

T.Q.M. IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Total Quality Management (TQM) in the classroom centers on continuously seeking feedback to identify problems early, and to involve students in decisions that affect them. This can be accomplished easily by using a Student Management Team (SMT). SMT's usually consists of four students who meet with the instructor every one or two weeks. SMT's pinpoint what is working well plus what needs to be changed and how. Members of SMT's can be elected, selected from volunteers, or invited. As learning managers we need to involve our learners in decisions that affect them. We need to do this early and throughout each course. SMT's are a powerful tool to achieve these essential objectives.

TEACHING EXCELLENCE MADE EASY

The winner of the most awards for teaching excellence in the California state university system was a presenter at the WMEA conference in 1991. He said the secret of his success was very simple. Beginning the second week of class he regularly asked his students what he could be doing better. He listened to what his students told him, and took timely action to correct problems. He adjusted his instructional methods to each class. He involved his students in his decision making process.

See Dramatic Improvements in Satisfaction

There is a simple technique you can use to do this. It doesn't matter whether you use traditional lecture, interactive case studies, or some more participatory method. Those who have tried it have seen immediate -- *and often dramatic* -- improvements in student satisfaction, and later in course evaluations.

S.M.T.'s Use Proven T.Q.M. Elements

The technique is the Student Management Team (SMT). It is a simple application of two critical elements of Total Quality Management (TQM) in the classroom. The first TQM element is empowering those working for you by involving them in the decisions that affect them. The second is actively seeking feedback to continuously improve any

product including our instructional activities. TQM focuses on improving product quality and consumer satisfaction, rather than on production convenience.

CREATE QUALITY CIRCLES

SMT's are a kind of "quality circle" and provide an easy way to gather feedback on a regular basis. Their function is to pinpoint what is working well plus what needs to be changed and how. SMT's can be easily customized to provide you with the type of feedback you value most.

Three Ways To Set Up Your Teams

A SMT normally consists of three or four students. Its members can be:

- (1) elected by the class,
- (2) selected from volunteers, or
- (3) individually invited by the professor.

Select The Best Team Members

If you select or invite students, it is generally best to wait two or three weeks so you have a sense of which class members:

- (1) attend regularly,
- (2) represent different segments of the class,
- (3) are creative and good problem solvers,
- (4) are willing to provide constructive feedback, and
- (5) do not have conflicting hidden agendas or personal problems.

Clarify Team Responsibilities

If you invite students, interview those you are considering. Ask each of them about:

- (1) available time,
- (2) other responsibilities, and
- (3) common meeting times.

SMT's commonly meet informally with the professor or instructor outside of class once every week or two for twenty to thirty minutes. It is usually more convenient for students to meet immediately before or after their scheduled class.

Invitations May Be Best

I prefer to write an invitation to each student I select, and make it easy for each to decline. Here's a draft of my invitation. You will want to revise my draft to fit your needs.

You are invited to be a member of my STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM for this class. The purpose of this team is to provide me with candid and ongoing feedback. I genuinely want to know about any problems related to my instructional methods and/or your assignments. I welcome any suggestions you care to make to help me correct a problem. It's also helpful for me to know about what's working well so I can continue doing that.

Being a member of this STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM is strictly voluntary. No extra credit is given for this service. The team normally meets with me before or after class about every two weeks for fifteen to thirty minutes. If the team is agreeable, I may have the team make their report openly in class for time to time. You would simply report from your regular seat.

If you accept this invitation, you will be introduced to the class as one of their STUDENT MANAGEMENT TEAM representatives. Class members will be encouraged to contact you with any observations and recommendations. You just pass them on to me.

If you would like to serve, just sign the bottom line of this note and return it to me by the end of class. If you have too much work or too many outside responsibilities, you need do nothing.

Yes, I would like to serve.

Everyone Likes To Be Asked

I've had only one invitation declined in four semesters. This student stopped after class to explain that she was a working single mother who was overwhelmed with her small children, a full-time job, and assignments for three classes. She just could not take on anything more. However, she greatly appreciated being invited.

OPEN CHANNELS FOR IMPROVEMENT

It is important that those serving on a SMT are identified for all class members. The SMT's purpose

is to provide a funnel through which successes/problems are reported. You can define how restrictive or completely open you wish the feedback to be: by all means start in your "comfort zone."

Regularly Examine Your Basic Assumptions

Be honest about the things you cannot or will not change, but be prepared to examine your most basic assumptions and provide justification about why you do what you do. If you cannot adequately justify what you are doing, you may need to make some changes. A SMT should identify problems and offer alternative solutions within the framework you provide.

Model Top Management Behavior

As a marketing professional I greatly value candid, "gloves off," feedback. I also like to model a managerial openness that is needed in the workplace, and that I would like my students to develop. Consequently, after a couple of informal meetings with me, I begin having my SMT's make a short formal report in class. Regardless of what's reported, I make sure the first thing out of my mouth is a genuine "Thank you!" Instead of being defensive, I try to restate whatever is being reported so my students know I have heard them. I try to objectivify reported problems in terms of specific actions and consequences, and deal with what I'm doing instead of who I am. It's not personal. It's just a problem we need to solve. This models good management behavior.

Produce Astounding Results

Students are empowered in a SMT and included in decisions that affect them. Consistently, across the nation, managers -- including "learning managers" like us -- will tell you that average people who are enthused often produce astounding results. You want the team to become so involved in the managerial function that they become responsible for their own learning, and share responsibility for the success of the course.

Small Improvements Add Up Quickly

As a culture, Americans look for big breakthroughs to turn everything around. The Japanese, on the other hand, have embraced Edwards Deming's principles and continuously look for small ways to improve a product or process every day. Judge for

yourself what small, cumulative improvements over time have done for Japan's products.

Empowering Students Enhances Your Success

Central to TQM is involvement of those who must implement management decisions in the decision process. As learning managers we need to involve our learners in decisions that affect them. We need to do this early and throughout each course. SMT's are an easy way to achieve this. Those of my colleagues who have tried SMT's have consistently had the same reaction: "I wish I had been doing this sooner." That was my first reaction. Try one.

GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I was introduced to the concept of SMT's at the annual gathering of the directors of the centers for teaching excellence throughout the United States and Canada. The POD Network (Professional and Organization Development in Higher Education Network) consists of those responsible for implementing instructional improvement. POD, like WMEA, has been one of the most pragmatically helpful associations I belong to. It's a resource you should know about.

Ed Nuhfer, John Krogman, and Russ Burgett contributed a terrific workshop on Student Management Teams at the 1991 POD conference. It was one of several excellent workshops provided each year. As with the WMEA conferences, I always come away with many new insights and useful techniques, plus a paradigm shift or two.

REFERENCES

Nuhfer, Edward; Krogman, John; and Burgett, Russell. "A Workshop on Student Management Teams." Workshop materials for the 16th Annual P.O.D. Conference. Platteville, Wisconsin: Teaching Excellence Center. October, 1991.