

In My Opinion...

Dean Says:

TOTAL QUALITY FIRE ALARM SYSTEMS

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In case you hadn't noticed, society in this country has developed an ever-increasing fascination with self-help books. Take a stroll through your local mega-bookstore. Notice how much shelf space the store has devoted to books that will help you become a better person.

And, authors have not only focused on improving individuals. The work-a-day world has also provided delicious fodder for the self-help gurus. Books detailing how to improve the corporate setting also overflow the shelves.

With an admitted measure of skepticism, springing forth from my years in the fire protection business, I wonder how much time will pass before someone writes a definitive self-help book for the folks who deal with fire alarm systems.

Titles like: *The One-Minute Fire Alarm Design*; *Total Quality Fire Alarm Systems*; *My Fire Alarm System is OK and Your Fire Alarm System Is OK*; *Fire Alarm Systems By Objectives*; flit through my mind. And yet, it's true that since a fire alarm system is, after all, a system, it can benefit from some of the

concepts of the current corporate self-help craze.

For example, fire alarm folk can certainly apply at least two of Dr. Demming's foundational principles of Total Quality Management. Specifically: benchmarking and continuous improvement.

Benchmarking. Two broad performance objectives for fire alarm systems state that we want a system that will operate when it should and remain in a normal standby condition the rest of the time. Stated another way, we want an alarm signal when there's a fire, but we want no false alarms.

Within the spread of these two objectives lies the upper and lower limits of a baseline quality for the fire alarm system. Using all of the influence that we have over the fire alarm system, we want to assure that when the team of manufacturers, designer, installer, owner, and authorities having jurisdiction bring a fire alarm system into being, that the system has an appropriate baseline level of quality.

We include among the efforts that we employ to meet this objective such items as developing a system-focused set of specifications; choosing only listed components; creating a design that meets the requirements of NFPA 72-1996, *National Fire Alarm Code*®; following appropriate installation requirements of the *Code*; and making certain the authorities having jurisdiction have reviewed each phase of system implemen-

tation.

The initial acceptance test conducted in the presence of the authorities having jurisdiction and the finishing of the Record of Completion finalize the establishment of the baseline level of quality for the fire alarm system.

Continuous improvement. Now, how to assure that the system will maintain the quality established by the initial benchmark. Periodic visual inspection, periodic testing, and periodic maintenance will obviously play key roles in this process. So will reacceptance testing where someone makes changes to the fire alarm system. Without the continuous improvement of these four items, the owner cannot maintain the initial baseline level of quality for the system.

When an owner has failed to maintain the baseline level of quality, then authorities having jurisdiction have little reason to have confidence in the integrity of the fire alarm system. With little or no level of confidence, then the owner has essentially wasted the money he or she spent on the system.

Maybe we should take a lesson from the numerous corporate consultants today who obtain contracts to advise various business enterprises on "business process redesign." These consultants collect significant fees to come into a corporation and help senior management analyze the structure of daily work flow.

They focus on uncovering interdependencies and interrelationships, both formal and informal. Then they write a detailed report that captures the detail of the existing business process. The consultants can then aid senior management as they study the business process and find ways to adjust the overall corporate performance.

In our world, once we gain an understanding of how to make certain a fire alarm system effectively perform over the life of the system, we can make appropriate adjustments to specifications, designs, products, and even the *Code*. This will make certain we actually receive the protection for which we've paid.

My, what a novel idea. □

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