



Virginia Walsh
Executive Director

Quality is one of the themes of this edition of *inCite*. In striving to deal with issues of relevance to the library and information profession, we have identified a number of 'organisational quality strategies' which are currently being pursued or investigated by our members. It was proposed that such strategies are worthy of further investigation, elucidation and communication to the membership.

'Quality' has been identified as synonymous with 'goodness', 'value', 'worth' and 'excellence' and has become the holy grail of current management theorists and practitioners. I remember 'quality time' as a concept proposed to assuage the guilt of the working mother. I suppose it was meant to suggest that our professional fulfilment provided us with the wherewithal to convey an excellent standard of nurturing to our little charges in a limited amount of time. But life is much more complex than that!

So too with 'quality' as a component of modern organisational theory and practice. In an abstract sense it is something that all of us strive for in all aspects of our lives. It encompasses our own personal search for excellence. But in business management 'quality' has offered yet another opportunity to develop rigorous and scientific paradigms aimed at securing strategic advantage in an increasingly competitive world.

The emergence of 'quality' as a corporate ideal is not as recent as some might suppose. Twenty five years ago the Australian Organisation for Quality Control was formed. Now known as the Australian Organisation for Quality, the quality thrust has expanded to embrace training, benchmarking, customer focus and strategic management. In the 1970s the emphasis was on process design in in-

dustry. The process focus had evolved from American studies of Japanese manufacturing and was an attempt to reclaim the strategic advantage that had been lost in particular market segments such as the motor vehicle sector. Total Quality Management as a subject studied in business schools often continues to have a major process component.

In Search of Excellence (sub-titled: *Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*) by Peters and Waterman was an attempt to document the 'secrets' of organisational success and, although it has been available now for over ten years, it is still considered by many to be the pre-eminent study of corporate excellence. The authors trace the evolution of organisational theory from Max Weber's construct of the shape of the bureaucracy to more recent emphasis on employees and customers. In the book they note the work of Elton Mayo in the 1930s who experimented with the concept that improved employee hygiene and conditions generally would produce increased productivity. His experiment was based at one of Western Electric's production plants located at Hawthorne in the USA, where he measured increased performance when the lights were turned up. He initially concluded that the enhanced lighting was directly linked to improved performance. But when the lights were turned down again, productivity again increased! This led Mayo to reevaluate his original thesis and to conclude that it is a focus on the employees, rather than on the work conditions, that produce the better performance. This finding has now entered the text books as the 'Hawthorne effect'.

Peters and Waterman concluded that the most successful American companies shared some very simple 'secrets' about corporate management. It was a focus on the external factors—service, quality and people.

'Quality' has been identified as synonymous with 'goodness', 'value', 'worth' and 'excellence' and has become the holy grail of current management theorists and practitioners.

Twenty five years ago *Total Quality Management* was essentially inward looking with an emphasis on manufacturing processes. It has evolved to provide an organisational method which can help us achieve competitive advantage by focusing on the excellence of the services we all provide in our workplaces. So too, the importance of a 'marketing approach' is built on the strength of an outward or customer focus (replacing the previous concentration on the 'product').

But beware! There is a downside in our approach to modern organisational theories. There is a risk that we indulge ourselves in the study of corporate management programs at the expense of actually translating the good ideas into action in our workplaces. Perhaps the best approach is to look at Marketing Principles, Total Quality Management and similar developments and be selective about the components of these approaches to business management that we adopt. To quote Peters and Waterman:

[There is] one strange contradiction that may really hold. We call it the smart-dumb rule. Many of today's managers—MBA trained and the like—may be a little bit too smart for their own good. The smart ones are the ones who shift direction all the time, based on the latest output from the expected value equation. [They are] the ones who juggle hundred-variable models with facility; the ones who design complicated incentive systems; the ones who wire up matrix structures. [They are] the ones who have 200-page strategic plans and 500-page market requirement documents that are but step one in product development exercises.

By contrast, the 'dumb' managers have what may appear to be a much simpler approach to corporate success. They believe that every product can be of the highest quality. They believe that every employee can provide excellent service. They believe that they can be the best! ■