This article induces a model of the evolving rhetoric and reality of total quality management (TQM) in five organizations to show how institutional forces can distort the technical reality of TQM. Using interviews, organizational documents, and observation, I follow the social construction of TQM in these organizations to trace the relationship between the technical practices and rhetoric of TQM. The model shows that managers consume a rhetoric of success about TQM, use that rhetoric to develop their TQM program, and then filter their experiences to present their own rhetoric of success. Consequently, the discourse on TQM develops an overly optimistic view of TQM. The models demonstrate how individual actions and discourse shape TQM and fuel institutional forces.

[I]We are absolutely convinced that TQM is a fundamentally better way to conduct business and is necessary for the economic well-being of America. TQM results in higher-quality, lower cost products and services that respond faster to the needs of the customer.


The term is counterproductive. My work is about a transformation in management and about the profound knowledge needed for the transformation. Total quality stops people from thinking.

—W. Edwards Deming (quoted in Senge, 1992)

The phenomenal spread of total quality management (TQM) has generated an ironic controversy. The controversy pits TQM advocates, who see it as a uniquely effective method for improving organizational performance, against opponents, who see it only as the latest of many organizational fads (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). The irony is that the controversy sets advocates of TQM against scholars whose expertise encompasses the very roots of the TQM methods. Advocates of TQM have used TQM to build a position from which they criticize academics for their failure to study TQM (Robinson et al., 1991). Yet those academics should understand TQM better than the advocates, because TQM employs technical methods scholars have studied for years (Dean and Bowen, 1994; Hackman and Wageman, 1995).

Meanwhile, some of the original experts in the quality movement, who continue to preach a renewal of business, have come to detest the term total quality management (Senge, 1992). And as organizational scholars have scrambled to understand the TQM phenomenon, they find themselves grappling with diffuse and ambiguous definitions of TQM. Most organizational scholars who have responded to the call for TQM research have focused their theoretical efforts on refining definitions of TQM (Dean and Bowen, 1994; Sitkin, Sutton, and Schroeder, 1994; Spencer, 1994; Hackman and Wageman, 1995) and of quality (Reeves and Bednar, 1994). The controversy has created two competing rhetorical positions and great difficulty reconciling the two.

Such problems are not unique to TQM. Empirically, various management fads suggest that TQM represents the latest instance of an enduring problem. Hackman (1975), near the peak of his work on job enrichment, predicted its coming demise. Lawler and Mohrman (1985) triggered an explosion

© by Cornell University.
© by Cornell University.

I thank Kimberly D. Elsbach, James V. Jucker, James G. March, Gerardo Olshausen, and Robert L. Sutton for their help on previous versions of this paper. I also thank the Stanford Center for Organizational Research, Stanford University’s Office of Technology Licensing Research Incentive Fund, the Stanford Integrated Manufacturing Association, and the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business for supporting this research. Special thanks to Mark Bergen, Stephen Schlosser, and George Wu, as well as Christine Oliver and the three anonymous reviewers for very helpful advice in developing the ideas in this version. I presented an earlier version of this paper in April 1994 at the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology in Nashville, Tennessee and in August 1994 at the annual meetings of the Academy of Management in Dallas, Texas.

of controversy by anticipating the decline of quality circles. Zipkin (1991) puzzled over the overly enthusiastic and inappropriate use of just-in-time (JIT) manufacturing. And, more recently, reengineering seems to have followed the same pattern of expansive rhetoric unmet by the reality of use. Other examples abound, including T-groups and management-by-objectives (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). Theoretically, recent research on management fashion (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996) seeks to understand these dynamics. TQM reflects a consistent theme in recent organizational theory: a concern that these fashions consist mainly of hype. Such concerns have generated considerable concern about the role of organizational theorists (e.g., Beyer, 1992; Donaldson, 1992). According to Astley and Zammuto (1992), organizational theorists and managers engage in separate “language games.”1Managers generate rhetoric, organizational theorists generate theory, and the two products cannot be reconciled (Astley and Zammuto, 1992). According to the research on management fashion, ongoing relationships between fashion setters and fashion users fuel a demand for managerial fashions. Consequently, the content of the fads apparently means less than the value of maintaining an appearance of rationality and remaining at the forefront of managerial thought (Abrahamson, 1996).

Here, I am interested in TQM as one such problem, specifically in how it is that a reasonably well-defined and established technical intervention like TQM can become an ambiguous and sometimes dubious intervention (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). It is almost as if there are two versions of TQM. One TQM, a technical TQM, incorporates some fairly well-defined organizational interventions that have clear rules for the use and analysis of information. A second TQM, a rhetorical TQM, seems to carry the sort of rhetorical excess that Hackman and Wageman (1995) worried about. As Hackman and Wageman observed, from the original statistical ideas of Deming (1986) and Juran (1974), the rhetorical TQM has exploded into a broadly used, ambiguous term with unclear organizational implications—save that it presumably improves an organization. A distinction between technical TQM and rhetorical TQM recalls a longstanding claim of institutional theory (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Institutional theory describes a process whereby the symbolic value of something like TQM ultimately supplants its technical efficiency value (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Selznick (1957: 17) laid out the general thrust of the institutional argument in his classic statement that “‘to institutionalize’ is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand.” Accordingly, the theory would suggest that the rhetorical excess pervading TQM and similar fads follows from the tension between the true technical merit of the practice and the institutional reality of its use. TQM gains institutional value over time because it becomes the accepted way of doing things. Using TQM may provide an organization with little technical benefit, but the claim to use TQM confers legitimacy on the organization (Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell, 1997). Consequently, managers will use the rhetorical TQM to gain legitimacy without affecting activities at the technical core of the organization (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

1I recognize that there is some legitimate dispute over the way that Astley and Zammuto (1992) have used Wittgenstein’s (1958) term “language game,” but I am interested in the notion of “language games” as Astley and Zammuto (1992) used the term: as stylized discourse specific to the semi-autonomous organization science and managerial communities. See Mauws and Phillips (1995) for another view of Wittgenstein’s idea of language games.
Though the institutional perspective offers a provocative view of TQM, an institutional story about TQM presents two significant puzzles. The first puzzle is about the rhetorical TQM. Institutional theorists argue that the mimetic processes that fuel institutional conformity are more powerful than “any concrete evidence that the adopted models enhance efficiency” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 70).2 Institutionalists would argue that in the case of rhetorical TQM, the managerial rhetoric about TQM serves mostly symbolic purposes (Pfeffer, 1981), suggesting that managers engage in language games (Astley and Zammuto, 1992). Yet the dispute over TQM reflects differing views about the content of TQM. Both the quality gurus and the TQM advocates in organizations preach a need for a fundamentally different and better way of doing business. W. Edwards Deming (as quoted in Senge, 1992) claimed that TQM is a vacuous term, mere hype that perverts his work. But the executives claim that management scholars have failed to grasp adequately the magnitude of TQM. To them, TQM consists of an extraordinary development originating in business practice (Robinson et al., 1991). Moreover, they point to outcomes in their own organizations that demonstrate these claims. They lament the lack of attention given to TQM by academics.

The second puzzle is about the technical TQM. From an institutional view, later adopters who choose TQM for institutional reasons, rather than technical reasons, choose to introduce a more narrowly conceived TQM (Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell, 1997). According to the institutional argument, early adopters will pursue TQM for its technical merit and, so, will implement whatever works for them. Later adopters, however, will choose TQM for legitimacy reasons and, so, will implement a standard, and therefore presumably legitimate, TQM package. That institutional view, however, seems at odds with TQM both theoretically and empirically. Theoretically, given the importance of operational definitions in TQM and related prescriptions (e.g., Ishikawa, 1985; Deming, 1986), such increasingly narrow definitions of TQM would suggest a carefully delineated operational definition and thus seem like a good thing. Yet empirically, the evidence suggests just the reverse. The history of TQM shows it shifting from its origins in a narrowly defined set of technical interventions (Tachiki, 1992) into an extraordinarily diffusefad, characterized by rhetorical excess and increasingly unclear definition (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). If managers choose TQM to gain legitimacy, their collective efforts at finding legitimacy somehow have expanded, rather than contracted, the definition of TQM.

These puzzles presented by institutional theory as applied to TQM reflect an ongoing ambiguity in institutional theory. The institutional view offers a powerful insight, that the adoption of TQM might simply be “myth and ceremony” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Yet institutional theory says little about the process by which a managerial innovation develops from a clear technical intervention into a mere symbol of institutional legitimacy; the relationship between the technical and institutional merits of a practice like TQM remains a source of considerable confusion in institutional theory.3 Moreover, institutional theory continues to explain institutional conform-

---

2 Selznick (1996: 273) made the same point about institutional theory.

3 See Scott (1995: 152) for the progression of the distinction.
Rhetoric and Reality

ity outside the individual organization. As DiMaggio and Powell (1991: 8) argued, institutional explanations “cannot be reduced to aggregations or direct consequences of individuals’ attributes or motives” (see also Selznick, 1996). In support of that claim, scholars have amassed considerable evidence on the organizational adoption of institutional practices that demonstrate the presence of institutional forces (e.g., Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell, 1997). Yet for all the discussion of institutional forces, institutional theorists have very little to say about how those forces develop or how those forces affect behavior in an organization. It seems puzzling that a theory rooted in the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) should say so little about how institutional value replaces technical value.

Here, I consider the adoption, use, and retention of TQM in a variety of organizations to see how institutional processes shape the technical reality of TQM. Following the logic of the social construction of reality, I treat TQM as a “sector” of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 24), an aspect of everyday reality that has particular meanings and experiences that shift organizational members out of their ordinary interpretations of everyday reality. Individuals who encounter TQM must integrate their understanding of the technical dimensions of TQM with the everyday realities they encounter in ongoing organizational processes. I treat the statistical base of TQM as a very specific sector of reality: a “province of meaning” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 25), a way of viewing everyday reality that provides specific circumscribed meanings to particular circumstances. To shed light on these understandings that organizational members create when they encounter TQM, I studied the relationship between what people say—the rhetoric of TQM use—and what people do—the reality of TQM use. In this context, I have defined rhetoric as the managers’ stated claims and accounts of TQM use, especially in the context of ongoing organizational life. I have defined reality as the specific elements of TQM in practice and discourse, but I ground that reality in a set of specific technical practices—for example, specific observable instances of TQM interventions, such as statistical process control, data analysis tools, and idea generation tools like brainstorming (Juran, 1974; Ishikawa, 1985; Deming, 1986; Hackman and Wageman, 1995). I selected these narrow definitions because I wanted to follow the organizational processes that shift TQM from the technical TQM to a more institutional TQM as managers and organizational members generate meanings out of their use of TQM and hence define for themselves the reality of TQM. In selecting these narrow definitions, I took into account the long history and deep theoretical base of TQM (Tachiki, 1992; Hackman and Wageman, 1995), largely based in statistical thinking and a variety of technical tools that have emerged around that statistical base. Defining specific elements of TQM as provinces of meaning by no means makes them more or less real than other dimensions of a TQM program. I could have chosen any one of a variety of different dimensions of TQM to define a base—for example, the small groups that also make up an integral part of TQM, some strategic planning process, some way of taking customers seriously. The statistics of TQM differ from many of these
elements of TQM, however, because they are less ambiguously technical. As Hackman and Wageman (1995) noted, it is in the accretion of new elements and meanings that TQM grows increasingly ambiguous, and therefore suspect, as an intervention. That process of accretion is the primary focus of the remainder of this paper.

METHODS

Following the logic of inductive research, I used case studies to build theory that would clarify the relationship between the technical and institutional elements of TQM. The case studies are appropriate because the research was aimed at building a model of how TQM enters the rhetoric and reality of organizational life. Through that model, I could probe the rhetoric that people use about TQM, to see how they understand it. TQM is particularly useful as an object of study because, as I show below, I could separate technical elements of TQM to see which elements people use. I could thereby build a model relating institutional claims, organizational rhetoric, and technical reality.

Research Sites

Given the focus on the relationship between technical and institutional forces, I viewed the rhetoric and reality of TQM through an institutional lens. Following the logic of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989), I drew the case studies from a diverse range of environments so that I could develop common themes across a variety of settings and build a stronger and more consistent understanding of how rhetoric relates to the technology of TQM (Harris and Sutton, 1986; Gersick, 1988). I looked for what was consistent across these sites. Differences could also prove interesting, but here I develop a consistent story about how individuals across a variety of settings resolve the relationship between the rhetoric and reality of TQM. To ensure variation across cases, I selected the case studies by following Scott’s (1987) distinction between technical and institutional environments, which suggests that organizational environments can vary from weak to strong on either or both of these dimensions. Five case studies complete the quadrant (one cell of the quadrant is repeated) defined by Scott’s distinctions.

The first organization I studied was a defense contractor, an organization in which both technical and institutional forces clearly shaped the environment, as status and success depended both on effective technical solutions and on satisfying government agency requirements. The second organization was a hotel, an organization in which technical and institutional forces both played a very minor role in the environment, as status and success depended on the ability to deliver value efficiently. The third organization was a hospital, an organization similar to the defense contractor in that both technical and institutional forces strongly shaped the organization’s environment, as status depended both on delivering effective technical solutions and on satisfying institutional requirements. The fourth organization was a manufacturing organization, in which technical forces clearly shaped the environment but institutional forces played a minor role, as organizational status depended largely on how efficiently

606/ASQ, September 1998
Rhetoric and Reality

the organization delivered good technical solutions. The fifth organization was a government agency, in which technical forces played a minor role in shaping the environment but institutional forces played a significant role, as status largely depended on meeting the expectations of others. Table 1 describes the characteristics of the five sites.

Data Sources

To improve the validity of the theory developed, I used the triangulation methods described by Miles and Huberman (1984) to construct the case studies from a variety of information sources: semistructured interviews, internal publications and TQM newsletters, TQM training manuals, TQM documents from the organizations, observations of activities, and notes from participation in the TQM training of one of the organizations. I conducted 69 semistructured interviews with organizational members at the research sites, either in the informant’s office or in a conference room. I audio-taped interviews at all organizations except the defense contractor, which did not permit audio-taping. There I took extensive notes and wrote comprehensive summaries of the interviews within 24 hours. After each interview, I also wrote extensive field notes. The interviews yielded over a thousand pages of transcriptions and several hundred pages of field notes. In selecting subjects to interview, I wanted to obtain a slice through the organizational structure. I sought informants from as close as possible to the top level of each organization all the way down to the operating level, to obtain a broad range of rhetoric and experience with TQM. I wanted to compare what the top managers said about TQM with the experience of those throughout the organization. I reached the informants through a combination of the recommendations of an initial contact in the organization and snowball sampling. Although my informants included only a sample of the employees at the research sites, that number tended to be a much larger sample of those using TQM. For example, the defense contractor employed thousands of people at the facility I visited, but only a few hundred of those had received TQM training. Informants at all the organizations were very cooperative and interested in the research. I sought both enthusiasts and skeptics, but regardless of their disposition toward TQM, informants willingly talked about it.

The semistructured interview followed a working structure that I developed before beginning the data collection. I began with a pilot interview at four preliminary sites unrelated to the five research sites reported on here and then refined the interview to better reflect the research framework. The final interview included a variety of closed-ended and open-ended questions, including questions about 38 specific TQM tools. One section focused on the background of TQM at the site, one on how the informant and the organization defined TQM, and one on perceptions of TQM. The structure of that interview remained essentially the same throughout the research. Interviews averaged 90 minutes and ranged from 45 minutes to over two hours. The interview questions aimed to evoke information on two general themes. One theme focused on what organizational members had to say about TQM. In these questions, I sought to understand their

607/ASQ, September 1998
**Table 1**

**Characteristics of Research Sites**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Defense contractor</th>
<th>Government agency</th>
<th>Hospital</th>
<th>Hotel</th>
<th>Manufacturing firm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of informants</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQM initiators</td>
<td>CEO and staff</td>
<td>National director for agency (and staff)</td>
<td>Vice-president for research and development</td>
<td>CEO and his staff</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means of introducing TQM</td>
<td>TQM courses offered on an ad hoc basis; TQM groups</td>
<td>Pilot TQM groups accompanied by TQM training</td>
<td>Periodic roll outs: training for employees throughout the entire organization</td>
<td>Classes focused on statistical process control; corporate TQM group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for implementing TQM</td>
<td>Pressure from government and military</td>
<td>Perception of poor quality service</td>
<td>Perception of serious quality problems; concerns about competitiveness</td>
<td>Perception of industrywide decline</td>
<td>Ongoing initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External TQM program reputation</td>
<td>No indications of positive or negative status</td>
<td>Considered a leader in government TQM programs</td>
<td>Regional reputation as a leader; taught TQM to surrounding hospitals</td>
<td>Reputation within hotel chain as a leading user of TQM</td>
<td>Model TQM program acknowledged throughout the Bay Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary TQM driver(s)</td>
<td>Executive-level TQM advisors; TQM training group</td>
<td>Site quality coordinators; site managers</td>
<td>Vice-president for research and development; vice-president of operations</td>
<td>Quality coordinator</td>
<td>Site general manager; site quality manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-site TQM expertise</td>
<td>One group of experienced TQM users; executive-level advisors; TQM trainers</td>
<td>Site quality coordinators</td>
<td>Vice president for research and development; TQM office</td>
<td>Limited support from site quality coordinator</td>
<td>Site general manager; site quality manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training program General TQM methods*</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New seven tools†</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven tools§ Intermediate statistics§</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status of TQM program at time of research Progress stalled; advisors control access to executives, claim success; TQM trainers and users seeking support; remaining employees skeptical</td>
<td>Modest successes achieved through small groups; some ongoing use; management utilizing union cooperation</td>
<td>No progress since last round of TQM teams; managers moving to process management</td>
<td>Ongoing use limited to suggestion program and weekly staff report by quality coordinator; site director considering eliminating that position</td>
<td>Transition because two key drivers moved on: quality manager moved on due to promotion; site general manager left company to start consulting firm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A broad range of general tools (e.g., brainstorming) herded under the banner of TQM.
† A commonly cited category of TQM tools that adds to the original "seven tools" of TQM. It includes the relations diagram, the affinity diagram, the tree diagram, the matrix diagram, the matrix data-analysis diagram, the Process Decision Program Chart, and the arrow diagram.
§ The classic category of TQM tools, based in statistical process control methods, which include the Pareto diagram, the cause-and-effect diagram, the histogram, the control chart, the scatter diagram, graphs, and checksheets.
§ For example, design of experiments.

perceptions about TQM—for example, how they felt about TQM, how well they thought it was used, and how useful they found it. The second theme focused on what they did with TQM. With these questions, I sought to go beyond the informants' claims and ascertain the basis for those claims.

608/ASQ, September 1998
Rhetoric and Reality

For example, when asking an individual about TQM training and education, if an informant claimed to have read a lot about TQM, I then asked for specific titles that he or she found useful. Similarly, when an informant discussed TQM activities in the organization, I asked for specific examples of what the TQM process looked like, and I looked for examples of the products of those efforts. Such questions allowed me to probe more deeply into the reality of the TQM program. In some instances, informants revealed a rich understanding of TQM principles and could speak in detail about the statistical analysis they had done of the production. In other instances, I learned that the TQM processes consisted only of periodic, unstructured meetings or that the TQM efforts focused on peripheral aspects of the organizational work. Similarly, the preliminary questions about the nature of the informants’ work, though seemingly innocuous, also provided an important means of checking the reality of the TQM application because they allowed me to get a better sense of how the informants could or had integrated TQM into their daily work.

I also obtained information from a variety of other sources. Many of the organizational members either provided me with or showed me materials they had used in their TQM program. I also obtained a variety of internal publications and documents that provided further indications of the specific elements of TQM used in the organizations. In some cases, confidentiality concerns prevented organizational members from releasing documents, but because I viewed them during the interviews, I was able to gain a sense of how organizational members used the documents. As the informants presented the material, I could quite readily gauge the extent of their TQM experience and the depth of their understanding of the TQM tools. In three of the five organizations, I obtained training manuals that established a baseline definition of TQM for the organization. They outlined the general structure of TQM in the organization and indicated the specific elements taught to the participants. Where possible, I toured the organizational operations to see how organizational members used TQM. For example, one tour produced evidence of statistical process control, an important element of TQM, that clearly supported claims to use TQM. Upon seeing such evidence (or a lack of it), I could also question the workers about the use of TQM tools to see how (or if) they used them. Similarly, my participation in the training session at one site provided experiential evidence of the grounding organizational members received in TQM and gave me a better sense of how organizational members used and valued the training material. I used this variety of sources to improve the validity of the model I was developing.

Data Analysis

My analysis of the data sources focused on instances of TQM rhetoric and reality in the various organizations. Following Barley and Kunda (1992: 363), I defined rhetoric as a stream of discourse used to construct, spread, or sustain a set of assumptions about TQM. As became clear in the analysis, much of the time managers were seeking to persuade themselves as much as their constituents. As a result, rhetoric incorporates a broad range of language used to per-
suade, including proposals to use TQM, claims to implement TQM, references to the fact that the organization used TQM, and TQM stories. I defined reality as the models of TQM that people constructed, focusing specifically on the tools used and the meanings made in those models. In analyzing the reality, I looked for instances in which organizational members used the basic tools consistently referred to by the original sources for TQM and its methods (Juran, 1974; Ishikawa, 1985; Deming, 1986). These tools include the basic elements of statistical process control, assorted data analysis tools, such as flow charts, and some idea-generation tools like brainstorming. I could have chosen a variety of other TQM elements, such as small groups, but these tools allowed me to establish a clearly defined technical TQM as a base. Definitions of TQM vary, but various sources consistently include these tools in definitions of TQM (e.g., Ishikawa, 1985; Anderson, Rungrusanatham, and Schroeder, 1994; Dean and Bowen, 1994; Hackman and Wageman, 1995). More importantly, these tools have been an important part of TQM from its earliest applications (Tachiki, 1992). Consequently, even as definitions of TQM grow more ambiguous (Hackman and Wageman, 1995), these tools remain significant and clearly definable technical elements of TQM. Moreover, these tools are at once technical and socially constructed. Tools like statistical process control demand technical precision in their use and are ineffective if inappropriately applied. Nonetheless, they are also socially constructed; they are products of broadly accepted definitions of how to analyze processes. Because the tools of TQM incorporate both technical and socially constructed elements, following their use should show how people construct a TQM program.

To clarify the dimensions, I broke the tools into four categories, arrayed as social constructions, from least technical (general TQM methods) to most technical (statistical tools). The categories follow the general categories of TQM tools defined in the TQM literature. The general TQM methods category includes tools that Ishikawa (1985: 199) called “principles” of TQM, such as the Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) cycle or customer surveys and interviews. Also included are tools like brainstorming and benchmarking. In these organizations, these terms and tools served primarily as markers of intent and less as specific tools. Informants generally did not follow the strict definition of the method (cf. Sutton and Hargadon, 1996). For example, individuals indicated that they used brainstorming every day: anytime they had a problem, they’d sit down and brainstorm a list of ideas. The next category, the so-called “New Seven Tools” follows a classic TQM category of tools used when problem solving requires generating data (Imai, 1986: 240–242). These tools are considered useful to encourage collaboration among different groups. They incorporate the sorts of tools Sitkin, Sutcliffe, and Schroeder (1994) distinguished as learning (as opposed to control) tools. The third category, the so-called “Seven Tools” of TQM are the first that are used to interpret existing data. These also follow a classic TQM category of tools, ones that Ishikawa (1985: 198) described as “indispensable tools for quality control.” The fourth category, the most technical, also follows Ishikawa’s categorization. It

610/ASQ, September 1998
Rhetoric and Reality

includes statistical tests and various experimental design techniques.

The research followed an iterative process to develop grounded theory, following standard methods described for inductive research (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989). The analysis was aimed at going beyond the claims to use TQM and determining the nature of the use of TQM within the organizations. The research began with a rough framework, to focus the data collection process (Miles and Huberman, 1984), centered around what members said about TQM and what they actually did when they implemented it. I sought to understand the nature of the rhetoric—the claims and proposals about TQM—as it related to the reality—instances in which people used (or failed to use) these tools.

Three fairly consistent revelations directed my initial analysis. First, all the organizations had some TQM success stories that members felt proud to tell. Second, all the sites were frustrated with the problem of integrating TQM into their daily routines. Third, it became increasingly clear as I progressed from site to site that informants felt a tension between the demands of their work and the structured, rational problem-solving methods of TQM. The third observation helped to focus subsequent analysis, because it reflected a tension between TQM and organizational theory about decision making and problem solving. Informants consistently described and even praised TQM as a rational problem-solving method. Their consistent enthusiasm for the rationality of TQM seemed at odds both with the situations in which the informants used TQM and with what we know about organizational decision making, that rational methods only describe a small portion of decision processes (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992). In following that issue, I began to consider the process by which organizational members concluded that TQM was a rational problem-solving approach. I started with simple data displays (Miles and Huberman, 1984), separating rhetoric and reality and considering each individually as it evolved in the organization. I then went to the data to find evidence either supporting or contradicting these displays. The critical point in the analysis was my decision to view the data from an evolutionary perspective, following models such as Weick’s (1979) enactment, selection, and retention and Miner’s (1994) evolutionary model. Using that framework, I began to consider how the rhetoric and the reality of TQM evolved as it entered the organization. I began looking to see how what people said and what they did changed throughout their experience with TQM. I tried to see how their understanding of TQM might evolve over time by focusing on what their experiences with TQM included. As I explored these themes, I continued to iterate between the theory and the data. As I gained a more consistent view of individual experiences of rhetoric and reality at various stages of the evolutionary model, I began to consider broader organizational level uses of rhetoric and reality. I continued that process of updating the model to reflect the data and then returning to the data to see how they fit the revised theory until I arrived at the model described in the next sections.

611/ASQ, September 1998
AN EVOLUTIONARY MODEL OF RHETORIC AND REALITY

The model developed here begins with an assumption, consistent with institutional theory (Scott, 1995), that to adopt TQM, organizational members must socially construct it: as organizational members construct models of TQM, they must select specific elements of it for their models. These models can incorporate both the rhetorical TQM and the technical TQM as part of the reality of TQM. If organizational members ceremonially adopt TQM and fail to incorporate the technical elements, the TQM program loses its power (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). Accordingly, the model developed here uses the technical TQM to ground the unfolding rhetoric and reality of TQM in something approaching what Perrow (1986: 177) called a "tool view," a rational, engineered view of organizational structures. In broad outline, the model describes a process that begins as the first organizational members encounter TQM. The model identifies the origins of TQM as it enters the organization through the rhetoric of various managers and TQM experts. That rhetoric simultaneously shapes the action of people and sustains their belief in TQM as they learn about it. People then experience TQM through training programs, TQM teams, and TQM approaches. Sometimes TQM works; often it doesn't. After they try TQM, however, people ignore the failures and select the best stories to tell. TQM then goes back out of the organization as rhetoric: success stories from those experiments.

The process model has two major components. The first component is the evolutionary process of variation, selection, and retention that describes how TQM changes an organization. That evolutionary model follows work on adaptation from both an organizational (Miner, 1994) and a social psychological (Weick, 1979) perspective. According to the evolutionary model, TQM changes the organization in nested and repeated cycles of variation (or, in Weick's terms, enactment), selection, and retention. At an organizational level, TQM introduces variation to organizational procedures as it enters the organization. Selection occurs when organizational members encounter specific TQM practices. Retention follows when organizational members alter their routines and rhetoric. The cycles of variation, selection, and retention, are nested because sub-cycles occur within each cycle. For example, the variation cycle at the organizational level contains a sub-cycle of variation, selection, and retention. Variation occurs as organizational members observe the performance of the organization and conclude that it does not meet expectations. Selection occurs as the members scan the environment and the organization to identify appropriate responses. Retention occurs when they identify TQM as a suitable response. Nested within such sub-cycles are further cycles of variation, selection and retention. Ultimately, the cycles reach the individual level as TQM shapes a multitude of interactions between existing understanding of TQM and new experiences with TQM that people use to make sense of TQM (cf. Weick, 1979). The cycles of variation, selection, and retention are repeated because leaders introduce TQM—for example, by setting up a variety of teams—and
Rhetoric and Reality

They observe the results. They then use those results as they begin a new cycle by setting up different teams, again watching the results, and modifying their ideas. The cycles of variation, selection, and retention are also repeated because they occur at a variety of levels in the organization. Hence, after leaders decide to implement TQM, they pass it to other members in the organization. These members face variation in their practices when they meet requirements to use TQM. They select specific elements of TQM to use in their jobs and then retain some of those elements. The second component of the process model is the combination of rhetoric and reality at each stage of variation, selection, and retention. The combination of rhetoric and reality varies over time. At various predictable stages throughout the process of variation, selection, and retention, different forces act on the rhetoric and the reality of TQM. Some forces encourage rhetoric about TQM, while other forces drive out the reality of TQM. While different forces drive out the reality of TQM in different organizations, a gap inevitably grows between the rhetoric and the reality of TQM (cf. Kahn, 1982).

The two components of the process model allow us to trace how TQM develops after it enters an organization. The subsequent sections of the manuscript break the process into three separate flow charts describing variation, selection, and retention. Because those processes of variation, selection, and retention are nested, each flow chart traces the evolution of the rhetoric and reality of TQM through subcycles of variation, selection, and retention.

Variation

The internal effects of TQM begin with the variation process outlined in figure 1. In institutional terms, the process is significant because it involves the evaluation of institutional demands for TQM. By considering that process, we can trace several elements of the institutional story: the events and forces encouraging TQM use, the process by which managers grapple with those events and forces, and the responses they choose. These are the three sub-processes of the variation process.

The process. The variation process begins as organizational members encounter cues or "issues" (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991: 518) indicating that the organization needs to change. In these five organizations, informants described two types of cues. One type of cue created a demand for methods like TQM. These "demand-side" cues (Scott, 1995: 90) indicated organizational problems for which TQM might provide an appropriate solution. For example, in the government agency and the hospital, organizational members consistently identified problems of customer complaints that created a very compelling concern about the organization's performance. The director at a government agency site described how the cues reached the organization: "Usually in government it takes some sort of cataclysmic event... Our cataclysmic event happened in 1985. We replaced a huge main frame computer in our ten processing locations around the country and they didn't work... And we got an awful lot of adverse publicity in the Wall Street Journal and from congressional subcommittees that really hasn't stopped 'til this.

613/ASQ, September 1998
day.” Similarly, at the hospital, organizational members pointed to myriad specific problems—such as consistent complaints from doctors about turnaround times on lab tests—that led them to see a need to improve what one informant described as “dismal” service. Informants at the government agency and the hospital presented the strongest evidence for such demand-side cues, but across most sites, informants identified some cues indicating a need for some change. The second type of cue pushed organizational members toward TQM as a specific solution. These “supply-side” cues (Scott, 1995: 90) define TQM as a ready-made solution to organizational problems. In one form, cues pushing TQM arrive as organizational members encounter evidence of TQM use in other organizations. Informants reported that these cues frequently reached them through magazine articles and media reports of TQM successes. In a second form, cues pushing TQM arrive as organizational members encounter customer demands for TQM. For example, the defense contractor faced direct coercion in contract requirements from its customers. The manufacturing firm faced slightly less coercive, but still direct demands for TQM in the quality certification program of its key customer. The hospital faced less-direct demands, as representatives from several local manufacturing firms encouraged it to use TQM.

These cues initiate the selection sub-cycle shown in Figure 1, during which managers begin the first serious organizational encounter with TQM. The chief executive officer (CEO) from the hospital summarized the general process:

I had heard enough about TQM to know that I needed to know more about it and I began by reading a little bit. Then I sent the first person off to the TQM program. That person came back raving and I decided that I don’t buy it. So I sent a second person, who I
thought would be a little more critical, and that person came back with positive, glowing reports. So then I sent a director—a management engineer who has been around for a long time. He’s very, very analytical and I respect his judgment a great deal. He came back not yet committed but directionally predisposed to using modified TQM approaches. Then I finally sent one of my most critical managers—she is Teflon coated to fads and to bullshit. And she came back believing that she had learned why some of the approaches that we earlier had taken to solve our service problems didn’t succeed or didn’t have staying power... It was after largely that I said “All right now let’s really consider it.”

The quote illustrates several characteristic themes through which managers bring TQM into the organization. First, TQM (not the problem) dominates the evaluation process. Like the CEO of the hospital, almost all the executives relied on cues indicating that they needed to know more about TQM. Second, as the hospital CEO indicated, the managers begin bringing TQM into the organization by sending other managers out to investigate it. They then rely on the reports from and protracted discussions with these subordinates to determine the value of TQM in the organization. Third, in response to their managers’ request for more information, the subordinates seek out various organizations that disseminate knowledge about TQM. Informants across all sites indicated that they used organizations like the Juran Institute to resolve uncertainty about TQM. They used these organizations, however, only after they already knew something about TQM. Fourth, the cases suggest that the executives begin considering TQM in ignorance. Except in the manufacturing firm, the top managers responsible for incorporating TQM in their organizations knew very little about TQM. As I show below, the ignorance of top managers proves very significant in shaping the TQM program in the organization.

Following the selection sub-cycle, the managers in these organizations completed the variation process by retaining TQM in their organizations. The retention process ends the variation process with a choice: the organization will use TQM.

**Rhetoric.** Consistent with research on conversation in producing such intentional change, the evidence from the five organizations indicates that rhetoric plays a central role in intentional change (Ford and Ford, 1995). The process outlined above indicates that during the variation process, TQM exists only as rhetoric in conversations about TQM. The TQM program in all five organizations was an intentional change and had not, in the past, been a part of the everyday reality of these organizations. To bring TQM into the everyday reality, the managers needed a language consistent with the existing organizational activity that would help them to understand and incorporate the technical TQM as another “sector” of everyday reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 24). Consequently, their rhetoric focused on problems of understanding TQM and building confidence in its value. The subsequent rhetoric included three facets: discourse aimed at developing a concept of TQM, conversations about successes in roughly comparable organizations, and conversations about internal applications of TQM. Once the managers learned the general content of TQM, the rhetoric relating success stories in comparable organizations seemed to
dominate rhetoric defining TQM. For example, managers reporting to the CEO at the hospital, in describing the primary benefit of a week of TQM training, dismissed the technical content and emphasized the power of hearing about the TQM successes of a comparable hospital. Subsequent discourse focused on what the organization might do with TQM, leading to the conclusion that the organization should adopt TQM. These kinds of discussions are precisely what one would expect of rhetoric at this stage (Ford and Ford, 1995), especially given that TQM introduces a new way of making meaning of organizational action (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). But there are two critical dimensions to note. First, the managers can only speculate—in abstract rhetoric, given their knowledge of TQM—on how TQM might affect their organizations. Second, at this stage, rhetoric constitutes the reality of TQM, yet that rhetoric sets the stage for the subsequent use of the technical TQM.

**Reality.** Meanwhile, forces work to drive out the technical TQM. The variation cycle is a critical stage in implementing TQM. Just as technology enters a firm (Allen, 1971), TQM enters the organization through managers and TQM experts who act as gatekeepers. As they develop their rhetoric about TQM, they filter the knowledge and shape the TQM program. Consequently, two forces work against the technical TQM: ignorance and intimidation. Ignorance generates a litany of difficulties in defining TQM for the organization: unrealistic expectations, troubles judging other TQM programs, and incomplete programs. Those troubles plague TQM efforts throughout subsequent evolutionary cycles. Intimidation compounds those difficulties because it leads managers to reject some of the most clearly technical elements of TQM in their programs.

Ignorance, the first force against the technical TQM, continues to prevent managers from grasping the realities of TQM. Ironically, that ignorance leads managers to hold unrealistic and simplistic expectations of TQM. The critical dimension is the reality of the TQM programs as they observe them in other organizations. The managers rely on presentations of representatives from other, generally comparable, organizations to help them understand TQM. The discourse about TQM in those presentations presents the managers with two general themes: TQM consists of a package of rational methods, and using those methods will lead to success. As a result of these presentations managers see TQM as a simple, rational program. A TQM trainer for the hotel observed: “People think about TQM like it’s in a white box and we’re going to unwrap it and show them what it all is. But it’s all sorts of stuff like empowerment and the tools and all that stuff that doesn’t always go together very well. A lot of people would go away mad because they didn’t go away with a white box.” Like managers evaluating the competitive position of other organizations, managers interpreting information about TQM have blind spots (Zajac and Bazor, 1991). They cannot evaluate the experiences of other organizations and, so, they develop unrealistic expectations for TQM. For example, a manager for the government agency described her impressions after hearing about another program: “I attended a presentation by a fellow from the Air

616/ASQ, September 1998
Rhetoric and Reality

Force about TQM as they had implemented it and I realized that it was very different from what we were doing. . . . I thought 'Boy, they’re really way far ahead of where we are.’” The same manager later observed, “I’ve since found that a lot of the things they tried didn’t necessarily work.” Yet her impressions defined unrealistic expectations for her own TQM program.

Intimidation, the second force against the technical TQM, in concert with the ignorance strips away the technical elements of TQM. The managers who act as gatekeepers in defining the TQM program for their organization need to understand TQM elements, such as the sophisticated statistical tools. The managers I interviewed found these intimidating, so they sought to avoid them. For example, the government agency almost lost out on the statistical element of the TQM program in selecting a consultant to help them:

[The director] said one of the reasons we went with Juran [as a consultant] was that he was not so statistically oriented. So basically he could understand what Juran was talking about without having talked about X and R bar charts and standard deviations and upper and lower control limits and all this sort of stuff. . . . So from their perspective, the statistics part was a downside—that if it’s all statistics then it won’t work in our organization. And so they saw him in his presentation as not statistically oriented—that you basically could use good solid logic and find a problem and think about it and come up with a logical way of making changes and improvements.4

The government agency didn’t completely lose substance at this point but was in danger of doing so. Other TQM programs did, however. The defense contractor had a training program with a one-hour introduction to statistics. TQM teams only used statistics when team members happened to learn it on their own. The hospital also used Juran’s package, but its TQM program lacked his statistical methods. At the hotel, the training program included about two hours of statistical training, but the employees did not use statistical methods. They had control charts but did not know how to use them. Only the manufacturing firm had a training program in statistics and demonstrated effective ongoing use of statistical methods. Even though, historically, statistics are an extremely important element of TQM (Tachiki, 1992), very early in the process of introducing TQM, four of the five organizations had already stripped away that part of the technical TQM. From the standpoint of an organizational leader seeking to introduce TQM, these kinds of difficulties are insignificant compared with the complexity of the entire program. But from the perspective of the TQM program, these are important problems. At this stage, the rhetoric is the reality, and that reality sets the baseline for the remainder of the program.

Selection

The process. During the selection process, outlined in figure 2, the very managers who only a short time earlier accepted the value of TQM must now convince others of its value. They begin this task by generating rhetoric in support of the TQM program, by defining the broad structure of the TQM program, and by implementing that TQM program.

617/ASQ, September 1998

---

4 Ironically, Joseph Juran is one of the most statistically oriented TQM practitioners. He and W. Edwards Deming were the original two “gurus” who taught statistical process control in Japan after World War II.
Figure 2. TQM entry: The selection process.

There are three aspects to the implementation process. First, the managers establish TQM structures. For example, all five organizations created departments devoted to supporting TQM. The government agency, the hospital, and the defense contractor each also had a Quality Council, a management group that was intended to direct the process. In addition, the various sites all had designated TQM representatives. Second, the managers create training programs. At the hotel, every employee went through several days of TQM training. At the manufacturing firm, almost everyone had training in the seven basic tools of TQM. At the other organizations, selected people went through training, some at places like the Juran Institute or Goal/QPC, while selected others went through internal training. Third, the managers set up teams intended to solve quality problems. The scope, composition, ability, purpose, and success of these teams varied immensely. Some aimed at resolving a particular quality problem; others seemed simply to address the need for having a team. These teams, like all the elements of the selection sub-cycle, seemed aimed primarily at beginning a TQM program. In conjunction with the structures and the training, then, the teams define both the rhetoric and the reality of TQM for the organizational members who encounter TQM.

Rhetoric. The selection process finds the managers changing from skeptical analysts of TQM to TQM advocates. Archival evidence, drawn from newsletters, correspondence, and memoranda and corroborated by informants reveal three forms of rhetoric that managers generate as TQM advocates. One form of rhetoric simply announces an organizational commitment to TQM. For example, the upper management for the defense contractor revised two of its “Management Policy Statements” to reflect its new commitment to TQM, and the hotel’s upper management developed a mission statement that supported TQM. The CEO for the defense contractor also addressed a letter to the entire organization endorsing TQM. Similarly, several issues of the
newsletter for the defense contractor included columns and letters by top managers, commenting on the importance of TQM to the organization and describing the broad structure of the program. Consistent with the ignorance the managers bring to the process, across four of the five organizations rhetoric simply supporting or describing the TQM plan came consistently from the top levels of the organizations. The one exception was the manufacturing firm. Employees there consistently observed that the general manager backed his commitment with specific expectations and counsel on the use of TQM tools. A second form of rhetoric describes TQM success stories. Such stories appeared in newsletters at both the defense contractor and the hotel. The stories sometimes tried to co-opt the work of respected upper-level managers into the TQM program. For instance, in the defense contractor newsletter, managers described tasks begun before the start of the TQM program as part of the TQM program. A third form of rhetoric describes the technical TQM. For example, the hotel, the government agency, and the defense contractor distributed pamphlets, notebooks, and wallet cards providing brief summaries of different TQM tools. Such material was professionally prepared and clearly came from the TQM experts hired by those organizations.

During the selection process, there already emerges a quiet response to this pro-TQM rhetoric. That response suggests a certain amount of skepticism in the organization. For example, during the TQM training sessions I attended at the defense contractor, employees checked the managerial rhetoric by peppering the instructors with questions about management funding (a critical test of commitment there) to TQM. Similarly, at the hospital an informant questioned the commitment of the CEO and the board to TQM: “I wonder how committed the CEO is. Most organizations argue that you have to start there. He’s a fast mover, a quick problem solver. I have to wonder about the slow TQM problem solving process. Is this driving him crazy? He says he supports it, but if he says so, why isn’t he in a group? What about the board? Are they trained in it? Do they use it? It seems like it’s packaged and sold by [two of the vice-presidents].”

Some of that sort of skepticism suggested the dissonance that occurs as organizational members are coerced into participating in TQM (Reger et al., 1994). Employees wondered why they had to use the TQM process while their managers apparently didn’t. During the selection process, that sort of skepticism was quite modest compared with the overwhelming pro-TQM rhetoric. But it indicated seeds of frustration that would sprout further anti-TQM rhetoric later.

Reality. During the selection process, management creates a number of forces to encourage the technical TQM. First, the rhetoric obviously provides some measure of support for the reality. Second, individual participation in the various TQM teams pushes the reality of TQM into the organization. When these teams used the TQM methods, they provided perhaps the first exposure to the reality of the TQM process. Third, the organization provides TQM experts to help, although these experts generally are not managers. As noted above, the only commonly cited manager was the site general manager at the manufacturing firm. Fourth, TQM train-
ing provides an extremely important source of technical information about TQM. The training manuals I obtained and the course I attended indicated that all five organizations provided TQM training that was quite consistent with classic TQM programs (e.g., Ishikawa, 1985) and more recent research on TQM (e.g., Dean and Bowen, 1994; Hackman and Wageman, 1995).

Ideally, these forces would prove sufficient to support a TQM program. Instead, the problem of ignorance described above again provides probably the greatest barrier against the infusion of the technical TQM. There are three broad dimensions to the problems of ignorance in implementing TQM. The first is an inability to grasp the complexities of TQM, which prevents the managers from designing an effective program. During the selection process, the managers make a transition from TQM analysts to TQM advocates, with only a basic understanding of TQM. They understand TQM as a general concept, the basic elements of TQM, and something of the successes others have achieved. They’ve developed a basic idea of how to implement TQM. But, as one of the defense contractor employees in the training sessions I attended said, when the managers implement TQM, they are “dating” it, trying it out to see if they want a long-term relationship with TQM. They still lack the cognitive structures to apply TQM tools appropriately. Consequently, their TQM efforts look like experiments. For example, a director at the hospital described the first two sets of TQM projects in the hospital. She observed that the first few failed to produce long-term results. Even the second time through, they only stumbled upon successes: “The second time we took five pilot projects in. And those five weren’t all successes either. But at the last minute we ended up putting a sixth one in there that was so wildly successful—if you could call it that. God! Because we didn’t really know how to pick what would really work. That one in eight weeks had the greatest success that any of them have had yet—the one that we just threw in.” That success rate, of one in six, appeared to be typical for the TQM teams, based on the descriptions provided by the informants. That combination of success and failure leads to a more complicated organizational rhetoric about TQM in the retention process described below.

A second barrier to the technical TQM is, again, intimidation. The managers act as TQM advocates and dutifully construct TQM training programs. But, as a manager at the manufacturing firm indicated, employees generally ignore the training: “We had Seven Tool training both at engineering level and on the operator level. But it was kind of like everyone knew that we ought to be using these Seven Tools, so they provided us the training. And the managers all felt very good that they had read something in a book and now they were very good managers because they had actually done something to improve things. But they were always very disappointed that they didn’t take it seriously. They had initially hoped things would work better.” Such disappointments result from problems on both ends of the training. The managers, perhaps because they rely on experts to design the training, choose training that is almost completely theoretical. Mean-
Rhetoric and Reality

while, the employees, who are almost always completely ignorant about TQM, feel assaulted by the technical nature of the training. Not surprisingly, informants with TQM training often described the training as “overwhelming.” Again, the intimidation that led the managers to reject the statistics leads many employees to do the same.

A third barrier to the technical TQM is a lack of integration with existing organizational practices, both at the managerial level and at the employee level. The lack of integration sets up cognitive barriers to using TQM. One such cognitive barrier exists because the managers do not use TQM themselves. They see it as a new way to work, but they see it as a new way for others to work. Meanwhile, they continue to use and reward the approaches they have always used, generally, simply selecting individuals or assembling expert teams, sending them after problems, and rewarding them if they find a solution. For example, a hospital director checked the rhetoric of the CEO against his activities: “The CEO is not actively involved in TQM. He continues to try to reinforce it and continues to talk about how it’s valued. But he also does the other thing of reinforcing people for coming up with a solution.” A second cognitive barrier occurs because TQM demands that the employees incorporate a new sector of reality into their everyday views of reality. There are two aspects to the problem. First, organizational members find it hard to integrate the TQM problem-solving process into their daily tasks. TQM work is outside their everyday reality. Consequently, employees see it as outside their organizational identity (Reger et al., 1994). For example, in the hotel, informants claimed that the nature of much of the work—cleaning rooms, serving customers, preparing food, and checking people into rooms—was inconsistent with TQM practices. One of the hotel informants pointed out, “. . . we don’t get to sit down as a group and talk about things. That’s not the way we work together.” Second, the new TQM process feels cumbersome. Even though they might have valued the careful, analytical process, informants said it felt contrived in its initial applications. Further, when faced with fast-changing environments, employees found that TQM teams took too long (cf. Fredrickson and Mitchell, 1984; Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988). At the hospital, while some of the teams labored through a cumbersome TQM process, others solved the problem before the team finished. As an engineer for the defense contractor quipped, “If you used the TQM tools to decide to go to the restroom, you’d be leaking out the door.”

Retention

The process. During the selection process, organizational members went through TQM training and participated in TQM teams and, so, had results from TQM. These results initiate the retention cycle shown in figure 3. Individually, the organizational members use these experiences to update their “reservoir of beliefs” (Weick, 1979: 187) about TQM. Collectively, they also construct new social models that integrate TQM with their ongoing everyday reality.

During retention, the rhetoric begins to diverge within the organization because the experiences people have with TQM

621/ASQ, September 1998
shape new understanding and beliefs about TQM. An example drawn from the government agency illustrates that divergence. A director had one view of his organization’s TQM teams: “We got some excellent solutions coming out of some of those teams. The one we’re most proud of fixed a very burdensome process that caused us to do a lot of rework. And this team really did an excellent job of analysis, of flow charting, of interviewing, of brainstorming potential solutions and eventually developed a handbook for people to use. And they achieved a really substantial savings. And they were recognized last year at a national quality conference. And next Tuesday, I’m gonna be giving them some cash money for their effort in that project.” The team was an excellent example of the success coming from the TQM program at that organization. But perspectives differed as one dug deeper into the organization. At the same regional office a manager reporting to that director spoke somewhat differently about the same team: “We’re giving ‘em awards again next week. I hope all of my employees show up to see it. ‘Cause they’re tired of hearing this. My director can’t understand when I tell him that. He says ‘Ah, it’s just your imagination. . . .’ I say, ‘They’re tired of hearing about this thing. How much . . . we gave ‘em money, we sent it to Washington—the whole nation has it. Let the shit go and do something else.’”

These two perspectives reflect two different rhetorics about TQM that now flow through the organization. In earlier cycles, the managers who served as gatekeepers possessed virtually all the TQM knowledge and experience in the organization. At the retention stage, however, many diverse organizational members have some TQM experience. Given that the experiences differ, the perceptions diverge. Those diverging experiences generate multiple rhetorics; the reality now shapes the rhetoric.

Rhetoric. The diverse range of TQM experiences suggests reasons behind the diverging rhetoric of the retention process. The rhetoric organizational members use depends on
**Rhetoric and Reality**

their experiences with TQM, and diverse experiences shape differing rhetorics. The rhetoric at the managerial level results from the very positive messages managers receive about TQM. Employees generally present the successes to the upper-level managers and exclude the failures. Consequently, managers receive distorted evidence that confirms their belief that TQM works. As a manager at the hospital observed, “We’ve had reports about TQM processes at different levels of management. Unsuccessful programs haven’t been reported out, but with the successful ones the storyboards and all of that have been impressive.” Archival evidence supported that observation. The defense contractor and the hotel both published a quarterly newsletter that included reports of TQM teams, all successful. Such stories indiscriminately described both successes that were clearly part of a TQM program and successes that had nothing to do with TQM. For example, the hotel incorporated in its TQM newsletters a host of ideas and improvements unrelated to TQM. These stories leave managers with misperceptions of the TQM experience, but the misperceptions are consistent with the understanding that they brought to the TQM program originally. Meanwhile, others in the organization develop less enthusiastic views of TQM. Most often, people see little or no change because they have no TQM experience. For example, at the defense contractor, perhaps 5 percent of the people had participated in TQM. Consequently, as a TQM team member from the shop floor observed, “if you went out on the floor they’d tell you it’s just another dog and pony show. Just wait a while and it will go away. If you were to go out on the floor and ask what TQM is all you’d get is a blank stare.” In other cases, people have TQM experience but see disappointing results. For example, a manager from the hotel complained, “I don’t know that I learned anything new. Those correlations took me a hell of a long time to confirm what I knew.” Still other times, the process yields no improvement. The team may have executed well but failed to solve the problem. For example, at the hospital, one of the teams had encountered a much bigger problem than expected and so was discouraged by the results of its efforts. Their experience fell short of the standards set by the more successful tales told at the hospital. These experiences define the retained knowledge through which individual employees update their understanding of TQM and shape the reality of the TQM that they see. That reality contributes to a rhetoric of skepticism at the operational level. Informant and archival evidence demonstrated the emergence of that anti-TQM rhetoric. At the hospital, when I asked the quality coordinator about TQM articles she had found helpful, all she showed me were several articles criticizing or satirizing TQM (instead of the Deming method, “the lemming method”) that she had received from various employees. At the defense contractor and the manufacturing firm, informants could identify other organizational members who opposed TQM. One such opponent, an engineer, identified the irony Hackman and Wageman (1995: 325) discussed: the TQM proponents fail to apply their standards of measurement to their own programs. And another manager, cited as a TQM success story in the company newsletter, gleefully pointed to his prominent signs mocking TQM.

623/ASQ, September 1998
Reality. There are two ways of looking at the reality of TQM during the retention stage. One reality is the set of outcomes arising from the TQM teams. These outcomes strongly shape the perception of TQM participants. For instance, if the outcomes are successful—the team identifies a solution or an improvement that makes a significant contribution to the organization—one would expect that the members would be quite pleased. Conversely, if they fail, team members should lose confidence in the TQM process. The evidence from these organizations suggests that TQM outcomes cross an entire range, from teams that fail to teams that are quite successful. Based on informants’ descriptions, it appeared that one out of six teams achieved what organizational members considered good success. Of those considered successful, perhaps half achieved some sort of notable outcome. Within the organization, then, there was a suitably wide range of TQM experiences from which to draw conclusions, but most TQM outcomes were insignificant.

A second reality is the tools the team members use and discuss. Are they mainly rhetoric that parrots the language of TQM (TQM problem-solving process)? Or do the tools reflect the addition of a new sector of reality (e.g., the seven basic tools of TQM)? TQM ought to provide increased knowledge and improved performance ability (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). To the extent that we see such tools used, we can gauge the nature of the reality of TQM and the depth of the infusion of TQM into the organizations. The data in this study will reveal the deepest infusion of the technical reality of TQM anywhere in the organization, for two reasons. First, the sample of informants was not random; I specifically sought employees who represented the best informed in all the organizations. Second, these results are self-reports. Given that the informants knew that I was studying the rhetoric and reality of TQM use, impression management almost certainly would lead them to inflate their claims to use TQM tools.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 present three different approaches to the frequency of use of the four general categories of TQM described in the methods section: general TQM methods, the new seven tools, the seven tools of TQM, and intermediate statistical tools. Table 2 presents the average number of times per year that an individual from each site used one of the tools from each of these four categories. Across all sites, the data show that the use of the tools diminishes as the tools grow more technical.

The data suggest that at the hotel and the hospital, the TQM program is mostly rhetoric. The defense contractor and the government agency show more frequent use of the more technical tools. One should interpret these data cautiously, however, because the informants were not drawn from a random sample. For example, my initial contact at the defense contractor directed me to a cell of employees who had discovered statistical process control methods on their own and had even brought in a statistics professor to beef up their knowledge. Without the cell of employees, the use of all TQM methods drops dramatically, as the data in table 3 show. In contrast, the manufacturing firm shows the greatest infusion of the technical elements. That outcome

624/ASQ, September 1998
Table 2

Frequency of Use of TQM Tools by Category*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research site</th>
<th>General TQM methods</th>
<th>New seven TQM tools</th>
<th>Seven TQM tools</th>
<th>Intermediate statistical tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>91.82</td>
<td>9.21</td>
<td>8.17</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing firm</td>
<td>42.30</td>
<td>15.15</td>
<td>15.54</td>
<td>28.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense contractor</td>
<td>40.85</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government agency</td>
<td>31.67</td>
<td>7.68</td>
<td>12.27</td>
<td>7.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>37.46</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All sites (average)</td>
<td>51.14</td>
<td>12.57</td>
<td>13.13</td>
<td>6.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The cell values indicate, for each site, the average number of times per year that an individual uses the tools in each category.

matches the interview evidence. The interviews indicated that, of all the sites, the manufacturing firm presented the clearest evidence of having achieved infusion of the technical TQM. Again, one should interpret the data cautiously, because the data do not draw from a random sample of the organization. The average use of TQM tools hides a great deal of variation across individuals in the use of TQM tools. This was a clear theme in the interviews. When I asked for copies of TQM literature from informants—or even when I asked for titles of literature that informants found significant—only one or two informants per site could provide anything. Though the data in table 2 present clear evidence that technical elements of TQM have infused in these organizations, they cannot show the lumpiness of the data. Table 3 shows the average frequency of use after removing the one or two informants per site who could provide TQM literature. With these informants removed, the overall use of general TQM methods remains roughly weekly but, as expected, without certain cells of employees, the data show a remarkable decline in use of all TQM methods. What these users have in common can be seen by considering the most commonly used tools in each category, those tools closest to being part of the everyday reality of TQM for all organizational members. Table 4 shows those data. The table presents, across each category, the most commonly used tool that informants claimed to use more than quarterly. Across all sites, the most commonly used tool overall is brainstorm-

Table 3

Frequency of Use of TQM Tools by Category (Excluding Statistical Process Control Users)*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research site</th>
<th>General TQM methods</th>
<th>New seven TQM tools</th>
<th>Seven TQM tools</th>
<th>Intermediate statistical tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>84.63</td>
<td>7.98</td>
<td>8.42</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing firm</td>
<td>31.78</td>
<td>11.03</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>16.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense contractor</td>
<td>21.15</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government agency</td>
<td>37.65</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>37.46</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>1.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All sites (average)</td>
<td>54.04</td>
<td>10.02</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The cell values indicate, for each site, the average number of times per year that an individual uses the tools in each category.
Table 4

**Most Common TQM Tool Use by Category***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most common tool</th>
<th>General TQM Methods</th>
<th>New seven TQM tools</th>
<th>Seven TQM tools</th>
<th>Intermediate statistical tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research site</td>
<td>Brainstorming</td>
<td>Flow chart</td>
<td>Pareto diagram</td>
<td>Design of experiments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing firm</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>87.5%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense contractor</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government agency</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All sites (average)</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The cell values indicate, for each site, the percentage of informants who use the most common tool in each category more than once a quarter.

Using, used by 95 percent of all informants. Furthermore, interview evidence indicates that the use of brainstorming as described by these individuals did not follow strict brainstorming rules (cf. Sutton and Hargadon, 1996). As the tools become more technical, the percentage of users from each site drops. These data suggest that the reality of TQM varies dramatically from person to person. When organizational members need a common language, they use a rhetoric that represents the least common denominator of TQM. As the next section shows, the rhetoric focuses on the reality people can share: the outcomes of the teams, for example.

Return: Beginning the Cycle Again

At the end of the retention process, the members of the organization have progressed from ignorance of TQM, through hearing about it, experiencing it, and finally to forming opinions about it. From those opinions, TQM exits the organization as rhetoric. That rhetoric, though, has changed, as it now describes what the organization has done. Yet TQM has barely begun to affect the behavior of organizational members. Nonetheless, shifting forces again work on the rhetoric and reality.

Rhetoric. The forces on the rhetoric change because organizational members who before had no TQM experience now have TQM stories to tell. External and internal forces shape a new rhetoric, a rhetoric of success. Externally, the same force that first drove organizational members to consider TQM—pressure from the environment—now leads managers to describe TQM experience in their organizations. Those external forces also meet an internal force, a need to display a positive organizational image. The combination of internal and external forces generates what a quality coordinator for the government agency described as a desire to “showcase a lot of what [the] teams have done.” The resulting rhetoric responds to external audiences with the rhetoric of success. For example, at the defense contractor, a manager indicated that his management only participated in the TQM program by “jumping on the bandwagon. They love it. They have me
Rhetoric and Reality

giving talks to people all over. It’s really kind of funny. They had me talk to the Air Force to show that we’re doing what they want us to do.” The hotel developed a good reputation for success with its TQM program because the quality coordinator sent a number of stories off to the company’s TQM newsletter. The manufacturing firm taught classes to a number of local organizations, one of which included the hospital, where an administrator said, “they were thrilled to think that they could train hospital administrators.” After it got its program underway, the hospital also spread news of its success. Administrators from the hospital took their best TQM story to a Juran conference. The hospital also became something of a model for surrounding hospitals.

There is little reason to anticipate that managers will correct these distortions. Instead, a variety of forces suggests that managers will encourage these distorted perceptions of the efficacy of TQM. First, the managers’ ignorance means that they lack the ability to evaluate TQM successes accurately. Second, during the variation and selection stages, the managers have made an increasingly significant commitment to TQM. Escalation processes are likely to increase the pressure to justify those commitments with successful outcomes (Staw, 1976; Ross and Staw, 1986). Third, managers tend to take credit for successes (Staw, McKechnie, and Puffer, 1983; Salancik and Meindl, 1984), so that they are more likely to claim responsibility for TQM successes. Consequently, as TQM winds its way through the organization, the emerging discourse on TQM will develop an inaccurate definition and an overly optimistic view of the power of TQM.

These examples of a rhetoric of success clearly match the predictions of institutional theory, that managers will use their conformity to increase legitimacy (Scott, 1995; Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell, 1997). Most of the outlets for such legitimacy, though, generally have little to do with the organizational base of legitimacy as defined by technical and institutional environments. Aside from the defense contractor, which clearly used success stories to satisfy its customers, most of the rhetoric either returned to the very sources that promulgated TQM discourse to begin with, as when the hospital returned to the Juran Institute with its success stories, or went to local sources seeking information, as when the manufacturing firm presented TQM to the hospital. Though TQM offers the organization legitimacy, it appears that managers use TQM to demonstrate their legitimacy before TQM audiences and not necessarily before the audiences that worry about the established technical and institutional measures of the organization’s legitimacy.

While much of the external rhetoric focuses on demonstrating success, the internal rhetoric must now counteract a strong opposing force: a renewed skepticism, brought on by previous rhetoric and by the forces against the reality of TQM. As the discussion of retention illustrated, many people (and most people at the defense contractor, the hospital, and the government agency) have no experience with TQM. For them, the rhetoric conflicts with their experience, and they grow skeptical. A government agency employee described the reaction: “If you vocalize and you beat the drum

627/ASQ, September 1998
and you talk about total quality to a mass of people who aren’t gonna see it, who aren’t gonna be involved in it, they get a tin ear. It sounds wrong. People say ‘What are they doing? Are they waiting? We don’t see anything. They’re wasting all this money doing all these things, but we don’t see anything.’ ”

Ironically, those who encounter the greatest success may also express the greatest disappointment. For example, an engineer responsible for pushing one of the more successful TQM projects at the defense contractor expressed considerable frustration. He and his coworkers found it quite troubling that the managers talked so much about the successes while ignoring the fact that the organizational practices had changed so little:

We were talking about the TQM newsletter and saying that there’s all this write up about what we’re doing for TQM and these guys are saying it’s not real at all. At least there’s no perception of it here. They look and say this isn’t happening. I report on TQM fairly often. [My manager] would come to me and say “I need a success story from TQM to tell somebody.” So I’d put together a pitch that TQM has done something. I got a request yesterday for a presentation to answer what have we done on [our production process]. What they’re asking me to present is old news. The big dramatic improvements occurred some time ago.

The frustration that engineer expressed follows the “paradox of positive value” that seems to occur in many implementation efforts (Sproull and Hofmeister, 1986: 57). The heightened salience of positive expectations only deepens the disappointment encountered when those expectations aren’t met. Here, the paradox generated the ironic outcome that the most positive TQM experience yielded the most bitter disappointment.

**Reality.** Still, the rhetoric can work as a force to encourage the technical reality of TQM. A TQM skeptic at the manufacturing firm could point to a long string of phases (and phrases) that the firm’s TQM program had gone through, dating back about fifteen years. Despite his skepticism, he concluded that the string helped:

But the other thing that does work, I think, is saying the same message even under different titles. Eventually it starts to sink in. I get to a point where I start thinking about it. You know, there is an initial part where it’s just a task: fill in this form, do this, do that. It’s a series of tasks being layered on that have this three letter acronym associated with ’em. And I think some place, there’s a transition where I start thinking about the intent behind the tasks. And I start internalizing that there is an intent.

Such rhetoric encouraging the technical reality faces two new forces, however, that drive out the technical TQM. The first force pushes out the technical reality of TQM as the organization struggles to integrate TQM with its existing practices. The TQM program suffers because it defines an enacted environment (Weick, 1979) such that participants interpret TQM tasks as separate from the rest of their work. The problem is another instance of the sorts of cognitive biases that make TQM implementation so difficult (Reger et al., 1994). Employees often saw TQM as an institutionally constructed reality, in contrast to organizational work, just as it was presented to them. At the hospital, a member of the
Rhetoric and Reality

administration described the problems they had getting people to use TQM all the time: “There is this presumption of TQM that whenever you have a problem, then you put it in the box and take it through that process that takes six months to come up with a solution. That’s one of the things that we’re still struggling with: How do you keep infusing it or getting people to use some of the tools in other activities that are not sanctioned by the quality council?”

The second force against the technical reality is turnover in the organization. Across all five organizations, the turnover of participants affected TQM programs at all levels. At the operating level, turnover affects efforts because the new employees who join lack TQM training. An employee for the defense contractor described the problem there: “The classes have kind of dropped off so when you get a new team it’s not trained. That money is gone now. We could still have used the training. People change monthly. The hardest thing is keeping a steady team, keeping the same people doing the work.” The failure to train new employees particularly affected organizations like the hotel, where turnover was high, and the defense contractor, where layoffs pushed out trained people. At higher levels, turnover is a problem because when managers move on to new positions, either in the firm or elsewhere, no one sustains their efforts. A hospital administrator who was one of the major forces behind introducing TQM described how things had changed: “When I first introduced it to senior management, I got quite involved. Everybody had to be on a team. There had been some new people who’ve come—we’ve hired some people and some people have left. And we haven’t treated the new people quite the same way, where we’ve insisted they be in TQM teams—which we should do. I mean you just have lots of things to do. And as long as there are enough teams, enough people out there doing stuff, I don’t see the loss. I’ve sort of lost interest in keeping track of them.”

Turnover also affected the manufacturing firm, because the general manager left to start a TQM consulting firm. People at the manufacturing firm repeatedly pointed to the old general manager as a strong force behind TQM. They clearly noticed the difference when he left. One manager described the difference:

Basically, in my new job my new boss doesn’t use any of it. [My new boss] is concerned verbally, but there’s not as much action as there was before with the other manager. The way I would characterize it first of all is that I don’t feel inferior. Like I used to get those books: it was like a teacher giving you a book when you were going through high school or even grammar school. You felt compelled to read it and if you didn’t start “walking the talk” and behaving that way, it was going to have an adverse impact on your pocketbook. Now with this existing boss, it’s more “old school.” He realizes that it’s important but if I don’t do it, I don’t feel like I’m going to be at risk at all.

Employees consistently noticed the difference between the two general managers. They respected the new manager but saw a diminished commitment to TQM from the new general manager.

DISCUSSION

The models of TQM variation, selection, and retention induced from the five case studies fill the gap between an or-

629/ASQ, September 1998
organizational decision to adopt TQM—presumably based on institutional conformity—and the organizational processes following such adoption. The models describe the process by which the rhetoric and reality of TQM develop interactively as TQM enters the organization, organizational members use TQM, and then managers describe the organizational use of TQM. Table 5 summarizes that development. Here I have tried to define the technical dimensions of TQM carefully to provide a base—the sort of “tool view” that Perrow (1986: 168) sought for a subject of institutional research—from which I could differentiate among TQM as introduced by managers, TQM as used by organizational members, and TQM as ultimately described by managers after the organizational members used at least some part, or none, of the technical base. What emerges is a TQM that serves as a sort of least common denominator, uniting many elements underneath the overall term total quality management. Nevertheless, the models presented here suggest that the use of TQM rhetoric has a very serious technical intent; the social construction of TQM is not simply a symbolic process. Consequently, if we wish to understand both the rhetoric and the reality of TQM—or any other institutionalized practice—we must take much more seriously the dialectical process by which organizational members make meaning of an institutionalized practice. Institutional theorists have long argued that, over time, institutionalized practices gain meanings—generally legitimacy—beyond their initial technical merit. The empirical evidence seems to support such a view, but the evidence focuses on which organizations adopt an institutionalized practice (e.g., Tolbert and Zucker, 1983) or what they adopt (e.g., Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell, 1997). Such a focus ignores two important problems of social construction: first, how the dialectical process progresses as organizational members negotiate the meaning of TQM, and, second, how those internal processes might create a broader process by which an institutionalized practice gains meaning “beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (Selznick, 1957: 17). We cannot truly understand how a structure or practice gains institutional meanings without first considering the technical base of that structure or practice.

The first problem of social construction is managerial rhetoric. Social construction processes demand that we consider a dialectic process by which people negotiate an understanding of the everyday realities they encounter. Yet our existing models of managerial rhetoric either treat the rhetoric about practices like TQM as ceremonial (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and symbolic (Pfeffer, 1981), suggesting that managers using rhetoric about TQM engage in language games (Astley and Zammuto, 1992) or, alternatively, suggest that managers should use rhetoric to specify interventions and desired outcomes carefully (Ford and Ford, 1995). The evolutionary models described here suggest that such views underestimate the difficulties managers face in developing rhetoric about TQM. On the one hand, symbolic views underestimate the complexity of organizational rhetoric. Once managers let TQM loose in the organization, it may have all sorts of unintended consequences. Managers introducing TQM face multiple audiences, and these audiences all bring their
Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evolutionary stage</th>
<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>Relationship between rhetoric and reality</th>
<th>Reality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variation</td>
<td>Understanding TQM</td>
<td>Rhetoric defines reality</td>
<td>Only as rhetoric: TQM definition, TQM uses, TQM possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning of successes at other organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining possibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection</td>
<td>Exhorting TQM use</td>
<td>Rhetoric encourages reality</td>
<td>TQM structures, TQM training, TQM teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diffusing success stories</td>
<td>Rhetoric defines reality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining TQM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anti-rhetoric develops</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention</td>
<td>Making sense of TQM: TQM successes, TQM failures</td>
<td>Reality defines rhetoric</td>
<td>TQM experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anti-TQM rhetoric</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>TQM success stories (spread to environment)</td>
<td>Rhetoric shapes perception of reality</td>
<td>TQM processes, Organizational processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TQM failures (retained inside organization)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

experiences with TQM to their creation of its reality. The presence of multiple audiences does not preclude managers from using TQM symbolically—according to one institutional view, multiple audiences demand symbolic rhetoric (Pfeffer, 1981). But the case studies clearly show that rhetoric supporting TQM generates a counter-rhetoric opposing TQM, and both rhetorics contribute to the social construction of TQM. The case studies also demonstrate that when managers intend to emit symbolic rhetoric, organizational members may take the rhetoric seriously and develop substantial TQM programs. Consequently, if we raise the issue of managerial intent in using rhetoric, we must also consider the corresponding issue of how organizational members respond to that rhetoric. On the other hand, the more prescriptive approaches to rhetoric lead one to expect too much of managerial rhetoric. Especially as applied to TQM, prescriptive approaches to rhetoric would urge managers to use rhetoric to define accurate and appropriately broad TQM programs (Reger et al., 1994; Hackman and Wageman, 1995). The models presented here suggest that the prescriptions may present managers with unrealistic expectations. Ideally, managers introducing TQM would specify their interventions carefully. But, as the models indicate, managers bringing TQM into an organization face the uncomfortable task of bridging multiple realities: everyday realities subject to ongoing negotiation and certain more problematic spheres, like TQM, in which meanings are more ambiguous and difficult to grasp and therefore not available to all organizational participants. Managers face the joint task of uniting existing sectors of reality and of communicating knowledge of TQM as a new sector of reality, even though they may have very little knowledge of TQM in theory or practice. Future research into institutionalized practices, then, will need to take the role of rhetoric much more seriously, considering the entire range of rhetoric in organizational practice, from rhetoric as symbol to rhetoric as substance.

The second problem of social construction is how technical processes appear to gain institutional value. Here, I have
sought to show how studying TQM in use can demonstrate how individual organizations infuse the technical base of TQM with institutional value. The models induced from the case studies suggest that, in using TQM, managers generate seemingly innocuous claims that TQM has provided their organization with efficiency benefits. The evidence from the models shows that these claims, coupled with the various social psychological forces that drive out the technical content of TQM, generate increasingly inflated claims for the power of TQM and an increasingly imprecise technical meaning for TQM. Consistent with an institutional argument, as TQM spreads from organization to organization, it garners legitimacy value and loses technical value. Contrary to an institutional argument, however, the evidence from these case studies diverges from institutional arguments on three bases. First, in response to both theoretical (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 70) and empirical (Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell, 1997) institutional arguments focused on ceremonial adoption of organizational practices for legitimacy purposes, the evidence here suggests that the institutional value of TQM remains firmly rooted in the original technical merit of TQM: that its supposedly rational methods offer efficiency benefits. Managers seeking to maintain the myth that they have introduced a change into the organizational process find evidence for that myth in some TQM success somewhere in the organization. Even if the ultimate success of TQM only follows some random chance—say, the one success out of six projects found in the case studies presented here—the managers use those success stories to sustain for themselves and for others a myth of rational action and the myth of their influence on the organization. Second, in response to institutional arguments that institutional processes generate an increasingly narrow definition of TQM, evidence here from TQM in use suggests just the opposite: definitions of TQM grow increasingly broad. The key distinction here lies in TQM as adopted and TQM as used and understood. Adoption only covers one portion of the organizational experience with TQM. If we wish to take seriously a social constructionist view of organizational practices, we must consider not only how organizational members present practices to the social world but also how others who experience those practices then understand the practices as objective reality (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 129). Third, in response to institutional arguments that institutions exist as structures that cannot be reduced to the consequences of individual attributes, actions, or motives (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991: 8), the evidence from this research demonstrates that the forces leading to the promulgation of TQM are indeed quite personal and firmly rooted in social psychological forces. The case studies revealed a broad range of experiences and forces that drive out technical dimensions and replace them with institutional dimensions of a practice. The models show how these individual actions drive the mimetic processes and generate the inexorable forces institutional theorists consider.

Given the weight of the evidence from this research, it is likely that these individual forces generate the very institutions that recent institutional research covers. The seemingly innocuous managerial claims of success might ultimately
Rhetoric and Reality

fuel the fads and fashions that continually sweep through organizational practice (Abrahamson, 1996). The myth lies not only in the value of TQM, which may or may not offer an organization efficiency benefits, but in the manager’s claims of efficacy in using TQM, in the consultants’ claims of expertise in TQM, and in the claims of organizational experts that they can unlock the mysteries of organizational life. It seems quite reasonable to suggest that the supply of TQM claims generates a broad range of institutional structures aimed at promulgating TQM. First, as managers experience success with TQM, they will seek outlets for those claims, hence generating the need for a structure supporting their claims of success and of expertise. Second, as other managers encounter those claims, they will need experts to help them understand TQM. One can easily imagine a process by which the simultaneous supply of expertise and need for understanding would fuel a fad. Presumably, the process eventually would have to collapse under its own weight. As organizational members later in the diffusion process encounter TQM and compare their results with the increasingly inflated claims for TQM, their skepticism would also increase. Later adopters might ultimately grow so skeptical that TQM would begin to lose legitimacy. Such a reverse process might begin a de-institutionalization process; as TQM grows more diffuse in meaning, it loses legitimacy. A combination of the model induced here and a similar model of de-institutionalization might suggest a link between individual organizational processes, in these apparently innocuous managerial claims of success that create an accelerating hype, and the cycles of boom and bust in normative and rational discourse (Barley and Kunda, 1992). Future research might examine the discourse about a practice like TQM or quality circles (Abrahamson, 1997) to find cycles of increasingly inflated promises of technical merit, coupled with increasingly diffuse definitions, and then followed by a collapse in claims.

Finally, to understand the institutional value of practices like TQM, we must take into account the technical dimensions of those practices. Like previous subjects of institutional research, TQM presents a social construction problem in which a variety of dialectic processes shape the everyday reality of organizational life. Unlike previous subjects of institutional diffusion processes, such as civil service reform (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983) and matrix management (Burns and Wholey, 1993), TQM incorporates technical practices that offer definite instrumental value. Consequently, the evolutionary models induced here show that we cannot treat managerial rhetoric as simply symbolic, because that rhetoric serves important functions in helping managers accomplish their tasks; the rhetoric serves the reality of TQM—sometimes is the reality of TQM. With the current melange of practitioners, consultants, and academics, we will face an increasingly complicated job of reinterpreting the fads like TQM that sweep through fields of organizations. These are very serious problems, very much like the sort of language games that Astley and Zammuto (1992) discussed. If we want to understand these problems, we should seek technical merit in institutionally legitimate practices so that we can treat the emerging language of managerial practices all the

633/ASQ, September 1998
more seriously. In studying institutional processes, then, we must carefully distinguish between technical and rhetorical dimensions of a program like TQM. It seems an egregious error to equate the technical dimensions of, say, statistics, with a perhaps more ambiguous technology like small groups and a still more ambiguous, but extremely important, rhetorical device such as urging employees to focus on the customer. As academics, we have the liberty to make these important distinctions carefully. We cannot see ourselves as simply witch doctors (Astley and Zammuto, 1992), promulgating our own rhetoric separate from the rhetoric of managers and consultants. Only by treating practices like TQM seriously as sectors of reality with legitimate technical content and institutional meanings can we truly consider what managers mean when they say they have implemented TQM, what employees mean when they respond to those statements, and, ultimately, how the meaning of those practices evolve, gain institutional value, and perhaps shift in their technical meaning. In short, we must take the social construction of managerial practices seriously, but we must also look for the serious technologies in those practices.

REFERENCES

Abrahamson, Eric


Allen, John C., Manus Rungtusanatham, and Roger G. Schroeder

Astley, W., Graham, and Raymond F. Zammuto

Barley, Stephen R., and Gideon Kunda

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann

Beyer, Janice M.

Burns, Lawton R., and Douglas R. Wholey

Dean, James W., Jr., and David E. Bowen

Deming, W. Edwards

DiMaggio, Paul J., and Walter W. Powell


Donaldson, Lex

Dutton, Jane E., and Janet M. Dukerich

Eisenhardt, Kathleen M.

Eisenhardt, Kathleen M., and L. J. Bourgeois III

Eisenhardt, Kathleen M., and Mark J. Zbaracki
Rhetoric and Reality

Mauws, Michael K., and Nelson Phillips

Meyer, John W., and Brian Rowan

Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman

Miner, Anne S.

Perrow, Charles

Pfeffer, Jeffrey

Powell, Walter W., and Paul J. DiMaggio (eds.)

Reeves, Carol A., and David A. Bednar

Reger, Rhonda K., Loren T. Gustafson, Samuel M. DeMarie, and John V. Mullane

Robinson, James D., Ill, John F. Akers, Edwin L. Artz, Harold A. Poling, Robert W. Galvin, and Paul A. Allaire

Ross, Jerry, and Barry M. Staw

Salancik, Gerald R., and James R. Meindl

Scott, W. Richard

Selznick, Philip

Senge, Peter

Sitkin, Sim B., Kathleen M. Sutcliffe, and Roger G. Schroeder

Spencer, Barbara A.

→ Sproull, Lee S., and Kay Ramsay Hofmeister

→ Staw, Barry M.
1976 "Knee deep in the Big Muddy: A study of escalating commitment to a chosen course of action." Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 16: 27-44.

Staw, Barry M., Pamela L. McKechnie, and Sheila M. Puffer

Sutton, Robert I., and Andrew Hargadon

635/ASQ, September 1998


636/ASQ, September 1998