

# TQM: A Contractor's Perspective

BY JEFF MANSER

**F**OR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, DEBATE about the value of formal Total Quality Management (TQM) programs has filled the pages of business periodicals. Some companies swear by it while others swear at it. Some consider their quality programs as having made a strong contribution to productivity, customer and employee satisfaction. Others have abandoned them, feeling their investment of time and money was largely wasted.

Where does the truth lie? And more to the point, should your firm consider plunging into the murky waters of TQM? Based on our experience since implementing a formal program in 1991, and at the risk of sounding like a lawyer, or worse yet, a politician—the answer is “*It depends.*” This article examines our company’s program, its impact on our performance, and some thoughts about what it takes to make it work.

## TQM Program Elements

The establishment of a formal TQM program by our company in 1991 was motivated by a desire to achieve significant improvement in terms of both internal performance and customer satisfaction. As expressed in the Mission Statement and logo developed early in the process by our Quality Management Team (QMT), the primary goal is to provide uncompromising customer satisfaction through quality workmanship, service and safe work practices. The programs and processes that have evolved during the past six years have been focused directly on achieving these goals.

Here’s our operational definition of total quality:

“Total quality is knowing what needs to be done, having the tools to do it, then doing it right the first time, every time.”

The components of this definition are interdependent. All must be present in order to make meaningful progress toward the goal of “total” quality. Let’s examine each element:

“...knowing what needs to be done...”

In the language of total quality, the word *requirements* is used to describe “...what needs to be done.” The TQM “Textbook,” verified by our own experience, indicates that most errors occur when customer requirements are either poorly defined and/or not clearly understood prior to beginning a task, activity or project. It’s akin to the old expression, “garbage in, garbage out.” Therefore, the classroom training in which all employees participate places strong emphasis on the importance of clarifying

and reaching agreement on critical “requirements” prior to commencing any activity.

“...having the tools to do it...”

In the context of total quality, the word *tools* means more than the physical tools used on the roof and in the shop, yard and office. Providing intangible tools—most notably education and training—is equally important. As a result, substantial investment is required to ensure that all employees are provided with both the tangible and intangible “tools” they need.

“...doing it right the first time.”

Once customer requirements are clearly understood and the necessary tools are in place, the final ingredient for success is that all associates embrace an attitude of *error-free work*. This means demonstrating a personal commitment to the idea of doing things right the first time, every time. And personal commitment is not something that can be bought or decreed. It must be earned by a management team that leads by example and “practices what it preaches.”

## Management by Prevention

TQM seeks to eliminate mistakes by building quality into work. Emphasis is shifted from “fire-fighting” to anticipating errors in order to cause them *not* to happen. This change in thinking is accomplished primarily through an increased level of planning and training activities.

Numerous studies have shown every hour invested in planning prevents at least eight hours of mistakes, frustration and rework. Our experience indicates this is a conservative estimate.

## Corrective Action

Perfection is obviously not achievable. Even committed employees make mistakes. When this happens, the key is not to assign blame, but rather to identify the cause(s) and take corrective action to prevent future errors. A primary reason some errors occur again and again is that we hurry our way into trouble. In our haste to get to the next job, time isn’t taken to identify causes and develop corrective action plans. In seeking solutions, managers are taught to recognize that the people who actually do the work are in the best position to find better ways of doing things. Encouraging, recognizing and rewarding ideas from all levels of the organization is critical to a successful program.



## Program Benefits

Here are some examples of what has been accomplished as a direct result of the TQM program:

- ▼ Based on a suggestion from field superintendents, hiring of a full-time safety director and development of a comprehensive and beneficial safety and health program.
- ▼ Major upgrades of both safety and roofing tools and equipment.
- ▼ The design of several labor-saving rooftop devices by field and shop associates.
- ▼ Major renovation and upgrade of shop and yard areas.
- ▼ Power tool standardization and preventive maintenance programs.
- ▼ Expanded training programs in all areas, including safety, quality, roofing and sheet metal skills and computers.
- ▼ The formation of ongoing teams to manage the quality process and respond to employee ideas and concerns.
- ▼ An "Idea" program that encourages and rewards people for sharing their ideas for improvement.
- ▼ A program providing written recognition to fellow employees who perform "quality acts," and an annual TQM Event celebrating progress and recognizing individual and team accomplishments.
- ▼ The development of documents standardizing "requirements" for such diverse activities as project management, field operations, safety and accounting.
- ▼ A post-project program enabling team members to meet, critique their own performance and reach agreement on ways to improve future performance.
- ▼ A partnering program to enhance relationships with key suppliers.
- ▼ A customer satisfaction questionnaire providing invaluable customer feedback on the performance of project teams.
- ▼ Implementation of human resource programs, including written goals, position summaries and an annual performance review and planning process.
- ▼ A comprehensive orientation and training program for new employees.

It is worth noting that the idea source for the majority of these initiatives was not "management," but rather the people who actually do the work on the roof and in the yard, shop and offices. Last year alone, the TQM Idea program generated over 100 suggestions.

## Keys to Success

Based on our positive, albeit sometimes painful experience, we would suggest the following to any firm considering a TQM program:

1. Ensure top management commitment. If it isn't there at the outset—in the form of time, money, personal involvement and leadership by example—don't even start. Neither you nor your employees needs another "flavor of the month."
2. Establish specific goals and communicate them clearly and often.
3. Don't try to wing it by simply talking quality. Buy a training program that's complete and easily adaptable to your needs. Start at the top and train everyone often. Commit a qualified

in-house person to drive the process and handle coordination, training and facilitation.

4. Establish the teams and processes needed to direct, support and implement quality initiatives.
5. Ensure some early successes to demonstrate your commitment to the program.
6. Focus resources on identifying and satisfying customer needs. Challenge people to question the value of any activity that doesn't contribute to your stated goals.
7. Involve both customers and key suppliers in the process.
8. Be patient. Commit to long-term continuous improvement. Hit for singles. The home runs will come.
9. Listen to your employees. Encourage them. And recognize and reward those who contribute to the quality process.

## Conclusion

Have there been disappointments? You bet. The path leading to "total quality" is both elusive and never-ending. Meaningful progress requires real change in people's attitudes and behaviors. And change is difficult, even for the most committed among us. There's no question, however, that the program has sharpened customer focus and produced positive change in all areas of operations. Is it a cure-all for what ails an enterprise? Certainly not. But no matter what your involvement in the roofing community—consulting services, materials supply, contracting, education, publishing or association work—our experience would indicate that a well-conceived program, supported by adequate resources and nurtured with time, patience and commitment, can enhance the well-being of your employees, the satisfaction of your customers, and your bottom line.

## About the Company

The Evans Service Company and its two commercial roofing subsidiaries—the Charles F. Evans Company, Inc., and CFE, Inc.—are headquartered in Elmira, NY with branch operations in Florida, North Carolina, and Maryland.

The company has successfully applied over 100,000,000 square feet of roofing, has worked in 28 states during the past years, is licensed or registered in 46 states, and ranks among the 20 largest contractors in the country.

Evans has received two national honors—RSI's "Roofing Contractor of the Year" in 1989, and the SPRI's "Contractor Achievement Award" in 1993. Elected to the RIEL "Hall of Fame," the company is a member of NRCA (its CEO, Phil McKinney, serves on NRCA's board of directors), and has employees who are members of RCI.



## About The Author

**Jeff Manser** joined Evans Service Co. in 1988 as a marketing consultant. In his present capacity as Director of Corporate Development, Manser has sales responsibility for New York State and the Mid-Atlantic region, manages the TQM program and edits the company newsletter, "From the Rooftop." Prior to joining Evans, he spent 21 years at Corning, Inc., serving in a variety of sales and marketing management positions. Manser is a graduate of West Virginia Wesleyan College and holds a master's degree from Cornell University's New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations.