TOP MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT?

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Abstract
Top management commitment is regarded as essential to management initiatives such as Total Quality, Effective Resource Management, Just-in-Time etc. Yet, the meaning of this commitment is not so straightforward. The changes associated with these initiatives cut across functional boundaries and many managers are not used to thinking beyond functions to the processes that lie behind them.

This paper investigates how a systems model which uses properties such as ‘emergence’, ‘hierarchy’, ‘communication’ and ‘control’ can help top managers with this process thinking so that they feel more confident about commitment to change. The implied argument is that unless defensible statements can be made about all four properties, commitment cannot be assumed to exist.

‘Process thinking’ as an alternative to functional thinking
The management of initiatives such as TQM, JIT and MRP-II is a process which cuts across organisation boundaries and often challenges taken for granted assumptions about the way in which the management process works. For example, the smooth flow of work across an organisation is emphasised which requires that disturbances and bottlenecks be identified, exploited and their impact reduced as much as possible, as Goldratt [1] explains in The Theory of Constraints (1990). The scope of such a change is large and therefore top management commitment is perceived to be necessary to see it through.

This is easier to do if involved managers view the process they manage as part of a set of interconnecting processes, with each process having internal suppliers and customers and receiving inputs of resources and information, some of which can be controlled, others not. Products or services which flow on to customers provide a means for the performance of the process to be assessed. The manager’s job is to produce those products efficiently (with a minimum of resources) and effectively (to satisfy the requirements of the customer). An understanding of the constraints which affect efficiency and effectiveness is clearly important for the manager, even though these may lie outside his control. Figure 1 is a schematic of a process model which illustrates how feedforward and feedback control actions are built into the management process to achieve the required performance.

Commitment to a new management initiative is complex. Managers may say that they support an initiative, but they not really understand what effects it will have. The commitment then may lack conviction because it is not clear to the people who have to implement new procedures what criteria are being used to assess the impact of the initiative or how their own role will be assessed. In this paper four systems properties are used to provide a basis for practical commitment to be communicated.

Thinking about management using systems properties
This process concept is at the heart of systems thinking. A manager’s world is described by Checkland and Casar [2] as a flow of events and ideas through time, see
THE GOAL and
STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES
(net profit, ROI, cash flow)

Operating objectives
(Throughput, Inventory, Operating Expense)

Managers reduce
variability of the
processes they manage
by problem solving
techniques.

Figure 1 A general model of process management (S is supplier, C is customer)

Figure 2. Managers perceive and evaluate this flow and take actions which themselves become part of it. How do they decide on the actions to take? Systems ideas can be used to help explain this.

There are four useful systems properties which can be applied at any level and to any process within an organisation: emergence, hierarchy, communication and control [3]. Emergence is the property that the process has because of the synergy of the parts.