



# A MEAN

***Time to clarify the definitions of 'quality' and 'excellence' to empower organizations and individuals*** | by Bob Kennedy

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EXCELLENCE

### Just the Facts

*Without common, clear definitions of “quality” and “excellence,” individuals and organizations can never know whether they have achieved a level of excellence.*

*The author has formulated a three-stage mantra: “To achieve quality outcomes, we must practice excellence and maintain systems that are fit for purpose.”*

*The proposed definition of excellence is easily understood and can be readily accepted as the way to do things, the author contends.*

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# INGENUOUS mantra

**It's difficult to avoid exposure to "excellence" these days.**

Most quality professionals link the term "excellence" to the Shingo Prize,<sup>1</sup> European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model<sup>2</sup> or the Baldrige Performance Excellence Award.<sup>3</sup> Excellence is lucrative for business and many organizations are keen to get a bit of it—even if it is a nebulous quantity.

Sometimes, you get the impression that excellence is akin to the proverbial king's clothes, and it would be a very brave or stupid person who dares to ask, "What is excellence?"

The absence of a clear definition of excellence is a real problem. How can we pursue, achieve or practice something we cannot define? Even the powerful Six Sigma define, measure, analyze, improve and control (DMAIC) method comes unstuck at step one (D = "define").

ASQ's Quality Glossary—updated and refreshed in 2018—lists a new term, "organizational excellence," and defines it as: "Achievement by an organization of consistent superior performance—for example, outputs that exceed meeting objectives, needs or expectations."<sup>4</sup>

You may be left wondering how an organization is to reach this level of performance. Does excellence lead to performance excellence?

A review of EFQM, Baldrige and Shingo literature shows that with each revision, excellence is becoming increasingly vague.

EFQM no longer defines excellence in its glossary but tells us: "Excellent organizations achieve sustained outstanding results that meet both the short- and long-term needs of all their stakeholders, within the context of their operating environment."<sup>5</sup> The problem with this statement is that it tells us what being "excellent" is but not how it is achieved.

Contrast this with EFQM's 2003 publications when it referred to excellence in a more holistic "what and how" way as follows: "Excellence is not a theory; it relates to the tangible achievements of an organization in what it does, how it does it, the results it gets and the confidence that these results will be sustained in the future."<sup>6</sup>

According to Baldrige, "The term 'performance excellence' refers to an integrated approach to organizational performance management that results in:

- + Delivery of increasing value to customers and stakeholders, contributing to organizational sustainability.
- + Improvement of overall organizational effectiveness and capabilities.

Organizational and personal learning."<sup>7</sup>

The Baldrige definition is beginning to separate ends (results) from means by introducing the concept of "an integrated approach to organizational performance management."

The Shingo Prize claims to "fill the gaps in your efforts toward ideal results and enterprise excellence."<sup>8</sup> This has promise on the face of it.

Rather than give a concise definition of excellence, however, all these models instead list various elements they consider excellence to be built on (see Table 1). Depending on the model, these elements are referred to as underlying principles, core values and concepts, or guiding principles. There is a commonality among these elements, even if they are not aligned or the terms that are used vary slightly. Value is, for example, added, delivered or created depending on the model selected.

So, what is "excellence"? This question brings us back to fundamental quality concepts and the struggle between what quality is (result) and how it is achieved. This dichotomy between the "what" and "how" of quality is the reason we are now struggling to define excellence.

In an era of increasing individual autonomy in organizations, this failure is dangerous and a great loss to society. To unleash the potential of every individual, we must provide definitions of quality (what) and "excellence" (how) that are readily

**We achieve quality through excellence—not vice versa.**

accepted and appreciated in easily understood terminology.

The quality profession can remedy this loss by promoting a simple mantra that is accessible, meaningful and relevant to all individuals engaged in purposeful activities:

"To achieve quality outcomes, we must practice excellence and maintain systems that are fit for purpose."

**Proposed definitions of 'quality' and 'excellence'**

This mantra separates quality as an outcome from excellence as the method or pathway to achieving it and the system needed to make it all happen. It clearly distinguishes between the "what" and "how," and it is readily understood and accepted.

To achieve quality service, we must practice excellence and maintain systems that are fit for purpose.

TABLE 1

# Comparison of elements of excellence

EFQM Excellence Model— 8 underlying principles	Baldrige Excellence Framework— 11 core values and concepts	Shingo Prize— 10 guiding principles
Adding value for customers	Systems perspective	Respect every Individual
Creating a sustainable future	Visionary leadership	Lead with humility
Developing organizational capability	Customer-focused excellence	Seek perfection
Harnessing creativity and innovation	Valuing people	Embrace scientific thinking
Leading with vision, inspiration and integrity	Organizational learning and agility	Focus on process
Managing with agility	Focus on success	Assure quality at the source
Succeeding through the talent of people	Managing for innovation	Flow and pull value
Sustaining outstanding results	Management by fact	Think systemically
	Societal contributions	Create constancy of purpose
	Ethics and transparency	Create value for the customer
	Delivering value and results	

EFQM = European Foundation for Quality Management

**To achieve quality outcomes, we must practice excellence and maintain systems that are fit for purpose.**

Focusing on the “what” and “how” of the mantra, we can define the following:

- + **What**—A quality outcome is achieved when the right things are done right.<sup>9</sup>
- + **How**—Excellence is an evolving methodology for achieving a quality or better outcome. It is based on voluntary, ongoing dialogue and agreement between the creators, consumers and complementors in the activity system who define, realize, deliver and evaluate dynamic emerging expectations in an enlightened, effective, efficient, ethical, elegant and enjoyable manner.<sup>10</sup>

### **Excellence definition explained**

This definition conveys to individuals throughout an organization that there is a preferred pathway to achieve a quality outcome or result. It is called “excellence,” which is an evolving

methodology—not something that is rigid or frozen. It is a methodology that must be entered into voluntarily because coercion will kill it. Its basis is inclusion, dialogue and agreement between the clients of the system that serves them. Clients fall into three categories:

1. **Creators**—Those providing or producing the product or service.
2. **Consumers**—Those who are the ultimate users.
3. **Complementors**—These neither create nor consume, but they are legitimate clients of the system. Obvious complementors could be administrators, regulators and financiers.

In a harmonious system, all three categories of clients (3Cs) are of equal value.

These clients must reach an agreement as they define, realize, deliver and evaluate dynamic emerging

expectations of the task they are undertaking or the service they are providing. They effectively specify a frozen definition of a quality outcome at that instant of agreement. They decide what quality is. They also recognize that quality is dynamic and constantly changing with time. When time erodes the value of any frozen definition of quality, they must act quickly.

How clients achieve agreement is encapsulated in the excellence methodology. It is done in an enlightened, effective, efficient, ethical, elegant and enjoyable manner (that is, core values or principles). The enlightened aspect allows clients to use whatever tools, techniques or approaches they deem appropriate.

This definition of excellence is deliberately structured to make core elements easy to remember:

- + The clients are categorized as 3Cs: creators, consumers and complementors.
- + The steps in purposeful activity are define, realize, deliver and evaluate.
- + The six core principles all begin with the letter “e.” “Elegant” and “enjoyable” are included here.
- + Fit for purpose is not good enough. The “what” and “how” also must be elegant.
- + The end never justifies the means.
- + Practicing excellence must be enjoyable. It cannot be stressful or it will fail to gain acceptance.

## What is a fit-for-purpose system?

The systems of interest to us in the service world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are nothing like W. Edwards Deming’s production systems. His systems were primarily mechanical with a human element. Today’s systems are human activity systems in which the individual is all powerful and important. He or she is empowered to make on-the-spot decisions about what to do and how to do it. We are no longer in command-and-control structures that standardize every activity to death. Organizations trust their employees to uphold their standards and values while working with unprecedented autonomy.

Critical to this is a clear understanding of quality and excellence described earlier. It also requires a fit-for-purpose system committed to practicing excellence. These human activity systems comprise culture, clients, climate and context. What a 21<sup>st</sup> century human activity system looks and behaves like will be developed in another article.

## A meaningful mantra

As organizations become more agile, they depend on individuals to act autonomously with an ever-increasing emphasis on urgency. The absence of a command-and-control culture can instill fear and paralysis in employees if they have no clear

appreciation of what is acceptable in terms of outcome and the method employed to achieve it.

This can be overcome by adopting the mantra, “To achieve quality outcomes, we must practice excellence and maintain systems that are fit for purpose.” This article addresses two elements of the triad encapsulated in this mantra—quality outcomes and excellence. The system element of the mantra has not been developed in any great detail in this article because accepting the other two elements is fundamental.

While lengthy, the proposed definition of “excellence” is easily understood and readily accepted as the way to do things. It’s now up to quality organizations and professionals to promote and empower its application to every activity—not only in organizations but throughout society. This only will be possible if we accept the definitions and core concepts presented here of quality as a destination, result or outcome, and excellence as the desired pathway or method to achieving it. We achieve quality through excellence—not vice versa. QP

### REFERENCES AND NOTE

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10. This definition was formulated by the author.



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