

BENCHMARKING FOR A NEW YEAR

Let's emphasize the "u" in quality.

By H. James Harrington

We've all heard the phrase; "Quality may begin with 'q,' but it can't start without 'u.'" The thought behind this statement is true: At the heart of any organization's quality effort are personal commitments by all employees to do their very best. This means "u" (you).

As quality professionals, we must set the benchmark for quality. If the rest of the organization shoots for six sigma, we must operate at eight sigma. If the rest of the organization improves at a rate of 15 percent per year, our rate must be 25 percent. Quality professionals must lead the way--not only in the quality of our output, but in our productivity as well.

I'm writing this column on New Year's Eve. It's a great time for all of us to look at what we've accomplished during the past year to see if we're setting the benchmark for our organizations. How much did the quality of your output improve last year? How much more productive are you now than you were 12 months ago? How do you measure both?

If you became a Black Belt last year, that's probably an easy question to answer. But if you're like me and saw nothing new in Black Belt training, how do you assess your improvement? Little things often make a quality person.

- Do you keep your commitments?
- Show up to meetings on time?
- Answer all your e-mail daily?
- Spend time each week with your mother and father?
- Attend your daughter's recitals?
- A quality person is a well-rounded one.

The beginning of each year is a good time to do a post-mortem examination of the chapter of your life that just closed. Sit down and make a list.

- What did you do wrong and why?
- What did you learn from it?
- How are you going to prevent it from happening again?

Be honest with yourself; you don't have to show the list to anyone else. If 10 things don't pop into your head right away, you're just pretending to examine your actions.

Next, make a list of 12 of last year's accomplishments that you're most proud of. Think about each of them.

- Why are you proud of it?
- What satisfaction did you get from it?
- How can you do more of it?

Now ask yourself if the quality of your work is better than it was last year.

- How is it better?
- How can you measure it?
- Do your customers think your quality has improved?
- By the way, who *are* your customers? (That subject deserves an entire column to itself.)
- Do you make better decisions?
- How do you know your quality has improved?

Ask yourself if you're more productive than you were last year.

- Can you solve problems faster?
- Can you handle more assignments in the same amount of time?
- Do you get assignments done on schedule?

As quality professionals, we all believe in root-cause analysis, continuous improvement and prevention, but how well are we applying these principles to the way we behave? Today, for the first time, I have no unanswered e-mail. All of my phone calls have been returned. I'll be submitting this column ahead of schedule. I even managed to have lunch with my wife and son yesterday. It feels great, but will it last? Real life's hectic pace slows between Christmas and New Year's Day. We have time to do things we know we should be doing all along. But will we continue in that controlled manner when the e-mail starts rolling in during the New Year? Probably not. However, we can learn from last year and prevent the same mistakes from happening again.

Last year I made a set of New Year's resolutions. I kept them all in the right-hand drawer of my desk. This year, let's keep our resolutions in our hearts and minds and live up to them each day. Let's make our lives the benchmark for quality that others in our organizations will want to emulate.

About the author

H. James Harrington recently retired from his position as COO of Systemcorp, an Internet-software development company. He was formerly a principal at Ernst & Young, where he served as an international quality adviser.

Harrington has more than 45 years of experience as a quality professional and is the author of 20 books. E-mail him at jharrington@qualitydigest.com. Visit his Web site at www.hjharrington.com.

Reprinted with permission of the author. Originally appears in *Quality Digest*, March 2002, p. 16.