

speed read

# soapbox

## Make yourself heard

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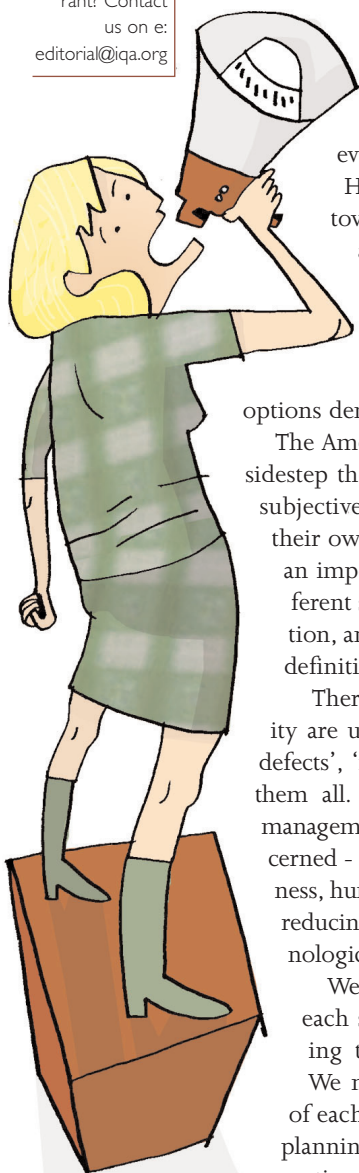


Illustration by Warwick Cadwell

## Jim Wade

I don't know whether to laugh or cry when I hear yet another group of quality professionals debating that perennial topic: 'What is quality?' Call me impatient, but shouldn't you have figured that out years ago?

Actually, I tend to cry because it's really not funny. It's a major barrier to effective communication between the profession and everybody else, particularly managers. How can they be helped to work towards 'quality' when their advisers are unable even to agree on what the word means? 'Exceeding customer satisfaction', 'fit for purpose', 'conformance to requirements' - the sheer variety of options demonstrates the rife confusion.

The American Society for Quality appears to sidestep the question by defining quality as: 'A subjective term for which each person has their own definition'. But at least this reflects an important truth: organisations are at different stages on the journey towards perfection, and at each stage they will have unique definitions of quality.

Therefore, all generic definitions of quality are useless in practice. 'World-class', 'zero defects', 'right first time, every time' - forget them all. They just depress and irritate your management colleagues who are more concerned - and rightly so - with getting the business, humbling the competition, cutting costs, reducing staff turnover, grappling with technological change and so on.

We need to accurately define quality, at each stage, for any organisation undertaking the continual improvement journey. We need to use the normal terminology of each business and to link it to its business planning cycle, to help effective communication with your management colleagues. And we need to reflect the fact that, during each stage of the journey, the organ-


isation will be aiming for something different from what was aimed for previously. So the definition of quality needs to be variable, not fixed; this is in line with the spirit of IQA's own definition of quality: 'A degree of excellence'. So how do we come up with a definition that meets all these criteria and is therefore meaningful to your management colleagues?

How about this: 'In any organisation, at any one time, quality is precisely defined by the organisation's current measurable objectives.'

Now, I know what you're thinking. What if the objectives are poor? What if they don't take into consideration customer delight or efficiency improvement or all the other items representing good practice?

Sure, in an ideal world the objectives would be a complete textbook set including all that stuff and more: corporate social responsibility, all the perspectives of a balanced scorecard, and so on. In reality, an organisation's objectives usually fall short of that ideal, don't they? But those objectives, like it or not, still define the level of quality (the degree of excellence) that the organisation intends to achieve in the next planning period.

That view of quality provides a sound platform from which you, as a quality professional, can engage managers in discussions where the language of the business conveniently replaces the 'q' word, and you can get on with the job of educating the organisation to set even better objectives and how to work systematically to achieve them.

So there you go - the one and only true definition of quality. Feel free to take it and use it. Just don't let me catch you debating it any more. 

Jim Wade is a director of Advanced Training and the driving force behind the Business Improvement Network - visit [www.bin.co.uk](http://www.bin.co.uk) for details.