

From The Forest of La Hulpe, Belgium – Reflections on Quality

The following observations were made in the forest outside a training facility in La Hulpe, Belgium. I believe that several days of thinking about quality have focused the senses through which I become aware of my surroundings. As a result, aspects of quality made themselves known through the touch of a beech tree, the sound of an avian choir, the sight of multi-shaped and multi-shaded plant life, the fresh forest scent carried on a light breeze and the bitter taste of a meadow grass.

Waxing poetic on a consulting assignment? Philosophizing during office hours? Perhaps, but well worth it in terms of coming to grips with what quality means to me personally. I don't mean to suggest I suddenly discovered the true essence of life through Pareto charts, Six Sigma analyses, Five-ups and Market-Driven Quality. Rather, I now have a much better feeling for the role that quality has in life. Sound a little bit wacky or "New Age"-ish? Read on! The following paragraphs capture the essence of the conversation I had with myself.

"I hope I can find an acorn in these woods. I'd like to pick one up as a gift for a friend whose job is to promote the adoption of market-driven quality as a way of working. The acorn represents the possibility of an oak tree, one that will grow tall and strong if provided with the right conditions. The acorn has no ability to control or influence those conditions, but it 'knows' how to respond by becoming the best oak tree it can under the circumstances. I guess people are the same way. They are "programmed" to grow as best they can in a given set of circumstances. In promoting market-driven quality, each of us has a responsibility to provide the conditions under which our people or processes can grow to their potential.

Unfortunately, I can't see any acorns. Or for that matter, any oak trees. There are plenty of beech nut husks but very little else of what I'm looking for. And speaking of beech trees, there are quite a few of them out here. They're relatively tall and have a relatively smooth bark. Too bad none of them are perfectly straight or perfectly smooth. They would have been great examples to talk about—perfection in nature.

So what does "perfection" look like in the forest? What does six sigma look like? What is a defect? I'm not sure the concept of 'defect' exists in nature. I believe it's a totally human construct that has no natural analog. In the forest, there is a dynamic balance within and between all its elements. For the forest as it is today, there is just the right amount of soil, moisture, oxygen, light, plants, insects and animal life. It's perfect. No defects. And if something changes, the whole forest shifts to come back into balance. It always strives to take the best advantage of what there is to offer.

But look at the trees. Some of them are taller than others. Some have rougher bark. Some have twists in their trunks. Some have fallen over, exposing a massive (and apparently insufficient) root system. How can they possibly be described as 'perfect'? Because they are the best trees they can possibly be under the circumstances. How, on their own, could they be any better?

The tree doesn't set up barriers to its own growth. It doesn't get lazy, discouraged, frustrated, angry or up-tight. It just goes about being the best tree possible. It may have the potential to be a better tree; however under the circumstances it is just perfect. Perhaps every tree here exceeds six sigma because it is perfect—the best possible, and therefore no inherent defects.

Maybe the penultimate of quality is simply being the best possible. If I'm to live a quality life, free of defects, perhaps I can best articulate my task as to 'do the best I can, and not to sell myself short'. In fact, it's better defined as 'doing the best I can or being the best I can', with no qualifiers. I couldn't do my best if I was selling myself short, could I?

How would business be different if everyone lived or did their best? The implication is that they could do nothing more. Like the beech tree in the forest, each person would be being as much as they could be in the existing circumstances. I find it interesting to think about the ways in which I limit my ability to be my best, to not optimize the environment I'm in. How many times do I sell myself short because it's more comfortable? How many times do I choose not to co-operate with someone else because my ego prefers to see me succeed on my own? How large would the tree grow if it chose not to be in optimal balance with the surrounding elements?

Quality tools are useful to improve processes. Perhaps they would be greeted with more open arms if each individual strove to be the best possible—to be in the optimal balance with everything and everyone around him or her.

(Is there time to philosophize about quality when there is so much pressure to 'make it happen'? Should I be feeling guilty because I'm thinking about quality rather than doing it? Absolutely not! Most of the early scientific breakthroughs that began to accelerate technological development were from the minds of philosopher-scientists. And much of today's leading edge science is as much philosophy as it is science. Perhaps by looking at 'quality' philosophically, someone will discover the breakthroughs demanded by customers and corporations.)

Personally, I don't get all fired up about the prospect of working harder and longer to improve quality for the exclusive benefit to a company's bottom line. I do get excited about living to my potential, and I believe that if I'm doing that, the company and all other stakeholders will benefit, too. So what? Well...

It means I must start to: think more clearly; take better care of my physical self; become more aware of the dynamics of the system I work and live in; be aware of the optimal balance for that system; and act in the most appropriate way to move towards that balance. The benefits? I'll be healthier both physically and mentally; I'll be better able to act appropriately within my system; I'll be better able to reach my optimal performance. By living my best, I will be better able to do my best. What more can I offer? And if things change, I will be able to quickly adapt to once again be my best. Budget cut, headcount cut, salary increased, new responsibilities assigned? It doesn't matter—as long as I am being the best I can be, I am defect free!

Enough thinking—I'd better keep walking! I see a number of other connections with quality, too. As long as I focus on the ground, one foot at a time, I lose the big picture. I miss the beauty around me, the different shapes and textures and resources of the forest. If I concentrated all my energy on not falling or on not getting my feet wet, I'd be unable to see where I was going. Oh sure, those 'close-up' aspects of the journey are important too, but in appropriate balance with what's going on around me. To optimize quality, a big picture perspective is essential.

There's a lot going on out here. Birds are singing, the wind is rustling through the trees and rabbits are disturbing the underbrush as they dash about. It is very easy to miss those sounds if I walk noisily or if I focus on my internal chatter. The richness of the environment is incredible, if only I choose to pay attention to it. I find myself walking in a daze, caught up in my own thoughts, unaware of anything but myself. How incredibly limiting. I suppose if my objective is to make it through the forest as quickly as possible, this is O.K. If my objective is to do or be my best, then I must pay attention. That may mean slowing down or stopping. Is there room for that in a business focused on quality? If doing the best for customers and shareholders and customers is important, will slowing down or stopping be acceptable ways of meeting that objective. It appears to be a must.

My walk is almost over. I found a pine cone, but no acorns. I suppose a pine cone will make a good gift, too. After all, if allowed to 'do its thing' and be the best it can be, it can become a tiny wood lot! Wait! What's that? There's some aluminum foil I didn't notice before—and it certainly doesn't belong on the forest floor. Defect, defect, defect! Someone should pick that up. Might as well be me.

How about that?!? Not only is there a pile of aluminum foil, but hundreds of tiny acorns, too! A coincidence? Perhaps. And how many other desirable coincidences are likely to be experienced if I choose to focus on quality and perfection, simply by living it in everything I do?"

A walk in the forest, a little reflection and a context of quality. Perhaps nature will play a larger role in the way we view quality. With humankind being the one noticeable exception, elements of nature appear to have a 'natural' tendency to be and do their best, in dynamic balance with each other. The tree doesn't willingly halt its growth; it grows in balance with its surroundings. Species propagate so as to ensure their survival, yet here, too, there is a natural balance that is eventually reached.

Is the purpose of our focus on quality to help us reach an optimal dynamic balance within a global economic system or is it to help us exceed the system's natural ability to balance—at the expense of other elements of the system? We no longer have the ability to jump to another system (geographic, economic) when the one we are operating in becomes totally out of balance. We now operate in the largest system available to us.

As we seek to improve quality in our business endeavors, we might be well advised to keep a couple of thoughts in mind. First, we are best able to provide quality if we seek to be and do the best we can as individuals—no self-imposed limits. And second, we have a responsibility to ensure that our quality focus is taken in the largest system view possible. We owe it to ourselves.