has also, on the other hand, been termed as a passing management fad (O’Donnell 1996:259). There has also been concern among academics as to whether quality management in its ‘orthodox’ form can be applied in the public sector (Swiss 1992:360).

Amidst the various viewpoints, however, several academics and practitioners have presented specific managerial concepts drawn from the writings of the major quality theorists, and in the contemporary form of their application, have termed these concepts as total quality management (TQM) (Hackman and Wageman 1995; Dean and Bowen 1994; Grant et al. 1994). In this literature three major principles encompass quality management: customer focus, continuous improvement and teamwork.

The principle of customer focus is geared towards restructuring the organisation to meet the needs and requirements of the customers that the organisation serves. The practices and techniques commonly associated with customer focus are primarily customer surveys to collect data to determine needs and expectations. The principle of teamwork focuses on collaboration of employees at all levels of the organisation through the formation of teams and the use of problem solving methods. Finally, to sustain the quality of a product or service, TQM advocates the need for continuous improvement of organisational procedures.

These concepts have been applied in both public and private sector organisations to improve the quality of products and services delivered and to improve the human resource potential in organisations. The potential effects of quality management at the organisational level can be highlighted through the outcomes of some of the studies that are available in the context of private organisations (Lam 1995; Shea and Gobeli 1995; Hodgetts 1994; Fisher 1993; Fisher and Davis 1992; Fisher 1990). Positive effects reported in these studies included fewer defects in manufacturing, reduced waste, and increased profits (Fisher 1993:188). Positive improvements in group involvement and work satisfaction were also reported (Fisher and Davis 1992:132). Negative aspects reported in these studies included the need for more training, poor relations between departments, a decrease in employee satisfaction and increased work load (Fisher and Davis 1992:132; Lam 1995:98).

Similarly, the reviewed studies on the application of quality management in public organisations also reported both positive and negative affects (James 1997; McDaniel 1997; Park 1997; O’Donnell 1996; McGowan 1995; Redman et al. 1995; Zayed 1994). Positive effects in public organisations included raising employees’ awareness, increased customer satisfaction, effective teamwork, and reduced customer complaints (Redman et al. 1995:27). Other studies showed that employee involvement through teams brought about positive effects associated with employee participation, such as job satisfaction, skill variety and co-worker social support (James 1997:226). A major constraint in implementing TQM practices is that quality management cannot be imposed on existing management
Adopting quality management concepts in public service reform

Mohamed Asim

structures (McGowan 1995:330), and that quality management will not work if it conflicts with existing management practices (O’Donnell 1996:259).

The conclusion drawn from the above discussion is that the application of quality management has the potential to bring about positive changes at the organisational level in both public and private organisations. These include positive perceptions among employees with regard to how they work and their perceptions of the organisation itself. Perhaps due to the successes reported in the application of quality management in private organisations, concepts that are inherent in the quality management literature are beginning to be emulated in public service reform programs in several developed countries. One such example is the Malaysian Public Service.

Research methodology

Two main issues were addressed in this research. The first focused on identifying the broader context of the quality management initiative in the Malaysian Public Service in terms of the policies and guidelines that basically identify the rhetoric of reform. The second centred on obtaining Malaysian Public Service officials’ general impressions of the impact of quality management initiatives on the public service.

The main source of information about the policies and guidelines of the Malaysian government on strategies to implement quality management was the Development Administration Circulars (DACs) issued by the Prime Minister’s Department. These circulars are guidelines issued to public service agencies on the implementation of various administrative reform policies. In addition, the annual publications of the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (MAMPU) were reviewed to highlight the government’s assessment of quality management initiatives.

The DACs and other relevant government documents identified the implementation framework of quality management in the Malaysian Public Service. This also identified the impact of the quality management initiative as perceived by the Malaysian government. A study of the general perceptions of employees in the public service provided another view of the same subject and balanced the ‘rhetoric’ of the government. Employees’ attitudes may also be seen as an indicator of the success of any reform initiative. This, however, represents a monumental task since such a sample of public service employees should cover the federal, state and local levels of government. With the time constraint faced by the researcher and experience of responses by mail, such a sample survey proved unworkable. The author contacted all 25 government ministries to obtain information on the nature of quality management in their respective organisations, but this proved futile as only two replied. In such a situation, the distribution and returning of questionnaires through mail appeared unviable.

Hence, the intention of the researcher was to conduct in-depth research using, as a focus group, experienced public service officials from a variety of agencies. This would add to the data obtained from a detailed case study of one public service
organisation. Viewpoints gathered from such a selection of public service officials would be significant, as they would serve to supplement data obtained through other qualitative methods.

The opportunity to gauge the perceptions of a sample of public service officials came up when the researcher discovered that two training programs for public service employees were being carried out at the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN). One such program consisted of the participants in the ‘pre-grade two’ course, which is mandatory for confirmation into grade two level in the public service. There were 20 participants in this course. This batch represented a good sample for this study because they had been in the public service for over sixteen years and most of them were heads of departments. It seemed reasonable to assume that the viewpoints of such a group would provide good insights into the implementation of reforms such as quality management because these people have passed through the system and should be deeply aware of the reform strategies adopted by the government and the implications of the implementation of such reform policies.

The other group selected were the participants in the ‘Diploma in Management Science’ course, which is an optional course for Malaysian Public Service officials. Selection for this course is undertaken by the Public Service Department, and requires a Bachelors degree for entry. There were 22 participants in this course, all of whom were middle-managerial government officials. This batch of employees also represented a good sample for this study as they had a strong academic background (a Bachelor degree), and were perhaps on the threshold of higher-level managerial posts in government. Moreover, these participants had also been in the public service for a substantial period of time.

While the time available with these groups was limited, the opportunity to gain access to such a diverse group of middle and senior level officials was significant. A standard questionnaire was drafted for optimum utilisation of the short time available and each course participant had 30 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. The methodology utilised to obtain information from these groups did not conform to the conventional focus group techniques, where participants are led into discussion by a moderator whose job is to pose questions that are then discussed by the participants of the focus group. As a result, these groups have been titled Training Groups for the purposes of this research.

During the meetings with the Training Groups, the researcher briefly introduced the research topic and, after announcing the intentions, distributed a standard questionnaire to all members of the groups, and remained to answer and discuss any queries the group participants had, and to note their comments. One advantage of this method over the conventional focus group technique is that it prevents dominance of the discussion by one person in the group. This technique also fosters the expression of frank opinions by those people in the group who might not usually respond with such openness in the context of a discussion. In
addition, there is the potential for asking follow-up questions because the researcher is present.

The questionnaire had a total of 19 questions. The first eight questions attempted to gauge the background of the respondents by asking about period of service, job responsibilities, highest educational qualification and whether the respondent was directly involved in implementing total quality management in their organisation. The rest of the questions gauged their views on the impact of TQM on various aspects of human resources and the organisation. Some of the questions were open-ended while others asked the respondents to rate their answers on a scale of one to five, where number one represented ‘very ineffective’ and number five ‘very effective’.

The questionnaire was presented in English as conversations with the course coordinators for both the ‘pre-grade two course’ and the ‘Diploma in Management Science’ course revealed that the participants in both these courses had a good command of the English language.

The employees selected were not representative of the whole Malaysian public service. But, their views provide the general attitudes and outlooks of a selection of public service officials who have experienced and been involved in the implementation of quality management since its inception. They represented several different government ministries and departments from federal and state governments. One common aspect was that they were all considered to be in the middle managerial level in the public service (Author’s interview with Pre-Grade II Confirmation Course Coordinator 1997; Authors interview with Diploma in Management Science Course Coordinator 1997). Both groups were highly educated and had spent a long period of time in the public service (43 per cent had a Bachelor degree and 28 per cent a Master degree, while 91 per cent had been in the public service for ten years or more). Furthermore, a significant percentage of respondents (41 per cent) claimed to have been directly involved in implementing TQM in their respective organisations.

Here then is a sample of employees from the Malaysian Public Service who, although not representative of the whole public service, are in a position to provide some general perceptions and an overview of what the application of TQM concepts and practices meant to them. It must be noted that a very high majority (91 per cent) had experienced the era of quality management and a significant proportion (41 per cent) had also been directly involved in the actual implementation of TQM concepts. In addition, their high educational levels (71 per cent have a college education) provide a general perspective that is authoritative and informed about the application of TQM in the Malaysian Public Service.

Having discussed at some length the research methodology and its limitations, this paper will now proceed with the findings. First, it will present a discussion of the quality management policies and guidelines implemented in the Malaysian Public Service. Second, the paper will analyse the perceptions of the two selected groups of public service employees.
Adopting quality management concepts in public service reform

Mohamed Asim

Implementation of quality management policies and guidelines

In the Malaysian Public Service, official guidelines issued by the Prime Minister’s Department in the form of Development Administration Circulars (DACs) since 1991 have been instrumental in the adoption of quality management. Through the DACs, the institutionalisation of a quality management program is evident in the Malaysian Public Service. It can be seen in the implementation of the quality control circle (QCC) program, the Client Charter program, and the total quality management (TQM) program. Hence, these three programs provide a broad framework for the discussion that follows.

Although these three programs form the core of the quality management framework in the Malaysian Public Service, several programs initiated through other DACs have assisted in the introduction of a culture of quality management in the public service. These programs focused on streamlining and developing the administrative functions of government departments. Such programs included, for example, the introduction of work action forms, effective management of meetings and improving services over the telephone. Emphasis was also given to improving counter services and clearing the backlog of work that existed in government ministries and departments. In addition, programs such as the ‘Civil Service Link’ provided a mechanism for the private sector and the public in general to gain access to information regarding rules and regulations pertaining to them (Maarof and Amat 1994:5).

Among the three main DACs mentioned above, the one concerning TQM introduced the core principles and the main philosophy for the broader framework of quality management. The QCCs and the Client’s Charter provided the implementation mechanisms. These focused on the external customers—the organisations’ clients—while the employees themselves were viewed as the internal customers.

Quality control circles. Quality control circles represent one of the main programs adopted in Malaysian Public Service organisations for the implementation of quality management. These QCCs are a group of 6–10 employees who meet regularly to discuss the problems they face within their division of work and propose potential solutions to the management of the organisation (Prime Minister’s Department Malaysia 1991:1). The QCCs encourage group members to obtain data and use statistical reasoning in analysing problems. They also encourage group involvement in organisational problems and provide due recognition to the input of employees within public service organisations (Prime Minister’s Department Malaysia 1991:1).

Positive aspects regarding the impact of QCCs on public service organisations are reflected in comments made by the Chief Secretary to the Government at the eighth Public Sector Quality Control Circles Convention in 1991. According to him, feedback from various government departments and agencies actively involved in implementing quality control circles has accrued positive benefits. Some of these claimed benefits include improvements in
Adopting quality management concepts in public service reform
Mohamed Asim

work procedures, methods, economic use of resources and improved motivation of employees (Sarji 1993:110).

This positive assessment contrasts with an earlier study in Malaysia, identifying the constraints in implementing quality circles (Ahmad 1987:153). The Ministry of Housing and the Ministry of Education were mainly studied through the perceptions of employees and through secondary data available from documents in the respective Ministries. The participants in this study expressed concern with major problems that had an impact on the proceedings of quality control circles. These included: the quality circles’ members being too busy with regular office work, lack of understanding and information on problem solving techniques utilised within the quality control circle, and ineffective leadership. Other problems identified included group size being too large, members not having their say in choosing the problems, and lack of unity and cooperation among the members themselves (Ahmad 1987:167). Furthermore, participants in this study also felt that management attendance at quality control circle meetings could be immensely improved, with 50–70 per cent of the respondents citing non-attendance of management-level employees at quality control circle meetings as a problem (Ahmad 1987:165).

The Malaysian government has also acknowledged problems in the operation of QCCs. For example, it has pointed out the persistence of conflicts, expectations, and resistance to change brought about by the quality circles concept. In 1993, former Chief Secretary to the Government Ahmed Sarji stated that problems in the implementation of QCCs have been a result of attitudes among management and staff that were detrimental to quality management practices. These included lack of commitment on the part of some heads of departments (Sarji 1993:110–1).

Perhaps in recognition of the potential problems posed by the implementation of QCCs, the government has undertaken the task of continuously training staff in public service departments in QCC courses. INTAN holds at least 12 such courses a year for public service officials. These courses cover in detail all aspects identified in DAC No.7 of 1991. They also teach the participants problem solving techniques involving statistical methods and statistical methods of collecting and analysing data (Author’s interview with INTAN Training Officer, 1997).

It is worth noting here that the general literature on QCCs reveals potential problems in their implementation. Academics who have observed and studied the QCC phenomena in the United States have stated that quality circles have their distinctive advantages in enhancing the process of participative management in organisations. However, the process of implementation is reported as inherently fraught with potential threats to the survival of the QCCs (Lawler and Mohrman 1985:65).

In their US study, Lawler and Mohrman concluded that QCCs would eventually decline due to ‘program cynicism’ and ‘burnout’. It is hard to tell, however, whether there has been a decline in the number of QCCs in Malaysian Public Service organisations because QCCs are convened
annually in all departments on the instructions of the government for the purpose of sending a QCC team to the annual QCC convention.

The Total Quality Management Program. The implementation of a structure to manage the quality implementation process and the concept of the QCC had, by 1992, paved the way for the implementation of what was officially termed a ‘total’ quality management approach in the Malaysian Public Service. The concept of ‘total’ quality as understood in the Malaysian context referred not only to product or service quality but everything that occurred in the organisation. According to DAC No. 1 of 1992, TQM is defined as a continuous customer-driven process that involves the whole organisation (Prime Minister’s Department Malaysia 1992:1).

The three key themes that emerge from this definition are familiar as the core principles of quality management identified in the general literature on quality management discussed earlier. They are

• continuous improvement
• involvement of the whole organisation
• and focus on the customer.

The need for continuous improvement of the organisation is reflected in the writings of both Deming (1986) and Crosby (1979). Theoretically, continuous improvement represents an ongoing cyclical process, where organisational improvements are made in line with the feedback obtained from customers. In this regard the DAC on TQM provides a specific definition of continuous improvement.

The TQM circular identified several principles that are seen as prerequisites for the successful implementation of TQM in Malaysian Public Service organisations. The seven principles are

• support of top management
• implementation of a long term strategic plan on quality
• customer focus
• providing training and recognition,
• fostering teamwork
• establishing performance measurement
• emphasising quality assurance (Prime Minister’s Department Malaysia 1992:6).

These principles provide a broad framework for individual ministries and departments to formulate quality management programs. They were expected to create more awareness among employees, change work attitudes and improve work commitment. Ample examples of the implementation of these TQM principles through the objectives, structure and improvement projects set by various departments are provided in the annual report issued by the Chief Secretary of the Government on Improvements and Developments in the Public Service.

A study of the effects of the implementation of the various programs in the Malaysian public sector is beyond the scope of this study, but the final section of this article will present the perceptions of two groups of public service officials comprising middle level managerial officials from the Malaysian Public Service and their views on the impact of TQM on several aspects of organisation.
The Client’s Charter Program. The seven principles outlined in the Development Administration Circular promulgated as a guide to TQM implementation in the Malaysian Public Service broadly outlined a philosophy which attempts to influence all aspects of human resources and the work environment. They are presented in the circular as critical in the successful implementation of TQM. Perhaps due to the importance of a strong customer orientation in the implementation of TQM, a separate circular on the principle of ‘customer focus’ was circulated by the government in 1993—DAC No. 3, titled ‘Guidelines on Client’s Charter’. The Client’s Charter outlines the service delivery component in the organisation, and is basically a promise to the customers of the organisation that a certain service will be delivered in accordance with the set guidelines previously determined through examination of customer requirements (Prime Minister’s Department Malaysia 1993:1).

This circular endorsed, officially, the customer focus aspect in the implementation of quality management and outlined the rationale for expected benefits of the implementation of the Client’s Charter, as well as the mechanics of formulating and implementing a client’s charter.

The issuing of separate circulars as guides for the implementation of quality control circles and the Client’s Charter, may be seen as reflecting the importance accorded by the Malaysian government to the effective implementation of these two main concepts of quality management—teamwork and customer focus. The relationship between these concepts, evident in the literature, is a cyclical one. Continuous improvement with information obtained from the customers provides feedback to the members of the QCCs, helping the work team focus on further improvement. Theoretically, this may then become a process of continuous improvement in the services provided by the organisation.

The second major quality management tool that contributes to significant organisational change in public service organisations in Malaysia then is the Client’s Charter. In the Malaysian Public Service, the implementation of the Client’s Charter has been widespread and comprehensive. Since 1993, a total of 402 government agencies constituting 134 agencies at the federal level, 144 at the state level, 51 statutory bodies and 73 local authorities have formulated and implemented the Charter (Government of Malaysia 1996a:89).

Substantial examples of the implementation of client’s charters in various ministries and departments are again provided in the annual report issued by MAMPU on improvements and developments in the public service. In these reports positive outcomes have been attributed to the formulation, promotion and monitoring of the Client’s Charter mechanisms.

Another review of the implementation of the Client’s Charter initiative in the Malaysian Public Service points to the reduction in the number of public complaints against those agencies that have successfully implemented the Client’s Charters (Rahman 1995:60). This study also reported on the positive changes in the attitudes and commitment of employees in
Agencies that have implemented the Client’s Charter. This overview was a conference paper presented by the former Director General of MAMPU, and hence consisted of information drawn mainly from MAMPU reports.

In summary, an institutional framework has been adopted in the Malaysian Public Service, to implement quality management in public service organisations, guided by the programs initiated under the DACs. The philosophy of quality management was drawn from the DAC on TQM, while the DACs on the QCCs and the Client’s Charter provided the operational mechanisms for implementing quality management at the organisational level. The government’s efforts to induce a quality culture is reflected in the efforts of MAMPU and the Prime Minister’s Department, through regular audits conducted by the Inspectorates of MAMPU, the annual QCC Conventions, and the various awards presented by the government in recognition of public service agencies that have excelled in the provision of quality services. The Inspectorate of MAMPU is entrusted with the task of monitoring the implementation of the DACs, while the annual QCC Convention convenes those QCCs in a competition to recognise and reward the best QCC in the Public Service for the year. Among the various awards given out by the government each year to recognise the performance of various departments, the Prime Minister’s Quality Award for the Public Sector is viewed by the government as the ‘highest and most esteemed award’ (Government of Malaysia 1996b:686).

The foregoing discussion presents the ‘official’ view of the implementation of TQM practices in the Malaysian Public Service. The crucial question, however, is the extent to which these changes have impacted on the views of public servants themselves. This article will now present the perceptions of Malaysian Public Service employees selected for this study.

**Employee perceptions**

The objective of the research reported here was to provide a general overview of what these programs have meant to public service officials. While the annual publications by MAMPU and the annual QCC Conventions reveal success in the implementation of quality management concepts in the public service, it is useful to obtain the general perceptions of public service employees on the impact of TQM.

As mentioned in the section on research methodology, the perceptions of public service employees were obtained through two groups of public service officials who were participating in two training programs for public service employees carried out at the National Institute of Public Administration (INTAN) in June 1997.

Employee perceptions of three main areas were obtained. One was their view on the impact of TQM on selected organisational aspects, such as employee training, job satisfaction, work skill and knowledge, work recognition, and changes in work practices. The second area focused on the employees’ views on the capability of TQM concepts to improve organisational and employee performance. Finally, employees’
Adopting quality management concepts in public service reform

Mohamed Asim

comments were gauged with regard to the impact of work improvement teams or the QCCs.

In this regard, the impact of TQM on selected aspects of organisation, as perceived by these Malaysian Public Service employees, is depicted in Figure 1. A cursory glance at Figure 1 shows that the impact of TQM on the five organisational aspects selected has been seen as positive. The impact on aspects of training, improving work skills and knowledge, and work recognition have been considered very positive (over 50 per cent believed that TQM was effective on these aspects). In addition, a significant percentage held the opinion that TQM was effective in increasing job satisfaction (48 per cent) and changing work practices (39 per cent).

Employees’ views on the potential for TQM concepts to improve employee and organisational performance represented the second area of study. In this analysis too, for purposes of graphical presentation, levels of improvement for the variables of employee and organisational performance were numbered on a three point scale, with one regarded as ‘very little improvement’; two as ‘some improvement’; and three as ‘substantial improvement’.

Hence, Figure 2 depicts the employees’ perceptions of the level of improvement achieved in employee and organisational performance as a result of TQM. The data

Figure 1 Impact of TQM on selected organisational aspects, perceptions from two selected groups of employees.

Source: Information obtained from questionnaires
Adopting quality management concepts in public service reform

Mohamed Asim

shows that a high percentage of employees’ perceive that there had been ‘some improvement’ in both the performance of employees and performance of the organisation. A significant minority also believed that there had been ‘substantial’ improvement in employee and organisational performance—24 per cent stated that there had been ‘substantial’ improvement in employee performance, and 19 per cent were of the view that there had been ‘substantial’ improvement in organisational performance.

The third area of analysis focused on employee comments on the general impact of work improvement teams. In this regard, the two groups of employees revealed more positive responses overall than negative ones with regard to the impact on work improvement teams (QCCs). Positive responses from participants included perceived improvements in employee participation, increased work skill and knowledge, more collaboration among departments, better input towards decisionmaking, and innovation for improvement. Individual responses like the following indicated the effects of work improvement teams.

- ‘Better work performance’.
- ‘More collaboration among the agencies or interdepartmental network’.

![Figure 2 Effectiveness of TQM on improving employee and organisational performance: Perceptions from two selected groups of employees](source: Information obtained from questionnaires)
• ‘Faster work, *esprit de corp*, work satisfaction—high. Good networking with other group. Difficult matter could be effectively dealt with and working papers such as reports could be prepared on time’.

• ‘They really contribute and find ways to improve whatever steps that can be improved. They act as a check/team for improvement’.

• ‘Work is done more effectively. Teams accept change better as they can see the benefit. Work improvement teams very important to maintain the standard and high quality of service’.

• ‘Streamline the procedure and workflow. Clear demarcations of duty/power. Every staff have a chance to register their ideas. Documenting all procedures and office manuals. Changing habits or attitudes is not that easy to accept. Telling people the ways of the "old days" are wrong’

• ‘Groups or teamwork seemed to be improved, thus leading to increased productivity. At the same time it enhanced the feeling of self-belonging amongst the group members and this generates them to work together as one towards achieving the organisational goals’.

• ‘More easy to communicate. No barrier between high/lower level. Everybody knows how or what their function and rights are. Sometimes if the relationships are too close it creates new problems which make it difficult to control staff’.

• ‘Work improvement teams [are] able to identify various problems faced by one customer and they can create early remedial measures to overcome them. This will lead to better customer satisfaction and at the same time enhance the department’s image in the eye of the public’.

Clearly these employees’ perceptions of the impact of QCCs on public service organisations have been positive. But several negative responses were obtained which focused mainly on QCCs being too time-consuming and too concerned with procedural matters. A sample of such responses indicates some of the negative effects of the work improvement teams.

• ‘More work’

• ‘Subordinates can give their opinion about the department’.

• ‘Work improvement team not properly guided. A lot of time wasted on procedural aspects’.

• ‘Time consuming, can’t concentrate on personal work. Costly in preparation of documents and presentation’.

• ‘Work done strictly following procedures and regulations’.

• ‘A lot of paper work, and time consuming’.

• ‘Work improvement teams such as QCC have been introduced in more organisations, but only to the lower level and the top level did not give much attention to it and it died off’.

This sample of negative responses, reveals inherent problems in the implementation of QCC in public service organisations in Malaysia. Among these responses, the most frequently cited focus on QCCs was that they created ‘more work’ and were ‘time consuming’. This perhaps portrays the feeling among the employees
that QCCs have added an extra layer of bureaucratic procedure in public service organisations.

Finally, employee perceptions of organisational changes were gauged from the responses obtained for the question: ‘what major organisational changes could be identified as a result of TQM?’ The responses obtained for this question showed that the employees felt that there were several positive changes in terms of attitude, work culture, training and teamwork, and a general change in the organisational culture.

Examples of some comments that portrayed TQM as having brought about a change in attitude amongst staff and a change in the work culture are:

- ‘everyone in our organisation is very conscious about quality and everyone contributes their best’
- ‘organisational culture especially in the area of attitude development depends on our values. If we respect the good values such as trust, responsible, hard work and discipline and practice it, so we will have a positive attitude towards achieving success and ways of improving quality’
- ‘teamwork spirit very impressive. Job satisfaction among staff. Well educated staff. Proper training program for all levels of staff. Good working environment and healthy relationship among the staff’
- ‘changes in work practices and environment in work place, where everybody is reminded about TQM and everybody has to know what he is doing in contributing to TQM practices’.

In addition, several comments centred on the impact TQM has had in terms of instilling a sense of teamwork and the subsequent impact teams have had on improving employee relations and morale. The following are examples of some such comments:

- ‘the teamwork and esprit de corps is very high’
- ‘more teamwork, dedication, teambuilding, adherence to land rules and national land codes’
- ‘teambuilding, productivity and quality increased, an increase in the image of department, customer satisfaction’
- ‘involvement by fellow workers in discussing and resolving problems that arise. Productivity increased, relations between workers improved’
- ‘increased cooperation among the officers in doing the job as a team. Minimised conflict through effective and better communication. Good flow of information’
- ‘employees started to work in teams. Better results are obtained as a result of teamwork. Better quality of work as a result of teamwork’.

Furthermore, comments also revealed that there had been changes and restructuring of work and, with additional training, improved work knowledge and skills.

To summarise, the most commonly cited organisational changes are those that have taken place within the teams themselves. Perceptions of organisational and job restructuring, and organisational culture reflect changes in the functioning of public service organisations. The impacts on organisational culture are shown in statements such as ‘team spirit’, ‘esprit de corps’, ‘empowerment’, ‘good working environment and healthy relationship
between employees’, and ‘more careful in dealing with the public’. These statements perhaps reveal the existence of an organisational culture that is team oriented and focused on the customer, at least among the participants of the selected groups. As mentioned before, these two concepts of teamwork and customer orientation are major TQM principles that are crucial in instilling the process aimed at achieving quality service.

**Conclusions**

This article has examined three operational mechanisms of quality management adopted in the Malaysian Public Service through a discussion of three main programs implemented under the rubric of quality management—QCCs, the TQM program and the Client’s Charter. From an overview of these three main programs it was clear that there was a discernible set of policies and guidelines which formed the basis of a quality management framework in the Malaysian Public Service.

The perceptions of the selected groups of employees were generally positive with regard to the impact of quality management in the Malaysian Public Service. The impact of TQM on the aspects of employee training, job satisfaction, work skill and knowledge, work recognition, and changes in work practices, were seen to be ‘effective’ by public service employees. A very insignificant percentage reported the impact of TQM on these aspects as ‘ineffective’.

Overall, the public service employees felt that TQM practices had effected ‘some improvement’ on organisational performance and employee performance in their respective organisations. A significant percentage also stated that there had been ‘substantial improvements’. Similarly, the impact of work improvement teams and the impact of TQM on organisational change was perceived positively by most of the Training Groups.

These perceptions, however, are drawn from middle managerial employees in the public service and have been presented to provide some general views on what the circulars on TQM, QCCs and the Client’s Charter have meant to public service officials in general. A small minority of respondents are heads of departments, which means that their promotion depended on how well they implemented the guidelines provided in the DACs in their respective departments. The Inspectorate Teams of MAMPU have, over the years, visited organisations where the head of departments were due for a promotion and made recommendations to the government on the progress of the implementation of the DACs (Author’s interview with MAMPU official, 1997). Hence, considering the nature of this Training Group, the tendency may exist for reporting positive outcomes with regard to administrative reform programs.

It may be concluded, however, that the adoption of quality management concepts and practices in the Malaysian Public Service has provided the necessary institutional mechanisms and focus for change in the government’s efforts to reform the public service. Nevertheless, to determine the global impact, this study needs to be broadened to include non-managerial employees as well as employees from state and local levels of government.
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References


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