

1 Re-defining quality

This chapter introduces the readers to various theoretical controversies in the quality management literature. It starts by suggesting that there are four managerial perspectives on quality (the product-based approach, the manufacturing-based approach, the value-based approach and the user-based approach) and four critical ones (the transcendental approach, the social constructivist approach, the discursive approach and the slogan approach). Managerial perspectives view quality as a self-contained entity or process that can be planned, managed, controlled with the help of technical and managerial knowledge. Critical perspectives assert that quality is a complex and multifaceted concept which escapes a definitive definition. Quality has multiple, contradictory meanings which arise from processes of intersubjective communication. Hence, quality is a political, cultural and social process rather than a technical, operational issue.

The chapter charts the strengths and weaknesses of each of the above approaches to quality, by placing them in their broader social and cultural context (Reeves and Bednar, 1994). In reviewing such strengths and weaknesses, the chapter asks two questions:

- 1 For which organizational stakeholders (i.e., manager, employee, shareholder, customer) do they constitute strengths and/or weaknesses?
- 2 To what extent does each approach to quality account for the interests of all organizational stakeholders?

The concept of quality has been contemplated throughout history and continues to be a subject of great interest today. Remember the story of the *Titanic*, the unsinkable ship that sank in 1912 as a result of colliding with an iceberg? *Titanic* was built to be the most technologically advanced, the fastest and most luxurious ship on the highly competitive North Atlantic mail and passenger route. The ship was made out of the finest steel and had a double-hulled bottom and automatic watertight doors that could be closed from the bridge. This, coupled with its elegant features such as deep plush carpeting, a gymnasium, an automatic dishwasher, a squash court and a

swimming pool made the *Titanic* a symbol of excellence. Yet, what was supposed to provide a pleasurable experience ended up in tragedy for so many of the crew and passengers. The reasons may have little to do with the quality of design and manufacturing and more with the quality of the decisions taken by the people in command. Indeed, too much confidence in the *Titanic*'s technological superiority led the people in command to take the ship through an ice field at top speed instead of slowing down, as was the common practice. The result was disastrous. Therefore, it was not the quality of the technology that failed the *Titanic*: the quality of decision-making failed her (Bond, 2001).

Remember also the *Challenger*'s accident? On 28 January 1986 the space shuttle *Challenger* burst into flames 73 seconds after being launched into space. The loss of the space shuttle was caused by the failure of the joint between the two lower segments of the right solid motor. Subsequent investigation showed that the failure of the pressure seal called the O-ring was due to a faulty design relating to a number of physical and technical factors. Moreover, the people who made the decision to launch *Challenger* were not aware of the problems concerning the O-rings or of the advice given by the contractor against launching the shuttle at temperatures below 53 degrees Fahrenheit. They also did not take into consideration concerns expressed that it was not safe to launch because of ice on pads. What was supposed to be a marvellous technological achievement ended up destroying not only people's lives but also NASA's reputation as a quality-driven business (Bank, 1992).

Quality is by no means a modern invention: quality has always been important to human survival and progress. The quality of the crops, the quality of houses and roads, of medical care were as important to our ancestors as they are to us. What is different, however, is the fact that in the last century or so, quality has become a scientific discipline of its own, safeguarded by a professional elite of managers, designers, engineers and marketers. And as a scientific discipline, it has its own vocabulary, techniques and rules that must be endorsed by those interested in pursuing its cause. Moreover, quality has become an institutional norm central to the effective functioning of the market: a norm that organizations (be they private, public or voluntary) are expected to endorse if they are to gain legitimacy in the eyes of society.

In recent decades, organizations have eagerly embraced the cause of quality in the belief that quality can offer new opportunities for competitive advantage. Critics, however, are quick to point out that organizations' over-concern with quality usually translates into the bureaucratic implementation of standards, leading to the commodification of organizational relations (i.e., a situation where organizational members and relationships between them are treated as commodities to be sold and bought on the internal market). In contemporary Britain, quality appears to hold a central place in political, economic and social debates: politicians, policy-makers, consumers, managers, trade unions, and eco-activists call upon the imagery of quality in an

attempt to give weight to their cause. Such parties allege that they pursue quality for and in the name of the consumer. The consumer has become a Godlike icon before whom markets and politicians alike bow (Gabriel and Lang, 1995). But sometimes this notion of consumer is too abstract and has little to do with the real needs and concerns of the actual consumer.

In western societies, but increasingly so in other societies, individuals are socialized into thinking of themselves and each other as consumers rather than producers. The market is both the common glue that keeps individuals together, for in order to exist they must engage in exchanges; and the differentiator between individuals as they can choose certain exchanges and not others, and thus, assemble a unique bricolage of products and services that may set them apart from the others by conferring them a unique identity.

The literature on quality is full of controversial perspectives and lacks clear conceptualizations. The purpose of this chapter is not merely to support some perspectives, or to criticize others from a particular vantage point but to suggest that different definitions may be appropriate under different circumstances. Furthermore, the chapter urges the reader to abandon the search for a universal definition of quality and accept that quality is an elusive, multifaceted and socially contingent concept.

To guide the reader in a more effective manner, the chapter builds upon and expands Garvin's (1984) framework concerning approaches to quality. The boundaries between these approaches are rather artificial and various writers may in fact belong to more than one approach. The first four approaches – namely, the product-based approach, the manufacturing-based approach, the value-based approach and the user-based approach – seem to be very popular with organizations and quality management gurus alike. We term them managerial for they view quality as a technical, operational and manageable matter. The latter four approaches – namely, the transcendental approach, the social constructivist approach, the discursive approach and the slogan approach – broaden the analysis of quality: here, quality is seen as a social, cultural and political process which has multiple meanings.

MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY

The product-based approach

This managerial approach views quality as a precise and measurable variable. According to Abbott, 'differences in quality amount to differences in the quantity of some desired ingredient or attribute' (1955: 126–7). Thus, the better the quality of cocoa in a chocolate cake, the higher the quality of the cake, providing that the attribute in question is considered desirable by all buyers. Product-based definitions first appeared in the economic literature,

supplementing the theory of competitive markets. While the theory of competitive markets viewed the principle of price competition as the driving force in an exchange, quality competition drew attention to the fact that buyers and sellers did not engage in exchanges of homogeneous or standardized goods. Therefore, buyers are not only interested in agreeing the right price but are adamant that the good in question provides them with the expected experience (Knight, 1921). If products and services were homogeneous, they would all provide the same experience. It is the difference in quality that makes products and services capable of providing different experiences and in so doing, of meeting the diverse needs of the buyers. With a few exceptions, most economic theories on quality focused exclusively on durability (Levhari and Srinivasan, 1969; Swan, 1970), for increased durability ensured more of the same for longer and this was seen to contribute directly to improved quality.

Strengths and weaknesses of the product-based approach The product-based approach was the first approach to acknowledge the possibility of measuring and controlling the quality of a product by measuring and controlling the quantities of a desired ingredient. Although focused on the ingredients and capabilities of the product, this approach hinted at the role played by the customers and their needs in defining quality. This approach has been relatively popular during the craft manufacturing period but has lost its significance during the mass production era and thereafter. Hence, it is of little relevance to contemporary organizations and remains confined to the drawers of management history.

The manufacturing-based approach

This managerial approach defines quality as the degree to which a specific product conforms to a design or specification (Gilmore, 1974). Crosby (1979), for example, defines quality as conformance to requirements. Process and design variation are seen to be a constant thread to achieving conformance to requirements. While according to some commentators, variation can be totally eliminated (see, for example, Crosby's 'zero defects' philosophy), for others (Deming and Juran), only a certain type of variation is controllable, others are not. Both camps agree, however, that if the design and the production process are stable and reliable, quality is inherent. To achieve consistency in design, companies can employ Taguchi methods of design engineering that assume that any deviation from the centre, no matter how small, increases a product's ultimate cost, including warranty, liability, lost customer goodwill (for a more detailed discussion of the Taguchi method see Chapters 3 and 4). In the production stage, statistical process control (SPC) enables workers to tell the difference between avoidable errors (due to special causes) and unavoidable ones (due to random causes) and track down the causes of controllable problems (see Chapter 7). Source inspection (or *poka-yoke*) is another technique that ensures that errors are caught at the outset

before they materialize into defects (see Chapter 3). This approach to quality is engineering driven and relies on the application of statistical methods to controlling variation in design, processes and final products. The idea of controlling variation statistically sprang from agricultural research carried out by statistician R.A. Fisher at the beginning of the twentieth century. To speed up the development of crop-growing methods, Fisher perfected scientific short cuts for sifting through mountains of data to spot key cause-effect relationships. Fisher's work inspired W.A. Shewhart, a physicist at AT&T Bell Laboratories who transformed Fisher methods into a quality control discipline for factories. Such methods of quality control were first implemented on a large scale in Japanese factories after the Second World War and then spread to the rest of the world.

Strengths and weaknesses of the manufacturing-based approach

Quality as 'conformance to specifications' has numerous advantages for managers and consumers but less so perhaps for employees. Most technical advances in quality are due to standardization and mass production. The very first technical advances in quality were achieved in the US armament industry. The crafts approach that had been dominant in Europe in the nineteenth century did not allow for quantity production, leading major American firms to adopt a version of mass production where the key to quality was conformance to specifications: if parts did not conform to specifications then the whole production system would fail. Given that inspection was too expensive, there was a need to make the processes more predictable and error free: quality control techniques were thus introduced. While standardization benefited the managers, the shareholders and to a large extent the consumers (through more affordable prices and less defect prone products), workers were reduced to mere extensions of the machinery. The mass production regime led eventually to the deskilling of work and a decreasing role for workers and trade unions in organizing the production process. Moreover, taking all necessary steps to ensure a product conforms to internal specifications does not necessarily lead to customer satisfaction. For the customer, the quality of a product/service is a subjective perception and 'conforming to specifications' sometimes plays only a minor role in affecting such perceptions.

The value-based approach

This managerial perspective considers quality as being the degree of excellence at an acceptable price or the control of variability at an acceptable cost. Numerous writers subscribe to this perspective, among them Feigenbaum (1951) and Abbott (1955). According to Abbott (1955), quality and price are inextricably bound together in economic choice. The relationship between quality and cost is, however, complex: there is little agreement in the literature as to whether the relationship is direct or inverse. Such a state of

affairs is typically attributed to definitional problems and the inconsistency of cost collection procedures. Japanese manufacturers take the view that quality and cost are inversely related because resources put into improving quality are more than matched by the savings made with respect to rework, scrap and customer complaints. In the western manufacturing paradigm, however, the relation between costs and quality is held to be a direct one, that is, better quality presupposes higher costs. The relationship between quality and price is similarly fraught with difficulties. It is widely accepted that price affects people's perceptions of quality but there are no models to account for the complexity built into this relationship: for some consumers, for example, smaller prices couched under the veneer of 'value for money' signal reasonable quality at competitive prices. On the other hand, at the upper end of the market, high prices signal uniqueness and exquisite quality reserved only for the few who can afford it. In such a market, the higher the price, the higher the desirability of the good/service.

Strengths and weakness of the value-based approach The value-based approach attempts to relate two distinct concepts: quality and price, resulting in the hybrid concept of 'affordable excellence'. This notion lacks, however, well defined boundaries and is often highly subjective (Garvin, 1988: 46). In the marketplace, consumption decisions are based on both price and quality. The value-based approach attempts to capture the intricate relation between these two aspects. Defining quality as value allows one to compare widely disparate goods and experiences, for example, staying a night at the Plaza Hotel in New York or spending it at the YMCA. This definition also facilitates cross-company and cross-industry analyzes as well as better knowledge of how purchase decisions are made by the customers. From a company's point of view, the value-based definition requires high levels of efficiency that usually translate into cost reduction programmes and increased levels of productivity. This could put a strain on both managers and employees. The consumer, however, is the one most certainly benefiting from having access to products and services that are better value for money. Companies tend to advertise their products as offering both value and quality.

The user-based approach

This last managerial perspective on quality focuses on the capacity of a good/service to satisfy or exceed the wants of a specific customer. Quality is typically defined as meeting and exceeding customer expectations (Gronroos, 1983; Parasuraman et al., 1985). Although the impetus for such conceptualizations of quality comes from the service marketing literature, some quality thinkers have also pointed to the importance of the end-user as early as 1960, defining quality as 'the degree to which the product in use will meet

the expectations of the customer' (Feigenbaum, 1961: 13) and 'the extent to which a product successfully serves the purposes of the user' (Juran et al., 1974: 22). While some of the quality gurus (Shewhart, Juran and Feigenbaum) have highlighted the importance of customer needs, they have provided little advice as to how customer wants are to be translated into appropriate product and services specifications. The difficulty of such processes of translation is magnified if we consider that what counts as satisfaction is a subjective matter and varies according to one's tastes, standards, beliefs and objectives; these themselves vary greatly with the individual personality and the cultural environment (Abbott, 1955). Marketers have done a great deal to identify the needs of the customers through 'preference testing' in order to sensitize the manufacturers to what is significant for consumers (Bayton, 1958; Bucklin, 1963). More recently, service marketers have developed quality tools and techniques that had as the primary ingredient an understanding of customer's expectations and needs (e.g., SERVQUAL: for a more detailed discussion see Chapter 4).

Strengths and weakness of the user-based approach The user-based definition signals the role of the consumer as the ultimate judge of quality. Customers can articulate how satisfied or dissatisfied they are with a product/service, though pinning down the rationale behind such a judgement is usually very difficult. Nevertheless, there are numerous marketing instruments that allow managers and researchers to include subjective factors (i.e., courtesy, helpfulness, confidence, appearance) into the definition of quality. The SERVQUAL instrument developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985) is a generic tool designed to measure the gap between customers' perceptions and expectations. Although heavily criticized, SERVQUAL is a useful exercise in drawing managers' and employees' attention to the dynamics of the market. Meeting and exceeding customers' expectations is the most challenging definition of quality for a company: on the one hand, the company has to be externally oriented, on the other hand, it must translate customers' demands into internal operational demands. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the trade-off between an external and internal focus will in fact lead to customer satisfaction. Oliver (1981) argues that pre-purchase attitudes play a major role in the subsequent evaluation of quality by the customer; thus, customers will evaluate the quality of a product or service more favourably if their initial expectations are high. Most research findings regarding the concepts of customer satisfaction and service quality are, however, contradictory. In some studies, service quality is an outcome of customer satisfaction, in others the opposite is held to be the case. Although these concepts have been often treated as separate constructs in the literature, their typical operationalization makes it difficult to distinguish between them. The user-based definition favours the consumer but poses important challenges for the managers who must be in a position to measure customers' subjective perceptions and then translate them into operational efficiency.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY

The transcendental approach

This perspective considers quality as synonymous with ‘innate excellence’. On the one hand, quality is universally and absolutely recognizable, on the other hand, it escapes precise definitions and measurements. Pirsig’s (1974: 185, 213) definition of quality is a powerful illustration of this approach: ‘quality is neither mind, nor matter, but a third entity independent of the two . . . even though Quality cannot be defined’. Garvin (1984) contends that this understanding of quality borrows heavily from Greek philosophy. Quality is regarded as something beyond definition, a direct experience that can be understood only after one has been exposed to a set of objects that display its characteristics. Thus quality is an embodied phenomenon and therefore cannot be approached merely through cognition. Indeed, quality triggers in individuals not only a rational response but also emotions and feelings such as pleasure, pain, hate, and happiness.

Strengths and weakness of the transcendental approach Quality as excellence is one of the oldest approaches to quality: it was a source of inspiration for the Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and it still acts as one in contemporary society. Peters and Waterman’s book *In Search of Excellence* (1982) proved to be such a bestseller mainly because of our fascination with the idea of achieving excellence in private and organizational lives. An organizational vision articulated around the imagery of excellence has a deeper impact upon the employees than one based on conformance to requirements, for example. The former is loosely defined and provides scope for individual interpretation and creativity (thus securing commitment), while the latter is constraining and tends to be perceived as lacking inspiration. Customers also take pride in owning excellent products or enjoying excellent services: numerous advertising campaigns stress that their products excel (see, for example, Singaporean Airlines, British Airways, Mercedes, BMW, Chiva Regal). While quality as excellence is an orienting meaning device, pointing to a desired state, the transcendental approach to quality fails to provide the blueprint as to how to control and measure quality. Excellence is difficult to pin down, measure and render controllable. Indeed, how could one assess whether and to what extent excellence has been achieved? Who determines what is excellent and what is not? If one has to rely on the expertise of the manager or the worker, who is to say that the same result will be obtained if the customer was asked? While the elusiveness and seduction of excellence may favour the customer, it certainly does not favour the manager who may need more specific procedures and techniques to be in a position to control quality. Ultimately, in some cases, the imagery of excellence (when not based on meeting safety and technical standards)

may also fail the consumer: the example of Concorde discussed by Muschamp (2000) is an illustrative one.

For more than three decades Concorde was considered to be an aesthetic masterpiece. Indeed, the contrast between its elongated fuselage and wide swept-back wings, the proportions of the windows to the fuselage and the triangular configuration formed by its needlepoint nose and the wing tips made the Concorde the most elegant and sumptuous aircraft for passengers (Muschamp, 2000). This coupled with its supersonic speed and the amounts of champagne and caviar served on board may explain its image of excellence and exquisiteness (it may also explain the typically £7,000 charged for a return trip between London and New York). This image of excellence arose partly from the craft's technical abilities (speed, elegance of design) and partly from the service provided on board. But because there had been no competition in the supersonic transport of the civilians, there was little incentive to technically upgrade the aircraft. Thus, Concorde pilots had to use manual controls to a larger extent than necessary. On 25 July 2000, an Air France Concorde carrying German tourists to New York crashed into a hotel outside Paris, killing 113 people. An engine burst into flames when the plane was trying to take off: a piece of fuselage dropped by another aeroplane which had already taken off was sucked in by the Concorde engine. As the engine was close to the fuel tank, it erupted in flames: the technical obsolescence of the aircraft made it impossible for the pilots to detect the fire in time and stop the take off. Thus, what was thought for years to be an icon of excellence proved in fact to be a fallible product (Muschamp, 2000).

The concerns regarding the uncontrollability of 'excellence' did not constitute a problem during the time of craftsmanship when each product was made individually, but with the advent of mass manufacturing and the factory system, the prevailing view of quality as a measure of excellence was too vague for practical purposes. Quality had to be quantifiable if manufacturers were going to be able to measure and control it. Thus, the definition of quality turned away from excellence to 'conformance to requirements' and later on to 'value for money' and 'customer satisfaction'.

The social constructivist approach

This critical perspective considers quality not as lying in the product or service but as being constructed through the accounts provided by various powerful agents: a product is held to be a quality product not because it is inherently good, but because it has been adjudged good by those in a position to bestow or recognize quality in the product: the customers, top management, a standard certification body and so on. Thus, quality cannot be studied in a neutral, value-free way through an objective lens of research. Rather, it must be viewed as a collective and, therefore, political process which unfolds sinuously both within and outside the organization. The

causes and outcomes of this process are difficult to predict or indeed control at a distance. For example, advertising and public relations (PR) campaigns try to enhance the image of goods/services in the marketplace; yet there are no conclusive measurements to confirm that perceived quality and advertising are directly related. Similarly, the relationship between inspirational, quality-driven organizational cultures and customers' perceptions of products or services is equally spurious. In some cases, the reverse may be true: highly bureaucratic, mechanistic organizations such as McDonalds and Disney do in fact provide consistent goods and services which are perceived within a particular market as high quality (here, consistency and value for money are the most important ingredients of quality). The social constructivist approach suggests that the meanings of quality are constructed, negotiated and enacted within a particular context and depend on existing power relations. Thus, there can be no ultimate, universal and objective meaning of quality. Quality acquires diverse and occasionally contentious meanings in the process by which employees, managers, customers, citizens attempt to make sense of what is going on around them.

Strengths and weakness of the social constructivist approach

The social constructivist approach to quality stresses the processual and social nature of quality. Here quality is something in the making, a process to which a number of parties contribute but whose effects are difficult to predict or control at a distance. Although this definition may have little practical relevance from the point of view of improving organizational performance, it draws attention to the most powerful voices within and outside the organization. Such voices usually win out at the expense of the rest and are taken to be the 'the reality of quality'. Although within the organization managerial perspectives are usually the most powerful ones, in the marketplace it is usually the voice of the consumer or of the quality certification body. Rather than searching for a definitive definition of quality, organizations must attempt to democratize their quality-related practices to the extent that marginal voices (e.g. employees) become heard. In turn, researchers are urged to move beyond the benign vision of managerial perspectives on quality and question the ways quality is identified and pursued in organizations and uncover some of the unchallenged assumptions and implicit power relations hidden within this allegedly neutral concept.

The discursive approach

This approach makes language central to the social construction of quality. It is through and with language that people in organizations make meaning, construct, negotiate and enact certain realities. Language is a socially conditioned process which determines (rather than reflects) reality, being itself determined by the existing social conventions and power relations. The

discursive approach to quality emphasizes this interdependence between language, power and reality. This literature views quality as one of the many discourses present in organizations. While for some researchers, quality is a language game (de Cock, 1998) or a sign (Xu, 1999) beyond which there is no material reality, for others (Kelemen, 2000, 2001) quality is a discursive resource whose effects upon individual and collective identities are both material and linguistic, both durable and transient at the same time. Many discursive conceptualizations of quality find resonance with Michel Foucault's writings on power, knowledge and the self (Foucault, 1977, 1980) and have been mirrored in recent literature on total quality management and business process re-engineering (Knights and McCabe, 1998a, 1998b; Kelemen, 2001).

Strengths and weaknesses of the discursive approach This approach could again be discredited for its lack of practical usefulness for, indeed, who could measure discourse? If quality resides only in language as some researchers suggest, we could change it by altering the way we speak about it. This in itself could be productive: it has been documented that language is essentially social and dependent on the material practices of a particular society. In turn, by altering the language of quality, one could, in theory change the way people think about it and interact with each other. Such processes of change could be experienced as positive and fulfilling but also as limiting and oppressive. It is hard to imagine that managers, employees, shareholders and consumers will ever refer to quality as discourse: yet, this approach to quality could stimulate researchers to construct more imaginative accounts about the meanings and consequences of quality in organizations.

The slogan approach

Organizations' obsession with quality and the consequent abuse of the term has led to a situation where quality has become a mere slogan. A slogan is a meaningless platitude with which nobody disagrees; as who could be against quality? As a slogan, quality gives the illusion of a unitary meaning that is endorsed by everyone in the organization; in so doing, it aims to construct a sense of normality and taken-for-granted commonsense among employees. Given its commonsensical message, it becomes harder and harder to ask questions such as: Why is quality a good thing? For whom is quality good? How is quality pursued by organizations? What are its consequences on organizational stakeholders? There is little doubt, for example, that McDonalds burgers are quality ones (providing one likes value-for-money, standardized burgers) but that is not to say that working as a sales assistant at McDonalds is a quality experience (Pearson and Parker, 2001). Furthermore, some companies that are seen to provide quality products and

services may do so at the expense of harming the environment. The controversial *Brent Spar* oil platform which was disposed by Shell in 1991 in the North Sea raised awareness of how some corporate practices relating to the environment may go unnoticed. Although Shell disposed of its oilrig in the most ecologically friendly way, the case was picked up by Greenpeace and described as a 'quick and dirty' deepwater disposal, thus stirring public emotion and anger and raising concern over how companies deal with the environment. More and more companies are exporting their manufacturing divisions to Asian and Eastern European countries due to cheap labour and advantageous taxation, destroying western communities and ways of life. Even companies which have built a reputation around the imagery of excellence do sometimes step away from this ideal when they deal with employees' disputes. The British Airways cabin crew strike from July 1997 is such an example: the three day strike organized by the cabin crew because they disliked the way the airline had imposed new working practices without their prior agreement was poorly handled by the leadership of the company who threatened the strikers with legal action (cf. *The Economist*, 7 December 1997).

Therefore, we should remain wary of slogans that urge us to view quality as an inherently morally good project, existing in some void, outside cultural and historical parameters. For the slogan of quality hides the contentious, political nature of the production and consumption practices in which quality is necessarily embedded. It is these practices that we need to understand and challenge in order to arrive at a notion of quality that is more democratic and meaningful.

Strengths and weaknesses of the slogan approach As a slogan, quality could be mobilized by numerous parties: managers, for example, can use the message of quality to inspire the employees, instil pride in the work they do and provide meaning for otherwise meaningless tasks. Although this could easily be a managerial ploy, it may work, particularly when employees perceive that it is beneficial to their career to be involved in quality programmes. Employees, on the other hand, could have their voice heard more often and more loudly because they now speak in the name of quality rather than in their own name. Given that quality is a company and society-wide concern, their suggestions for improving quality have a better chance of being heard and not pushed under the carpet. Therefore, various parties could pursue various ends, all in the name of quality. This scenario could in fact be a productive one, providing that all interested parties achieve their goals and at the same time the market endorses their efforts as quality. More talk about quality is not bad in itself but it could have disastrous effects when people do not do what they say they do. For example, when companies pledge quality in their advertising campaigns but do not deliver it, the slogan of quality could have negative effects upon organizational image and profits.

SUMMARY

This chapter has reviewed eight definitions of quality: managerial definitions regard quality as a technical issue which can be managed and controlled with the help of statistical and managerial knowledge. Critical approaches shed light on the multifaceted, contentious and political nature of quality. The chapter maps out the strengths and weakness of these eight approaches from the point of view of various stakeholders: that is, managers, employees, customers, shareholders, and so on. The boundaries between these approaches are by no means definitive or clear cut: they reflect the point of view of the author of the book. Chapter 2 provides a short historical overview of the principles that underpin the quality thinking, going back to antiquity, and reviews the wisdom of modern quality gurus.

KEY CONCEPTS

Here are the key concepts covered by this chapter: definitions of quality, managerial perspectives, critical perspectives, social constructivism, discourse, slogan.

QUESTIONS

At the end of this chapter you should be able to answer the following questions:

- What are the most important managerial/critical approaches to quality? Provide a short summary of each approach.
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of each individual approach?
- What is the difference between managerial and critical approaches to quality?
- To what extent can managerial and critical approaches be reconciled?
- What is your own definition of quality? What theoretical perspectives (managerial and/or critical) does it draw upon?