Implications of business ethics for quality management

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Implications of business ethics for quality management

Keywords: Quality Management, Business ethics, Responsibility, Collective responsibility

Abstract

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<th>Purpose of this paper</th>
<th>Responsibility is a key concept, both in quality management and in business ethics programmes. Quality cannot be managed successfully without an explicit focus on moral concepts like motivating values, loyalty and sincere attention for each other. At the same time, ethical behaviour in a business environment supposes full quality control. A good balance is needed between control and release and between trust and responsible behaviour.</th>
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<td>Design/methodology/approach</td>
<td>Based on research in the field of business ethics, methods and processes are explored for implementing quality management within organisations.</td>
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<td>An important result of this study is that only by combining personal care with control of processes is it possible to achieve the highest levels of quality. The implications of these findings are discussed along with future directions for research on quality management.</td>
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<td>In Total Quality Management systems, attention is paid to social responsibility as far as the impact on society is recognised and implemented within the company. However, this paper puts forward the necessity for relational responsibility based on personal care as a crucial factor in the</td>
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relationships between supervisors and employees, between salespeople and customers, et cetera. Therefore, the incorporation of relational responsibility into quality programmes seems an important next step in the development of quality management.

| What is original/value of paper | Responsibility in the sense of authority distribution within organisations is a central topic for quality management. This paper contributes to a broader view on responsibility based on moral values, personal care and its impact on stakeholder relationships. |
Introduction

In the academic world research in the fields of quality management and business ethics are often separated. One reason for this is that the origins are very different; business ethics stemming from philosophy while quality management has developed from management studies. With the present developments in both fields there are strong reasons to link the disciplines. In both quality management and business ethics it is common practice to discuss issues of responsibility. Does this imply that both disciplines are reflecting the same topics? This article is an attempt to clarify the links between quality management and business ethics in order to show what quality management can learn from insights out of the field of business ethics.

Developments in quality management

Quality management has, both in practice and in the theoretical consideration of it, gone through an impressive development. There is hardly any management philosophy that is as much adopted by companies as quality management. Total Quality Management requires that organisations have to make visible to the outside world that they are doing the right things and are doing them in the right way. However, this aspect of visibility is often poorly exposed in quality management. It is only demonstrated in the efforts of organisations to achieve certificates or other ways of differentiating quality management. In this way, visibility remains attached to demonstrable control and to a commercially driven exposure of quality achievements to the public (Boje and Winsor, 1993). Visibility in the sense of transparency (giving
insight into processes) for a public that is attentive to the added value of a company needs to go further then a framed certificate in the entrance hall of the head office.

In all quality models like ISO 9000, EFQM-model and the Malcolm Baldridge Award a focus on external parties is embedded. The attention to customers is prevalent because quality is in most cases understood as ‘fitness for use’. If we follow the phasing of the Dutch quality model (Hardjono, 1995) then the one-sided attention on product quality is gradually replaced by an integrated care for quality of the entire organisation. Fine-tuning with the outside world, with customers and with the other parties involved claims a central role. This has resulted in a solid position, in quality models, for the different stakeholders such as customers, employees who have to provide products and services, and society as a whole.

**Focus on stakeholder value**

The focus on stakeholder value addresses the fact that organisations have to operate in an environment containing a multitude of parties. Not only do customers and consumers articulate their demands. There are many other direct and indirect parties involved who have their legitimate or illegitimate desires and expectations (Donaldson and Preston; 1995; Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997). These include shareholders expecting a high return on their investments, employees within the company, local residents and governments to name just a few. Shell, with its experience surrounding the Brent Spar and the problems in Nigeria has learned that it is good management to deal strategically with the different stakeholders. For this it is not enough to restrict oneself to compliance to local legislation. A more value-based position, partly based on moral deliberations, is inevitable (Zain, Dale and Kehoe, 2001). It is argued that this
position should be developed through interaction with the different stakeholders in and around the organisation (Hummels, 1998).

In quality management, the tuning to the broader environment is managed by provable control and renewal of the internal processes of an organisation. Organisations have to make visible what they do, why they do it, and what the consequences of their actions are (Koehn and Nayebpour, 2000). Impact on society, satisfaction of clients and satisfaction of employees are important elements of the widely adapted EFQM model and the Malcolm Baldridge Award. In this way, quality management leads automatically to moral deliberations and responsibilities towards the different parties in and around an organisation (Stainer and Stainer, 1995; Buban, 1995). This is a first link between quality management and business ethics. There is another connection which we refer to as ‘the paradox of control’.

**Paradox of control**

In bureaucratic and technical environments there is often an almost unlimited confidence in the control of the processes of production, management and innovation. At the same time it is generally accepted that the implementation of, for example, quality management systems is difficult to plan and often these have only limited success. Gonzáles and Guillén (2002) state that the explicit consideration of leadership’s ethical dimension is required in order to achieve a complete, deep and sustained deployment of TQM-principles. Credos like ‘management is not committed’, ‘employees resist the system’ or ‘customers don’t know what they want’ are often used as excuses. No matter how thoroughly a system is designed and how well the implementation is planned, there are always some unexpected factors that cannot be
controlled (Krüger, 1998). For example, factors concerning the participation of employees in the design process of a quality management system:

- Could they indicate their skills, knowledge and experience?
- Were they respected as people and as professionals?
- Have they felt any concern for individual employees who could be harmed in their current position or in their future prospects?
- Have they had the time to make the quality system their own?
- Have they experienced that the system could be a tool to support them in improving their collective performance?

All these questions concerning the implementation of quality management refer to what may be called social dynamical aspects (Fisscher and de Weerd Nederhof, 2000). Alongside system structural aspects such as procedures and division of tasks, responsibilities and authorities, these social dynamical aspects prove to be very important in implementing quality management. In fact, the same applies to the organisation of the maintenance process of a quality system. According to Van den Water (2000, p. 761) quality management is defined as “the system consisting of system structural and social dynamical aspects with the objective of controlling the quality of the organisation”.

An interesting example of the relevance of social dynamical aspects has been given by Weick and Roberts (1993) in their analysis of the functioning of an aircraft carrier. They argue that in situations where not even one mistake is acceptable, a group or team has to function as a collective entity, partly based on:

- Subordination of one’s own interests to that of the group
- Representation of the group by each individual
- Heedful interrelating between the different members of the group

Although the importance of preventing mistakes is in most organisational settings not comparable with the situation on an aircraft carrier, the prevention of errors and even the goal of zero defects are common elements in quality management. In these cases reliable and eventually successful team behaviour is depending on full commitment to, identification with, and responsibility for, the team by all its members. At the same time, there should be an attitude of respect and trust towards team members and management (Lau and Idris, 2001). For management this implies that they sometimes have to let go. This creates a paradoxical situation. The paradoxical character of control is that on the one hand full control is impossible and, on the other, that precisely this awareness and a corresponding release by the people who are in charge can be a basis for reaching the intended results. Or, expressing it the other way around: if we want to control we need to release (see figure 1). In order to achieve reliability in business processes and results, respect and trust are as essential as command and control. We cannot go around the concepts of respect and trust if we want to manage quality processes, stimulate renewal and justify ourselves to the outside world.

<<Insert figure 1 here>>
The paradox of control leaves us with a gap between controlling every aspect of a process, and releasing management ties to give a certain degree of freedom to employees. This space can be filled in different ways. When managers try to determine and prescribe every aspect of a job, most employees will react by looking for possibilities to escape from such a straightjacket (Willmott, 1993). For example, when a supervisor is away at a meeting, employees will stop working or will extend their breaks. This is because the motivation of employees is not based on internal motivation but is dependant on the supervision. Research on empowerment and autonomous teams shows that, in a climate of trust, employees can perform very well without supervision (De Leede, 1997). When employees are treated with respect and have the opportunity to do work that they perceive as meaningful, they do not misuse the freedom given to them. The balance between trusting people and acting as a trustworthy and responsible person is a delicate but strong one in the relationships between people (Hosmer, 1995).

This emphasis on trusting people, in order to achieve fully responsible acting, highlights that there is more to quality programmes than the so well known strict division of responsibilities. In some programmes, the structure of an organisation is designed and described by a strict division of tasks, responsibilities and authorities. However, such a hierarchical view on the functioning of an organisation has little to do with trusting your employees. In many cases it even shows a lack of trust since the performance of employees is monitored according to these ‘structural arrangements’. Apparently, when we talk about responsibility associated to trust, it is somehow a
different kind of responsibility. This other kind of responsibility is elaborated upon in the context of business ethics theory.

**Specification of responsibility**

In the field of business ethics much work has been done on distinguishing different types of responsibility. For this it is necessary to get a clear view on the concept of responsibility. Responsibility always refers to a relationship between someone and their environment. In the context of relationships between persons and/or organisations it is possible to be called to account for behaviour, intentions and plans for acting, or simply for not acting. Responsibility implies giving an answer, an answer that is more than a reference to the rules of the game. An answer like ‘that’s the way we do it’ or ‘we have no choice because of market forces’ is no more than a legitimisation. Responsibility implies that ones own attitude towards the scope of acting is part of the answer and might also be questioned. Responsible acting requires an actor to be able to give an answer based on arguments and motives. This implies that certain preconditions have to be met when an actor takes on responsibility. Bovens (1990, p. 171) claims that in order to be held accountable it is necessary to have the opportunity to act in a responsible way. Lenk (1992, p. 15) emphasises this position when he postulates that the freedom to act and responsibility are indivisible. The responsibility a person can reasonably bear is limited by the opportunities to fulfil the accompanying obligations. In other words “ought implies can”. Freedom to act in a responsible way is the overall precondition for responsibility. This overall condition can be divided into different aspects such as the intention to act, foresight ability, possibilities for acting, and skills to make a conscious evaluation (see De Leede, Nijhof and Fisscher, 1999).

*Levels of responsibility*
In business ethics there is always a question as to the nature of the actor who bears responsibility. On the one hand, employees and managers within a company make moral deliberations, choose to act in a certain way, and are sometimes held accountable for this. On the other hand, alongside such individual responsibility, it is necessary to distinguish a responsibility on a collective level. In fact, there are several levels of collectivity, such as the group, a department, a business unit, or the organisation as a whole. In literature on organisational responsibility, much attention is paid to the question as to whether an abstract entity, such as an organisation, can bear responsibility.

The starting point for this discussion is the fact that an organisation has no feelings, no conscience and cannot act by itself. Only the decision-makers within an organisation can act and evaluate the values involved. This is the basis on which Werhane (1985) argues that organisations can act only in a secondary sense. People in an organisation are the primary actors but they often act on behalf of the organisation. Hence, the reasons for acting are determined by the organisation. In this sense, corporate actions can be perceived as secondary actions because they are authorised by the charter, the goals and the directives of an organisation (Werhane, p. 55). Using the same line of reasoning, French (1984) emphasises the importance of the formal decision-making structure and acknowledgement rules. These rules focus on the organisational interests, and therefore an organisation has its own intentions distinct from the intentions of the individual employees. The ability of a collective to behave in a responsible way corresponds with what, in essence, is an individual human ability.

Just like individual intentions, the intentions of an organisation can stimulate or block responsible behaviour. However, there is an important difference between
individual and collective acting. When individuals act, they can make a choice to act in a responsible or in an irresponsible way. For example before somebody steals there is always a, sometimes subconscious, choice to do something against the prevailing values in our society. With a collective act this is no longer true. When people work together disasters can happen while, at the same time, all the employees involved are doing what they ought to do from their restricted perspective. With collective action, the precondition that the act has to be intended by someone is no longer valid. Rather, there is a responsibility for the management of a company to organise the processes in such a way that the individual employees are capable of seeing beyond their actions and thus prevent irresponsible collective acting.

Categories of responsibility

In addition to the distinction of the actor who bears responsibility another important differentiation of responsibility is based on the related issues. A first category for this differentiation concerns the support of the interests of the organisation. After an organisation has existed for a certain amount of time, many people will depend on it for their income, fulfilment of contracts, products and sometimes even their meaning of life. This brings with it an important responsibility that can be called organisational responsibility. Employees have to strive for continuity, profits are necessary, the good name of the company has to be preserved, the ISO certificate has to be achieved, etc.. In practice, the interests of the organisation will often be clear. A second category refers to the expectation that all employees will do their best using all their skills, experience and professional standards. This can be called professional responsibility. Many decisions by professionals in an organisation impact on society, and in so far as
A social responsibility can be distinguished. Examples are making an appropriate contribution to employment and preserving the environment. A final category refers to relational responsibility, based on the moral appeal of individual employees, customers, or other stakeholders of the organisation (Gilligan, 1982).

Combining the actors’ different levels of responsibility with the four categories to which responsibility can be related results in a matrix of responsibility, as shown in figure 2.

<<Insert figure 2 here>>

The different categories of responsibility can be illustrated by looking at, for example, a surgeon working in an academic hospital. The organisational responsibility of this surgeon relates to matters of efficiency, meeting targets, fulfilling the goals of the surgeon’s department in order to guarantee the continuity of this organisation. Independent from the organisation where the surgeon is working, he or she also has a responsibility related to the profession. For example, that sensitive information about the health of patients is not discussed with outsiders. The relational responsibility includes how a surgeon deals with patients who are frightened or depressed. Does he or she take the time to make a patient feel at ease and explain what is going to happen? The surgeon’s social responsibility can include appointing employees from minority groups, or helping sick people who are not insured. In all of these examples, the individual sense of responsibility is an important starting point but, at the same time, these responsibilities cannot be fulfilled by an individual alone. The context of the hospital with all its structural and cultural conditions places constraints on the
possibilities to act. This introduces the necessity to organise responsibility within an institution, in order to make it possible for individuals to weigh different responsibilities and behave in a responsible manner. This is precisely what ethics programmes are designed for.

**Development of ethics programmes**

Since research on ethics in a business environment developed a more institutionalised character, there has also been attention paid to organising ethical behaviour. Initially, this attention focused on determining factors that stimulate or block ethical behaviour (Bartels, 1967; Jones, 1991). In the late 1990s the focus shifted from ethical decision-making models towards ethics programmes for corporate social responsibility. This shift in attention can partly be explained as a logical sequence in the development of theory. The research on ethical decision-making has found a strong influence of organisational factors on ethical behaviour. These organisational factors are the core of ethics programmes. Another explanation can be found in external pressures on organisations such as the revised provisions in the Sentencing Guidelines in the USA (Ferrell et al., 1998) and the Cadbury Report and its recommendations in Europe. In literature, there is no commonly accepted definition of ethics programmes. Ferrell et al. (1998, p. 385) state that an effective ethics programme is a process of continuous activities that are designed, implemented and enforced to prevent and detect misconduct. Cochran, Weaver and Trevino (1999, pp. 41-42) note common elements of formal ethics programmes such as:

- *Formal ethics codes*, which articulate a firm’s expectation regarding ethics, written down as a number of responsibilities,
- **Ethics committees**, charged with developing ethical policies, evaluating company or employee actions, and/or investigating and adjudicating policy violations,
- **Ethics communication systems**, providing a means for employees to report abuses or obtain guidance as to responsibilities
- **Ethics officers or ombudspeople**, charged with coordinating policies, providing ethics education, or investigating allegations,
- **Ethics training programmes**, aimed at helping employees to recognise and respond to ethical issues, and
- **Disciplinary processes** to address irresponsible behaviour

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**Synthesis of quality management and business ethics**

**Linkages between quality management and business ethics**

The discussion on developments of both quality management and business ethics has shown that there are several linkages:

1. An obvious connection is that both quality management and business ethics focus on the responsibilities of an organisation towards different stakeholders. However, on a closer look, the responsibility discussed in quality management refers to organisational responsibility of employees, while business ethics is more concerned with professional, relational and social responsibility.
2. In order to achieve the organisational responsibility that is desired in quality programmes it is necessary to have some leeway in relational responsibility.
This is illustrated by the apparent paradox of control that shows that excellent performance can only be achieved by making a delicate balance between control of behaviour on the one hand and release to act on the other.

3. A third link between quality management and business ethics refers to the necessity to link a meaningful answer to the good intentions stressed in ethics programmes. The ability to act in congruence with personal motives on an individual level, and a code of conduct on a collective level, should be organised and managed. Quality management tools, including the control of internal processes, create an essential part of this ability.

The foregoing analysis shows that there are not only correspondences between quality management and business ethics but they are also prerequisites for each other. In order to give a meaningful answer, while avoiding the paradox of control, careful balancing between the different types of responsibility is necessary. On one hand, we need control where quality management tools can be very useful. On the other hand, we need trust from, and moral concern for, the people involved. This balance can be organised by:

- respect for individuals as the ultimate sensemaking ‘entities’.
- the inalienable imperative of individuals to reflect upon their own moral positions.
- identification of collective entities (teams, groups, organisations) with moral impacts on their environment.
- organising for responsibility on a collective level.
Strengthening quality management systems

A good balance between control and release can strengthen quality management systems. To support the organisation of such a balance a number of tools are available in the field of both business ethics and quality management. From quality management methods and instruments like (self-) assessments, auditing, benchmarking, exchange of best practices are widely available and applicable. From the field of business ethics instruments like codes of conduct, community advisory panel, dilemma training and sustainability reports are important.

In the previous analysis it was made clear that quality management and business ethics have more linking them together than simply similarities. The connection is much stronger; quality management and business ethics require each other! Still, in practice, many organisations in organising their relational, social and professional responsibility do so with distinct ethical programmes. In our opinion, the linkages between quality management and business ethics are a strong argument for integrating the associated management systems. Especially when an ethics programme is based on norms such as SA8000 or the AA1000, such integration can be managed carefully. An integrated system can encompass tools and methods drawn from both fields. In figure 3, the different tools and methods from quality management and ethics management are summarised.

<<Insert figure 3 here>>
Discussion and conclusions

Traditionally, designing clear task structures, and the balancing of tasks, responsibilities and authorities, is part of a quality management programme. In addition to this responsibility in a formal sense, responsibility also becomes part of quality management programmes in a moral sense. According to the paradox of control, responsibility is assured when full control is released. Quality cannot be managed successfully without an explicit focus on moral values. At the same time, ethical behaviour in a business environment assumes full quality control in order to be able to adequately answer moral questions. Good intentions alone would lead to failure in one’s duty. Quality management and business ethics are prerequisites for each other with responsibility as the central theme. This relationship between quality management and business ethics is subdivided into three propositions for future research.

In quality models and systems, such as ISO 9000, much attention is paid to professional responsibility in structuring programmes, tasks and responsibilities. Organisational responsibility is also included because the strategy of an organisation has to be translated into goals and personal actions. In Total Quality Management systems, attention is also paid to social responsibility as far as the impact on society is recognised and implemented within the company. However, relational responsibility is missing in all the quality management models. This is surprising since relational responsibility is a crucial factor in the relationships between supervisors and employees, between salespeople and customers, et cetera. Therefore, the incorporation of relational responsibility into quality programmes seems an important next step in the development of quality management. We have stressed the need to
organise this kind of responsibility both on the individual and collective level. In order to create this human characteristic within collective entities we are convinced that a much stronger focus is needed on relational responsibility. In most organisations, this category is significantly underestimated, especially when compared with professional and organisational responsibility. This plea for relational responsibility is the basis of our first proposition.

In the field of quality management a whole set of tools is available: our second proposition is that it is worthwhile exploiting possible applications of these tools in a business ethics context. Relational responsibility is based on the values, considerations, communication, and behaviour of individuals. Nevertheless, in an organisational environment, responsibility also requires certain actions at the collective level. Certain preconditions have to be fulfilled such as developing joint values, sharing information, exemplary behaviour by supervisors, and the stimulation of discussion on doubtful behaviour. In practice, these issues are usually managed in ethics programmes. Some companies include it as part of their quality management systems. This second approach seems to be more effective because responsible behaviour requires the control of internal processes. Only by combining personal care with the control of processes is it possible to achieve the satisfied customers, employees and society strived for in quality management.

A third proposition concerns leadership. Organising responsibility implies a specific and very important role for leadership. The paradox of control shows a need for a dynamic balance between control and space to act, and between trust and responsible behaviour. It is pre-eminently a task for leadership to manage this dynamic balance.
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Figure 1: The paradox of control
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<td>Individual level</td>
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<td>Collective level</td>
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*Figure 2: The responsibility matrix*
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<th>Ethics management tools</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Community advisory panels</td>
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<td>- Functioning and appraisal conversations</td>
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<td>- Engagement in local community</td>
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<td>Instruments related to reflection on responsibilities</td>
<td>- Self assessments</td>
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<td>- Social audits</td>
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<td>- Customer and employee surveys</td>
<td>- Norms such as SA 8000 and AA1000</td>
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<td>- Internal and external quality audits</td>
<td>- Stories of employees and other persons that determine the ethical climate of an organisation</td>
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<td>- Norms such as ISO 9000 and the EFQM model</td>
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<td>Instruments related to the integration of responsibilities</td>
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Figure 3: Tools and methods stemming from quality management and business ethics