

Think About Quality Management, Again

In October 2002, Adobe Systems (www.adobe.com), San Jose, announced its plan to lay off 10% of its work forces. This is the largest round of a series of “restructuring” the company’s business since one year ago. Its employees still remember that the company announced to hire one thousand employees (50% increase) just two years ago, and the company’s third building (North Tower) is still under construction regardless of the economy recession. Since at this time almost all software companies froze hiring, laid off workers would not find any job for a long time. And, as we all have experienced, the process of laying off is largely as managers’ please. We can expect something to happen.

Most employees were nervous to go work on the day of laying off announcement. When one employee arrived at her office in the morning, her telephone rang. She looked at the telephone display: it was from her manager! Without the courage to take the telephone, she couldn’t help crying. Crying does not help to change boss’ decision, and she saw her manager walking towards her room! Fortunately enough, the manager came not to notify her to go, but just to ask a routine project process. She belonged to these blessed ones who survived this round of laying off wave.

Adobe allows employees to go right away with that day’s pay, plus two to six months’ compensation package. Most laid off employees accept the fact calmly. After all, the hiring agreement states clearly that the company can terminate the employment contract “at will”. There is no union in the hi-tech industry. One quality engineer, upon receiving notification to go, did not leave immediately. She worked the whole day as usual to complete her current bug reports, which would otherwise take another engineer one week to start over. However, unavoidably, among hundreds of laid off people, someone would act differently. The whole company was out of order that day: one laid off engineer shut down the company’s network system because he couldn’t accept the fact that he belonged to these 10% unfortunate ones.

With revenue-per-employee higher than Microsoft, Adobe is more generous than most software firms in Silicon Valley and everywhere in the world. Adobe is named by the Fortune magazine number 5 of the “Best 100 Companies” this year. The worst case is that a laid off HP employee brought rifles back to his former workplace and shot his boss and co-workers. One of my friend in Sun Microsystems has a fair-play manager: he brought a bottle filled with candies: “Let’s do numbers. If your guess is the farthest from the actual number, you can bring the bottle home now and count them at home again.”

If you read English quality management books and magazines in the U.S., it is striking for any “outside” observers of how absurd the American quality management is. Basically, employees are considered something easily substituted by others. Let’s read how one internationally famous quality authority Alka Jarvis treats others: “We have heard teachers of ‘C’ attempt to justify clever uses of FOR-loops in ‘C’ on the basis of their being ‘clever’ or ‘creative.’ Such people should be fired” (Inroads to Software Quality, p.137. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997). As an American representative to the ISO software quality committee as well as a Cisco Systems quality manager, she is leading and practicing this kind of quality management. There were enough highly qualified engineers all over the world at Cisco’s disposal. I asked her how to do with the frustrated American service quality (such as the Post service), she refused to answer me because she knows that Federal government employees cannot be fired at will. While manufacturing companies such as GE, Ford, Boeing (hardware titans), Microsoft, Cisco, Sun and Adobe (software titans with much less employ rolls) still make big money, near 80% of American

economy is “service,” in which many “industries” (such as insurance, lawyers or financial analysts) basically contribute nothing to our living standards.

Although leading figures such as Jarvis, Cem Kaner (author of Testing Computer Software, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999), Brian Lawrence (Technical Editor of Testing & Quality), Donald Gause, Gerald Weinberg (Exploring Requirements: Quality Before Design, New York: Dorset House Publishing, 1989), and some journalists such as Lloyd Dobyns and Clare Crawford-Mason (Thinking About Quality, New York: Random House, 1994) claim that they are applying Edward Deming’s quality management approach, they never understand (nor bother to learn) why Dr. Deming succeeded in Japan but failed in America. No one can bring the 1950-70 Japanese industrial condition to America, even to today’s Japan.

In their University of California-Extension software engineering management courses, I tried hard to raise their attention to the American industrial/corporate institution/policy which cannot maintain high quality long. I cited an example from a Japanese bestseller “The Japan that can say No!” authored by Sony’s boss. A seventeen-year-old administrative girl saved the company by discovering that the company’s product quality failure comes from the near-by railway train’s vibration, not from any engineering technology problem. She is concerned of her company’s product quality because she will work for the company during her life. No American company can solve such kind of quality problems: who cares the company’s product quality? Even the quality engineers are thinking of accepting a higher offer from another company or are concerned about the coming lay off announcement. The current corporate management system (especially its employment) guarantees the failure of their product quality.

There are many American corporate sins, such as executives’ responsibility failure (they are responsible to Wall Street rather than their employees or local communities), managers’ control and abuse power over employees. Corresponding to this corporate failure is the deterioration of human knowledge (including Sociology, Economics, or Political Science) to face up to, study and change this vital field of industrial institution/policy in human life.

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