

Case studies

Quality in education: creating a learning society: the Pen y Dre experience

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Abstract

Comments that Pen y Dre is a school in a socially deprived area of South Wales and that through their strategy of "Raising Achievement" they have succeeded in doubling their examination results and raising the self-esteem of the school and local area over the past two years. Notes that the winning of the Wales Quality Award for Education in November 1995 was another important milestone for the school in its drive for continuous improvement, seamlessly building quality into every aspect of the school. Highlights some of the methods that the school has employed to implement its commitment to Raising Achievement. Points out that from this assessment, it will become apparent that many of the methods employed in industry are equally applicable to the educational environment – indeed, many of the processes evident in the school are developed well beyond many currently employed as good business practice in other sectors. Notes that the process of assessment for the Wales Quality Award drew out a number of valuable lessons for both the school and the members of the assessment team. Discusses these points which are applicable beyond the confines of the school gates and should interest many in the educational, business and industrial sectors.

Introduction

Pen y Dre (meaning "top of the town") is a school on a very deprived estate in a bleak position, high up on the edge of Merthyr Tydfil, overlooking the spectacular countryside of the Brecon Beacons. In the early 1990s the school had numerous problems, including the poor reading skills of children on entry from local primary schools, poor condition of buildings and equipment, vandalism, and extensive local poverty, 40 per cent of children qualifying for free school meals. It was therefore not surprising that the school suffered from low esteem and poor results.

This was the situation facing John Williams, the new head teacher, when he joined the school in 1993. The inspiration that led to John's commitment to total quality was a period he spent with Rank Xerox some years ago where he had the opportunity to look at their "Leadership through Quality" programme. This experience led John to discover that quality is something that is quantifiable and that the language of business and industry can be applied to schools, albeit with a refined "dialect".

In recent years there has been a culture change in education; if businesses are becoming more like schools in that they recognize the need for continuous learning and continuous education among their workers, then schools are becoming more like businesses with the emphasis on the need to clarify, monitor and evaluate processes and the shift away from the emphasis on inputs to the emphasis on outputs.

With this knowledge and understanding, and with John Williams taking the lead, the senior management team within Pen y Dre made a commitment to make dramatic improvements throughout the school through a total quality management approach. Thus the Raising Achievement programme was developed with the explicit aim of doubling examination results within two years, specifically in terms of the key benchmark of five A*-C passes. (A* – pronounced "A star" – is

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the highest grade awarded in the GCSE examination.) This objective was surpassed in the summer of 1995 and other equally impressive results have been achieved across the school, culminating with the distinction of winning the Wales Quality Award for Education sponsored by Sony in November 1995.

Through this paper we would like to highlight some of the methods that the school has employed to implement its commitment to "Raising Achievement". From this assessment, it will become apparent that many of the methods employed in industry are equally applicable to the educational environment – indeed, many of the processes evident in the school are developed well beyond many currently employed as "good business practice". This, and other lessons, are therefore drawn out for discussion.

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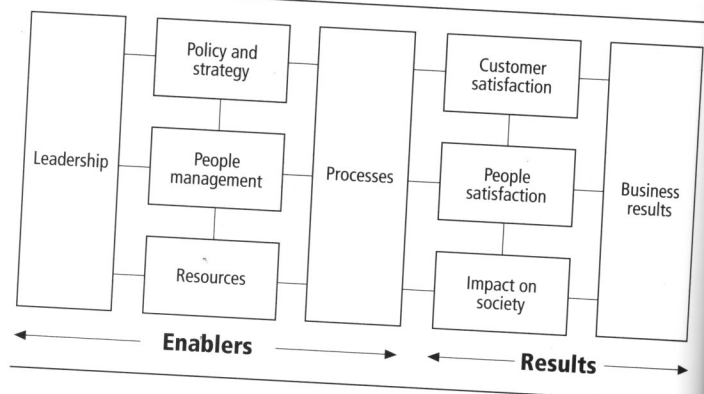
We see no better way to start than to review the school's approach using the mechanism of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM)[1] model as used by the Wales Quality Award, in common with the better known UK and European Awards.

Background to the EFQM model

The EFQM was created in the late 1980s by leading European businesses in order to increase the acceptance of quality as a strategy for developing global competitive advantage and encouraging quality improvement initiatives.

The EFQM developed a model based on the experience of a number of leading European companies. Building on the experiences of the Baldrige model in the USA and the Deming Award in Japan, the model developed around nine areas, five representing *how* a business operates and four representing *what it achieves* (the "enablers" and the "results") (Figure 1). The enablers establish the business environment and facilitate the introduction of a total quality culture:

Figure 1 The EFQM model



- (1) *Leadership* is defined as being how managers behave to inspire and drive the culture towards that of a total quality organization.
- (2) *Policy and strategy* need to reflect the commitment and drive towards continuous improvement.
- (3) *People management* defines how the organization manages its people to realize their full potential.
- (4) *Resources* need to be effectively managed and utilized to support policy and strategy.
- (5) *Processes* need to be identified, reviewed and revised to create an environment of continuous improvement.

The results include the four key results areas and are concerned with how the organization measures its performance:

- (6) *Customer satisfaction* measures the perception of the organization's customers regarding its provision of products and services.
- (7) *People satisfaction* measures what the organization's employees feel about working for it, including the provision for their learning needs.
- (8) *Impact on society* measures the impact the organization has on society, including environmental, social and other factors.
- (9) *Business results* measures how the organization is performing against its planned business performance.

Through this model it can be seen that leadership drives the policy and strategy and people management within the organization, providing the resources and processes necessary for it to thrive. As a result, customer satisfaction, people satisfaction and an impact on society are achieved, ultimately leading to excellence in business results.

It has been demonstrated over the past few years that these nine critical areas of business improvement can help determine the level of success that a company achieves. To support this approach the EFQM developed the European Quality Award (EQA). The award is given to leading companies in a wide range of business sectors who apply to be assessed against the criteria defined in each area and who are judged to be the "best" against these criteria. Similar awards have been developed on a national basis across Europe; these include:

- The UK Quality Award which is organized annually by the British Quality Foundation and;
- The Wales Quality Award which is similarly organized by the Wales Quality Centre.

Application of the EFQM model to Pen y Dre school

Before we are able to draw meaningful conclusions, we would like to highlight some of the key points from the Pen y Dre submission[2]. To do this, we consider them under the nine key areas of the model.

LEADERSHIP, POLICY AND STRATEGY

While the language of industry and business does not always fit well into the educational environment, it is not difficult to see that many of the mechanisms and processes are fundamentally the same. Whatever the environment, the need for leadership combined with a clear policy and mechanisms to deliver it cannot be disputed. Pen y Dre demonstrates this as clearly as any organization can.

As with any business, Pen y Dre has customers, suppliers and competition. The school regards its primary customers as being the parents of the pupils, local businesses and local householders; its sixth form pupils may also be viewed as customers having considerable choice in their place of education. Its primary suppliers are also the parents and the local primary schools as well as suppliers of books and other materials and equipment as with any business.

Pen y Dre also faces real competition with several other schools competing for the pupils. Within this environment, Pen y Dre has a clear statement regarding its Mission, Vision and Values:

Mission:

- To put children first.
- To raise the achievement of all pupils in Pen y Dre.
- To improve continually the quality of teaching and learning so that achievement can be raised.
- To foster high self-esteem and self-worth among its pupils.

Vision:

- All pupils realizing their full potential.
- A curriculum which is broad, balanced, relevant and differentiated.
- A school which is challenging, supportive and concerned with quality throughout the whole institution.
- The creation of a civilized and civilizing institution.

Values:

- The encouragement of intellectual curiosity.
- Hard work.
- Telling the truth.
- Keeping promises.
- Respecting the rights and property of others.
- Acting considerately to others.
- Helping those less fortunate than ourselves.
- Taking personal responsibility for one's actions.
- Self discipline.

This clear statement of the school's Mission, Vision and Values could put many businesses to shame. In addition, these statements are the touchstone for all actions and are driven throughout the school via a range of mechanisms. Through the Senior Management Team's leadership, strategies have been developed which focus the school towards Raising Achievement; they are implemented as summarized in the Processes section of this article.

For each strategy, targets have been set and are owned by a named individual; they form the basis of the *School Development Plan*. The strategies form cost centres in the school budget and are supported by policies, procedures and working practices that are documented in the *School Handbook*. For example, the Quality of Teaching and Learning Strategy is supported by *internal audits*, definitions of "the good lesson", "the good teacher" behavioural policies and policies with regard

to moral and spiritual development, including the *Positive Discipline* programme.

The School Development Plan is produced annually through a clear planning process and is devolved throughout the organization by way of Faculty and Year Development Plans.

Many mechanisms exist for communication with all stakeholders. These include communications with parents via the school magazine *Pen y Dre Horizons* and the *Pen y Dre Partnership Document* that clearly lays out how all parties, including both the school and the parents, can assist in the educational process.

Through these mechanisms, and more, quality pervades the whole organization – quality is not an “added extra” but is fundamental to the way the school operates; it is built into everything the school does.

People management

Many of the mechanisms used in the school for the management of its people would be commonly recognized throughout industry. Effective recruitment, induction and continuous staff development are seen as being essential to the development of the school and the fulfilment of its mission. All staff participate in the official appraisal scheme with less formal one-to-one meetings on a monthly basis to maintain regular communication on important matters.

Effective communication throughout the school is achieved through a variety of mechanisms. These include:

- formal meetings;
- senior management regularly walking the school;
- their use of daily bulletins;
- the school magazine – *Pen y Dre Horizons*; and
- the Staff Association, in addition to the appraisal process and one-to-one meetings mentioned above.

The school is committed to achieving Investors in People with a target to achieve it within the coming academic year.

Resources

How the school manages its financial resources: Three key points need to be made with regard to the management of financial resources within the school.

- (1) The manner by which the school's strategies form the cost centres allowing prioritization of resources towards the fulfilment of the school's mission and vision.
- (2) The determination of the school to win additional funding for its programme of quality improvement. In this regard it has been startlingly successful, winning over £300,000 for specific purposes in support of its drive towards Raising Achievement.
- (3) Its determination to get value for money in all cases through the development of service level agreements with the local authority enabling the school to achieve savings of between 10–20 per cent on many goods and services. A good example of the school's search for value for money is where the school has reduced its gas costs by 50 per cent through negotiations with alternative suppliers.

How the school manages its information resources:

The information resources available to the school, both from internal and external monitoring of performance could be an example to many in industry. In addition to the traditional government monitoring, the school has taken many initiatives itself to develop appropriate information for management – including the development of surveys of staff, parents, sixth formers and local businesses.

How the school manages its physical resources:

The management of its physical resources is also aimed at achieving fitness for purpose with a purchasing officer designated to achieve value for money. An innovative tendering and quotation process has been developed. Wherever possible, preventive measures are favoured, for example the erection of new fencing to reduce vandalism and prevent the need for repairs to property, etc.

How the school manages technology:

The school has particularly developed its use of technology, both to aid the management of the school and also in the development of its curriculum – vital to the employment prospects of the children in this area of Wales. A head of IT has recently been appointed.

Processes

While the definition of processes is less obvious in a school than in an industrial process, Pen y Dre has nevertheless identified, documented and monitored its critical processes

with the active involvement of a range of stakeholders, including staff, parents, governors and local businesses.

Many processes and methods have been developed in a number of areas to help with the achievement of the school's goals:

- develop subject specific skills and knowledge tested by examination;
- develop skills and knowledge outside specific subject areas but contribute to examination success across a range of subject areas;
- help in the transition from school to work;
- develop the self-confidence and self-esteem of pupils;
- develop the self-confidence and self-esteem of staff;
- promote interests and enthusiasm which will enable pupils to make better use of their leisure time;
- develop social, physical and emotional wellbeing of pupils;
- develop social, physical and emotional wellbeing of staff;
- attend to the moral and spiritual development of pupils;
- attend to the moral and spiritual development of staff.

These processes are underpinned by activities which include:

- study weekends;
- homework clubs;
- the Breakfast Club for 11 - 14 year olds;
- primary school links;
- the development of the Positive Discipline Programme – a programme which supports the application of the school values and rewards good behaviour in the children and provides sanctions against unacceptable behaviour;
- definitions of what a “good teacher” does and a “good lesson” contains;
- schemes of work which allow for the most able to be challenged and the less able to be accommodated;
- use and regular review of action plans for the pupils;
- the linking of education to vocational training;
- emphasis on team building and empowerment;
- benchmarking of processes against other organizations;

- the celebration of success linked to reward mechanisms and a belief in the potential of pupils.

Many innovative rewards have been developed to support this programme both within the school and with the help of local businesses – for example the development of a “credit card” to provide discounts in local shops.

Many methods are used for monitoring the performance of these activities, including the use of internal audits and reviews which are conducted according to a systematic programme. Any changes in procedures follow strict guidelines. Where a process involves a single faculty team, they are empowered to make those changes. However, where processes affect more than one team, these changes are subject to controls that include pilot trials where appropriate, discussion and communication, with revisions incorporated in the School Handbook and training needs incorporated in the staff development programme. Process changes are evaluated both qualitatively and quantitatively wherever possible.

All these efforts will count for nothing unless the school demonstrates results. Pen y Dre has managed this across all result areas of the EFQM model.

Customer satisfaction

Pen y Dre has undertaken surveys of all its major customers: parents, local businesses and sixth formers.

In each case “good school attributes” have been identified relevant to that group and a sample of customers have rated the performance of the school against the key attributes. For example, the key attribute for parents was that the school should “seek to maximize every child's potential” while the key attribute for local businesses was that the school should “ensure students have skills/competences necessary for transfer from school to work-place”.

In each survey Pen y Dre demonstrated a high performance across the full range of its activities. However, it was unable to demonstrate trends in performance in this area as these surveys are relatively new innovations, although they have provided a focus for continuous improvement.

People satisfaction

Two staff opinion surveys have been undertaken within the three-year period from 1993-1995 as the school has been working towards Investors in People. While somewhat limited in its scope, being focused towards the Investors award, these surveys have nevertheless demonstrated a large improvement in staff awareness and opinions regarding the school community.

In addition, lost time rate has improved and is now above the county average and staff turnover has been successfully reduced.

Impact on society

The school has a major impact on its local community. Perhaps one of the most impressive measures of its impact is that *petty crime on the estate has dropped by 33 per cent in the past two years*. While this cannot all be directly attributed to the school, it is important to appreciate that 50 per cent of petty crime is committed by children under 16 and the school's influence on this age group is recognized locally as an important factor in the drop in crime.

Business results

Above all, the school can demonstrate a positive and dramatic improvement in its business results – primarily its examination results. It exceeded its target of 30 per cent of year 11 with five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, with results exceeding target in all faculties. Moreover, A-level results are now close to the Wales average.

Beyond examination results, the school has undoubtedly succeeded in raising its esteem in the local community. The self confidence and self esteem of pupils is increasing, with an impact beyond the school gates as demonstrated by their impact on society. Moreover, the results are undoubtedly linked to the approaches taken by the school and, given that this approach continues, should build a strong school for the future.

Lessons learned through the Wales Quality Award assessment

We believe that the process of assessment for the Wales Quality Award has brought rewards for both the school and the assessment team. The school now has a number of "areas for

improvement" which it may not have identified from internal analysis alone. As regards the assessment team, we would venture that the following points gave valuable learning:

- As may be imagined, in assessing a school in this situation, there was extensive discussion on what comprises a "quality school". The focus on enablers within the model as opposed to simply examination results in a "league table" was a real learning experience for the team.
- The applicability of the EFQM model to a school demonstrated many similarities between industry and the educational sector. The importance of learning across sectors was driven home. We are sure that the school has a lot to learn from industry – but conversely industry could learn much from many of the school's processes.
- The importance of quality becoming embedded as "the way we do things" on a day-to-day basis as opposed to an "initiative" which is "yet another thing" to do where people soon become cynical.
- The importance of leadership – and the difficulty of achieving effective "participative" management through the right balance between "directive" and "consensus" management.

Summary

In the 1990s, schools have become increasingly in the public eye; more than ever, they are accountable for what they do and under-achievement is going to be tolerated less and less. Pen y Dre has demonstrated that total quality offers a way of dealing with the pressures society are rightly putting on schools to do better.

Pen y Dre is a remarkable school; through its application for the Wales Quality Award it has clearly demonstrated how a school can use the EFQM model to benchmark itself against other organizations from any business sector. The school's novel approach to many issues has clearly contributed to its dramatic improvement over the past two years. The application for the Wales Quality Award is simply one more innovation demonstrating clear leadership and has led to a valuable learning experience for both the school and the assessment team.

Since winning the Wales Quality Award the school has furthered its links with local industries, approaching Hoover, Hitachi, Ford and Sony as well as smaller firms. In addition, Royal Mail has offered support for further training demonstrating that quality improvement is a continuous journey – not a destination.

Note and reference

- 1 The UK/European Model for Total Quality Management as detailed in *Towards Organisational Excellence*, The British Quality Foundation, 215 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London WC1V 1EN.
- 2 "Teaching quality", Pen y Dre High School's submission to the Wales Quality Centre for the Sony Award, 1995.

Commentary

What a very inspiring story! One of the problems with learning from the world's best companies (see previous article) is that most of us don't work in them! But here's an organization with no natural advantages that has hauled itself up by its bootstraps into excellence. Great stuff!