

# Business Ethics Quality: A Case Study from Greece

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the link between Business Ethics and Quality Management. Business Ethics as a management practice is well rooted in many organizations, but its contribution to quality management implementation programs and practices is not well documented. The ISO 9000:2015 standard and the Business Excellence frameworks and awards provide a basis for the implementation of a Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy, which is a distinctive approach to improving organizational performance and attaining competitive advantage. The main purpose of this paper is to examine various issues related to Business Ethics, including corporate citizenship, human rights, environmental protection, consumer protection, occupational health and safety, dishonest business practices (such as corruption, idleness, and weave problems), and investigate the relationship to Total Quality Management in an MNC operating in Greece. The data gathering was carried out through extensive and in-depth interviews with multiple informants, including the plant manager, the production manager, and the personnel manager, utilizing a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions. The goal was to collect data and produce basic information, enabling qualitative observations concerning organizations' Quality and Business Ethics programs and initiatives.

**Keywords:** Total Quality Management, Business Ethics, Greece, ISO 9000

## Introduction

Quality has become the most used word in today's discourse. It is used in the company advertisements, annual reports, banners, and on the lips of all the organization's stakeholders, government initiatives, and even in personal relationships. Some argue that quality is mostly rhetoric and good stories in order for organizations to promote sales and create a "customer-orientation" profile. In the United States and Europe, awards were established to promote awareness and provide a basis and a model for TQM implementation. However, the organizations in both the US and in Europe were not so enthusiastic about the awards, and the numbers are very small in all categories. On the other hand, the certification with the new ISO 90000:2000 series of standards is gaining ground, and especially in Asia, the increase in certified organizations is beyond expectations.

Business Ethics, on the other hand, concerns moral principles and standards that guide behavior in the world of business (Crane & Matten, 2016). It emphasizes values such as honesty, integrity, fairness, and respect for stakeholders. Scholars such as Oakland (2003) argue that TQM's emphasis on transparency, accountability, and fairness inherently embeds ethical considerations into business processes, suggesting a conceptual overlap between the two. Business ethics dissert issues such as corporate citizenship, human rights, environmental protection, consumer protection, occupational health and safety, dishonest business practices (corruption, idleness, and weave problems). There is an increasing demand on focusing at the humanistic dimension and social responsibility of business enterprises. Organizations during the 90s began to invest in formal Business Ethics programs (Weaver et al 1999), especially in the US, by establishing codes of ethics, using telephone lines for reporting ethical concerns, and employing ethical officers or creating Corporate Social Responsibility departments. However, according to Donaldson and Dunfee (1994), "the field of Business Ethics has been troubled by a lack of direction..." and Randal and Gibson (1990) found that research on Business Ethics was methodologically incorrect. It seems that quality can provide a new agenda and a new direction for the design and implementation of Business Ethics programs

and initiatives, and create a new language by using a set of frameworks such as Business Excellence models (EFQM, MBNQA) or Quality Management Systems such as ISO 9000 or the ISO 26000 CSR.

## Literature Review

### *Total Quality and ISO 9000*

One of the most controversial concepts in the history of management theory is the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM). It is considered a “social movement” (Hackman & Wageman, 1995), a “comprehensive way to improve total organizational performance and quality” (Hunt, 1993), or a “new paradigm in management” (Spencer, 1994; Grant et al., 1994). Its origins can be traced in the work of the so-called quality gurus, Deming, Juran, Feigenbaum, Ishikawa, and Crosby, and on the rise and dominance of the Japanese automobile industry in the world markets. TQM emphasizes self-control, autonomy, and creativity among employees and requires active co-operation rather than mere compliance (Wilkinson et al., 1991). Hence, it could be argued that it has a significant impact on the culture of the entire organization, calling for change, as it is a global philosophy involving all the organization’s members.

ISO 9000 introduction fifteen years ago created a series of controversies and doubts over the role and the significance of ISO 9000 series on improving product and service quality, achieving internal and external customer satisfaction, and improving performance (Tsiotras & Gotzamani, 1996; Dick, 2000; Van der Wiele et al., 2000; Magd & Curry, 2003; Stevenson & Barnes, 2001; Kartha, 2002.) According to Douglas et al. (2003), “ISO 9000 is a multi-million-pound industry with many individuals and organizations reliant on it for their livelihood, including quality consultants, lead auditors, internal auditors, supplier auditors, quality representatives/managers and software designers/sellers as well as the numerous training companies and certification bodies and their employees.” However, other authors, including Kartha (2002), argue that the new standards main purpose is to assist organizations to “identify mistakes, streamline their operations, and be able to guarantee a consistent level of quality.”

The newly revised standard launched at the end of 2000 is described as “an attempt to harmonize all the standards and remove the manufacturing bias,” according to Beckford (2002). Several authors stated that the new ISO9000: 2000 is directed towards performance rather than conformance (Najmi & Kehoe, 2000). Coleman and Douglas (2003) argue that organizations, to achieve the new ISO 9000:2000, should demonstrate that they have quality processes and procedures in place, they are skeptical about what happens after ISO 9000 certification. Casadesús and Karapetrovic (2005), studying the relationship between the “new” and the “old” ISO, found that “the evaluation of the new ISO 9001: 2000 standard is generally positive.” Vouzas and Gotzamani (2005) contend that there is no negative impact but mention that the perceived benefits are less than the previous standard and that the level of reported benefits from ISO 9001/2/3:1994 has decreased over time, as evidenced by two empirical studies conducted in 1998 and 2002. Overall, they argue that there is “an erosion of the perceived usefulness of ISO 9001:2000 in the future, especially in terms of short-term benefits.”

Martínez-Lorente and Martínez-Costa (2004) further argue that organizations certified by ISO 9000 “may have gone a part of the way to TQM”. However, the authors claim that it is only the “first part of the way, not its end, because there is a large amount of TQM requirements that ISO 9000 does not satisfy.” Research on ISO 9000:2000 all over the world is ongoing, and the perceived benefits and its integration with other quality initiatives are expected to clarify the picture and provide a basis for further improvement of the standard (Laszo, 2000; McAdam & Jackson, 2002; Najmi & Kehoe, 2000). According to Vouzas and Gotzamani (2005), “careful analysis of the ISO 9000:1994 standards’ requirements compared

to the basic principles of TQM and the requirements of the two most representative business excellence awards, the European Quality Award and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, reveals several main shortages of the ISO 9000:1994 standards.” The authors noted a lack of strategic quality planning, absence of top management commitment, insufficient focus on customer satisfaction, and a lack of systematic training in quality. Furthermore, HR competitiveness, benchmarking, and quality cost measurement are absent, as well as issues related to health, safety, and the environment in a study in Greek EQA-awarded organizations. However, many authors believe that the newly revised ISO 9000:2000 series of standards is a significant improvement on the previous version in terms of its conceptual simplification, process-based vision, and acknowledgment of the importance of customer satisfaction as a key requirement for verifying the effectiveness of the quality system (Conti, 2002). The basic principles on which the new standards’ requirements are based (as found in the ISO 9000:2000 document) are much more TQM-oriented.

### ***Quality and Business Ethics***

Douglas Montgomery’s editorial in *Quality and Reliability Engineering International Journal* (2003) states that organizations embracing the philosophy of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can enhance their reputation and gain greater financial returns. Furthermore, it argues that quality has a role to play, that quality has a very strong ethical foundation, and that all quality gurus (Deming, Juran) incorporated ethical issues in their writings.

A direct relationship between quality and ethics and social responsibility is that of quality systems such as ISO 9000 and ISO 26000. According to McWilliams et al. (2006), there is a growing interest in CSR and ISO 26000, driven by three main motivations: coercive, altruistic and strategic. As mentioned earlier, ISO 9000 is a Quality Management System, while ISO 26000 is guidance on social responsibility. Both standards have similarities and differences in their scope, principles, and content (Castka & Balzarova, 2008). ISO 26000 can not be certified by a third party, and its scope includes issues such as social, environmental, and legal diversity in the world and looks at them in terms of globalization, climate change, organizational governance and sustainable development, etc. (ISO/TMB/WG/SR, 2006). The ISO 26000 standard consists of four clauses: the SR context, the SR principles, the SR issues and SR guidance, and its main purpose is to build awareness and create an ethical philosophy within the organization (Castka & Balzarova, 2007).

In the early days of the quality movement, authors such as Deming (1986), Crosby (1979), and Peters (1988) stated that quality has a high ethical content. Vinten (1998) states that “TQM is built on a foundation of ethics, integrity, and trust. It fosters openness, fairness, and sincerity and allows involvement by everyone.” Vinten (1998) also believes that “Crisis ethical management comes expensive. The extent of ethical audit depends upon the organization’s attitude to business ethics and society, as well as to its more immediate stakeholders. Ethical considerations are the only guaranteed way to ensure this is by the adoption of total quality procedures. There is hardly any management philosophy that is as much adopted by companies as quality management

According to Svensson and Wood (2005), the core values of quality management should be built upon ethical fundamentals, and quality tools and techniques should consider these fundamentals. Quality is about making things right, responsibility for quality lies with all, customer satisfaction is the main drive for success, and profound knowledge is the new name for quality. The main argument is that doing good and doing well is the key to excellence. Organizations can not just invest and focus only on technical-oriented approaches and techniques but rather enhance and utilize their people and contribute to the community. According to Steiner & Steiner (1995), quality, productivity, and ethics go hand in hand. Issues such as corporate image, better environment, avoidance of stricter government regulations, and prevention of social problems rather than their cure are the main elements or

aspects of the above relationship. In a study conducted in European organizations, Steiner and Steiner (1995) found that very few organizations of the sample had an ethical culture, and statements or codes of ethics, and there was no difference between service and industrial organizations. According to their study results, ethical dimensions should be incorporated into the quality management process. Fisscher and Nijhof (2005) tried to investigate the implications of Business Ethics for Quality management. The authors argue that quality cannot be managed successfully without an explicit focus on moral values, and the contrary, ethical behavior in a business environment, assumes full quality control to answer moral questions.

Another aspect of the quality and ethics relationship was examined by Gonzales and Guillen (2002): the ethical dimension of Leadership in Quality. One of the main quality principles is that quality requires top management commitment, and that leadership is one of the critical success factors in quality management implementation. The authors state that “the ethical dimension of leadership refers to the right decisions and actions combined with good intentions, and accompanied by moral correctness of behaviours.” They suggest that organizations should start building moral trust in their manager’s behavior, by providing them training in ethical issues, allowing them to write an ethical statement, and creating an ethical culture in their function. Arasli (2002) posited that ethical leadership is a critical enabler for TQM success, asserting that leaders who uphold ethical standards cultivate a quality-oriented organizational culture. Svensson and Wood (2005), however, found that there are different expectations and perceptions between managers and employees concerning corporate ethical issues in TQM. Finally, all the so-called Business Excellence (EFQM model and the Malcolm Baldrige Award), focus on ethical issues, specifically on Corporate Social Responsibility. Impact on society, satisfaction of clients and satisfaction of employees are important elements of the widely adapted EFQM model and the Malcolm Baldrige Award. In this way, quality management leads automatically to moral deliberations and responsibilities toward the different parties in and around an organization (Steiner & Steiner, 1995; Fisscher & Nijhof, 2005).

Recent studies advocate for Integrative Management Systems that combine TQM, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and Ethical Governance to create sustainable organizational models (Zairi & Peters, 2002). Moreover, researchers suggest studying cross-cultural perspectives on ethics and quality, as ethical norms and quality expectations vary globally, affecting TQM application and outcomes (Lagrosen, 2003).

Finally, a substantial body of empirical research supports the notion that ethics and quality management are interdependent: Longenecker and Gioia (2000) found that organizations with strong ethical climates demonstrated superior quality outcomes. Ethical climates foster trust, cooperation, and open communication—all critical enablers of successful TQM. Ahire and Dreyfus (2000) revealed that trust among employees, managers, and suppliers enhances commitment to TQM processes and reduces resistance to change. Studies suggest that ethically responsible companies report higher employee satisfaction and engagement, critical for TQM success (Wilkinson et al., 1994). When employees perceive fairness and respect, they are more likely to contribute proactively to quality improvements. Zairi and Peters (2002) highlight that TQM combined with ethical business practices strengthens brand reputation and customer loyalty, creating sustainable competitive advantages.

## **Research Methodology**

In this paper, the author suggests that to have a reliable and objective depiction of the Business Ethics on quality improvement frameworks, a thorough examination and analysis should include all the various approaches and perceptions recorded in literature—some of them based on empirical data and others deriving from rhetoric and “good-stories” or “how things ought to be”

perspective. The paper examines one industrial organization, a multinational company in the drinks and beverages sector that has operated in Greece for over 45 years and has a long tradition of corporate social responsibility. The company was among the first organizations in Greece to receive the ISO 9000 in the 90's and implemented a series of standards (ISO 9000, ISO 22000, ISO 18001, and ISO 14001) with a strong commitment to quality. The data gathering was carried out through extensive and in-depth interviews asking several multiple informants, i.e., the plant manager, the production manager, the personnel manager, using a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions in one of the three plants operating in Greece. The main purpose was to collect data and produce basic information, enabling qualitative observations concerning organizations' Quality and Ethical efforts. The questionnaire was developed based on state-of-the-art literature review and consisted of three parts. The first part was questions about the profile of the organization (legal status, number of employees, etc.), the second part was about the organization's Business Ethics efforts (policy, programs, initiatives, etc.), and the third was about the link between quality improvement efforts and Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility. This paper is based on a pilot study of larger-scale research aiming at exploring both qualitative and quantitative the link between Business Ethics and Quality. The data analysis provides some ground for generalizations, even though subjective judgments were also made from the analysis of the case.

## **Findings**

### ***The Company profile***

Company A is one of the biggest organizations in Greece in the Drink and Beverage sector, and the leader in alcoholic beverages. In the past ten years, the company invested almost 300 million Euros in infrastructure, and its plants are considered the most modern in Europe. The company is a major sponsor of athletic and social events and promotes safe alcohol drinking among young drinkers. The company's advertisement logo is "enjoy responsibly," and on its webpage, there are pages dedicated to safe drinking. All companies' plants have environmental standards concerning energy consumption (electricity, gas), pollution (water, air, noise), and money spent on introducing environmentally friendly production technologies. The company was awarded in 1987 with the best award for environmental consciousness and in 1998 with the Corporate Social Responsibility Award. The plant in which the study took place has 300 full-time employees and 100 seasonal personnel in approximately 20 specializations. The plant went through restructuring and infrastructure modifications in the past ten years. From 1996 to 2000, there was a multi-skilling program aiming at enhancing the skills and abilities of the personnel, with the majority coming from nearby rural communities.

### **Business Ethics**

The organization's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) issues are in the hands of the Communications Affairs department in the central offices in Athens. The department is new, and before that, CSR and Business Ethics were handled by the financial department. The main philosophy of CSR in organizations is that Ethics is everybody's job, and all employees from top to bottom are responsible. Furthermore, the company must prove that through everyday practices and culture. Every year, the company organizes a CSR conference aiming at building awareness and communicating best practices to all stakeholders.

Employees and management are aware of the importance and value of Business Ethics through the company newsletter and of events taking place inside the organization. The main programs and initiatives introduced and implemented related to Business Ethics are: promoting employee participation (many work groups operating at the plant, both, functional and cross functional) written commitment of all work groups within the plant on quality and safety, full implementation of ISO 18000, continuous training and coaching, strict numerical

goals regarding energy consumption, pollution, recycling, internal and external benchmarking on quality and CSR issues, support of local community, formation of voluntary groups for environmental purposes (cleaning beaches, planting trees on burned forests, etc.), schools and university students visits, etc.

However, there are no formal ethical codes that take the form of work practices and responsibilities among employees and managers in the plant. The reason is that people have been within the organizations for many years, and there is no need for written statements and formal ethical policies in the plant, according to top management. There are no training programs focused on CSR and Business Ethics on the plant, and there are no disciplinary actions in cases of ethical malpractice. The training manager mentioned that the climate is that of a "public organization," meaning that employees enjoy work stability and security, and formalities and rules are being incorporated through informal communication.

Over the years, the organization and the plant, in particular, had no incidents of unethical behavior from managers or employees. The plant manager, in cooperation with the management team and the union, has day-to-day communication, and the goal is to prevent any actions causing problems (proactive philosophy) inside the plant or affecting customers or the local community. In cases of customer complaints about the product – retailer or final customer- (not proper filling of the bottles, foreign particles inside the bottle, etc.) the organization policy is to provide information to the customers and give them the opportunity to visit the plant and the facilities and to get familiar with the production and the quality assurance system. Today, the organization is trying to be as effective as possible, introducing new technology, utilizing people and techniques, and cutting costs. All these are done in accordance with the organization's Corporate Social Responsibility policy and with the change of philosophy. Being effective and financially healthy depends on ethics, and ethics can push an organization forward.

### ***Business Ethics and Quality***

Quality has always been a major concern of the organization since its establishment. The company's products are known worldwide for their supreme quality. The plant has been certified with ISO 9000 since 1994 and, as mentioned earlier, had two other certifications (ISO 14000 and ISO 18000). The main driver for quality improvement in the plant is the quality improvement teams. The teams were formed with the consensus of the union. The main goal of the teams is to ensure that quality procedures are understood and implemented without problems. There are a series of financial and non-financial incentives to promote quality and productivity. Employees get a productivity bonus based on the annual performance appraisal system, and there are awards for the best team in the plant. Training is considered an investment because it allows employees to learn more and become less vulnerable to changes in technology and systems implementation. The multi-skilling program enhances employees' capabilities and protects them from being obsolete. This was considered an ethical program by the top management and the employees.

There is a very strong connection between quality and ethics in the plant, according to all informants. The plant organization is focused on satisfying customer needs and protecting the public from excessive alcohol drinking. There are annual customer satisfaction surveys and on-the-spot audits (from the sales department) at the consumer points (supermarkets, cafés, bars, clubs, etc). The goal is to have zero complaints, zero defects, and zero accidents. The company used various quality management techniques and tools, such as benchmarking, business process re-engineering, etc in order to monitor and control all quality issues related to ethical problems. Best practices among the company's worldwide plants are articulated and top management people have the opportunity to visit other plants around the world and learn new methods and practices.

The organization is not in the process of applying for the European Quality Award, according to the plant manager. Top management is aware that EQA is providing a model for

self-assessment and that in the model, there is a CSR part. The training manager at the plant said that EQA is the next step and a major challenge for the organization and for the plant itself. However, he believes that many things need to be done before the organization gives the green light for the award process, such as formal written CSR policy in each plant, the appointment of a CSR officer, and a long-term training program on ethical issues for all personnel.

Finally, ISO 26000 CSR is more than welcome, and the managerial team of the plant believes that it is only a matter of time before it is introduced and implemented.

## Conclusions

Business Ethics is a necessity and a major challenge for all organizations around the world. It provides a set of guidelines and a new culture for the future. Quality management, which emphasizes awareness of both internal and external customers, promotes a culture where production avoids pollution, minimizes the use of energy and resources, and prevents harm to individuals. Quality serves as a tool to prevent ethical problems and change the way organizations think about the product, service, and stakeholders. In quality, financial profit is replaced by value for the people inside and outside the organization. Providing a safe workplace for the employees, keeping the production under environmental standards and creating an ethical new image for the product and services are the main issues in the ethics-quality relationship. The organization studied is in the process of changing its practices and re-evaluating its policy on ethics. Greece is a country with a long tradition in ethics, from Socrates, Plato, and the Greek philosophers, to the new reality.

The findings consistently show that TQM and business ethics are mutually reinforcing. Ethical behavior fosters a culture where quality initiatives can thrive, while TQM practices support the institutionalization of ethical conduct through systemic and continuous improvement. Therefore, organizations seeking excellence must ensure that quality management systems are firmly grounded in ethical principles, recognizing that sustainability in business performance is as much about doing the right thing as it is about doing things right.

This paper is the first step of a major research project on Business Ethics and Quality. The research is underway, and the author are making final alterations in the quantitative questionnaire, aiming at Greek organizations already involved with CSR and that are members of the Greek Network for Corporate Social Responsibility.

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