



BY ROGER FROST

Editorial

## Dazed and confused in Harrogate

***T**here were moments during the European Organization for Quality's Q2002 conference in Harrogate, northern England, when I felt like nutting<sup>1)</sup> someone.*

Not that the conference, hosted by the Institute of Quality Assurance (IQA), was boring – just the opposite, the jam-packed programme of presentations was rich in variety and content quality. In fact, it was a bit too rich. It was like one of those foreign business trips where your hosts are so set on giving you a good welcome that they treat you to one refined and expensive meal after another. By day three, your digestive system is just crying out for a simple, but wholesome vegetable soup.

There were two dimensions to my problem with Q2002: conference speakers and Western culture (well, if you're going to have a problem – you may as well make it a whopper...).

An often-quoted survey which asked people to score stress-producing events resulted in a top of the list that was not, as you might expect, something like discovering you have an incurable illness. No, for the majority of people surveyed, the most stressful event was...public speaking. Therefore, conference speakers, most of whom actually volunteer to speak in public – they may even compete to be selected – cannot be considered as normal human beings. This was easy to verify at Q2002 where there were dozens of speakers who not only had something interesting to share – and with ease, if you please – to audiences ranging from dozens to hundreds, but who, in a disquieting number of cases, could put it across with consummate communication skills, and even charisma.

Descended from Mount Olympus were gurus, leaders of men and captains of industry, the latter riding high on excellent business results, consecrated by quality awards and fuelled by pride and passion. There was drama. Or more accurately, amateur dramatics. Such as when one speaker declared that leaders were there to serve the people they lead – and to illustrate his point, he slowly sank to one knee, raising his outstretched hands in offering, like a knight before his queen. I don't know what your reaction would be if you arrived at work one day and



1) British slang for “administering a head butt”.

were greeted like this by your CEO. Mine would be to conclude that behind his noble brow, his brain was definitely out at play with the fairies.

Well, if the conference was so obviously entertaining, you're asking yourself, what am I moaning about? I'll tell you: it's the combination of these extraordinary communicators and that bane of the West – the adversarial culture. What I mean is that if you are *for something*, in general you have to be *against everything else* – or more accurately, against anyone else who disagrees with you. Instead of working together to discover in practice what produces the desired results, we argue about who is right. And in the latter case, that “who” is usually the hierarchic superior, the most aggressive or the most articulate.

So at Q2002, many speakers seemed to be selling a single quality solution, whether it be Six Sigma, the Deming approach, the Business Excellence model, systems thinking, passion at work, ethic-centred leadership and so on, to the exclusion of the rest. And when they were among the skilled communicators, they were very, very convincing – which is why I became dazed and confused in Harrogate, because listening to these silver-tongued devils, they were *all* obviously right. And yet in real life, the “one size fits all” approach usually means that it fits no-one. Those who can alter their approach to fit the context, or choose the tool appropriate to the job, seem to be the most successful in consistently achieving the desired results.

### Don't mention I - - 9 - - - !

You will have noticed that I have not yet mentioned ISO 9000. With cause. In most of the conference sessions I attended, the world's most widely adopted quality management standard was hardly mentioned, except for an insular British argument at the opening session on whether accreditation should be compulsory. This silence is strange because among the quality tools available, ISO 9000, implemented in 161 countries, has a strong claim to being the most universal. Maybe that is the problem. ISO 9000 is too “common”, in both main senses of the term, for golden lads and lasses whose jaded palates needed more “sophisticated” quality fare on which to wax lyrical.

But as I said earlier: most conference speakers are abnormal. In the real world, however, where ISO 9000 is used extensively, that standard is far from being as sectarian as some of the experts. For example, in *ISO 9000 + ISO 14000 News*, which preceded *ISO Management Systems*, we several times reported on the use made by winners of the European Quality Award and US Baldrige Prize of *both* ISO 9000 and the EFQM Business Excellence model or the Baldrige model.

It's a pity, therefore, that ISO 9000 did not rate more air time – not for ISO, which is big enough to look after itself, but for the sake of those delegates from organizations in developing countries and economies in transition who attend conferences like Q2002 in search of guidance on which quality tools to invest their scarce resources.

When they know, on the one hand, that ISO 9000 is implemented world-wide, and on the other hand, hear so little about it at an international quality conference, then the disparity is bound to create a malaise. I certainly felt a little uncomfortable at the session devoted to ISO 9000. Yes! There was such a thing and – surprise, surprise – it was probably one of the parallel sessions that attracted the biggest audience. But it was a rather subdued audience, giving the impression of people turning up at a meeting where they had to confess in public to a strange addiction – that of actually preferring plain vanilla ice cream to awful, but trendy new flavours.



The session was not helped by the rather damning title of, “ISO 9000 – alive and kicking?”, which already gave the impression that the standard had one foot in the grave when, in fact, ISO 9000 is very much alive and kicking worldwide – with the possible exception of Harrogate during Q2002.

For me, the man from British Gas (participating in the “Quality for Senior Managers” session) saved the day(s). The company’s Director of Quality, Stephen Pratt, was no charismatic speaker – which was already a point in his favour. I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized that he was nervous at speaking in public, because here at last was a normal bod who might actually be going to talk sense. And he did, demonstrating that you don’t need to be a slick operator to be a good communicator.

Mr. Pratt had not come to do a sales pitch for a quality model, even of ISO 9001:1994, to which British Gas has achieved company-wide certification. He simply recounted the company’s continuing quality journey and the results obtained so far. Well before the arrival of ISO 9001:2000, British Gas discovered the importance of the process approach by applying ISO 9001:1994 to the whole organization, thereby clarifying the all-important interfaces between functions and allowing integration of the company’s efforts.

Using corrective and preventive actions to identify areas where staff needed training to use the quality system effectively was resulting, he reported, in an improvement to the bottom line of some GBP four million annually.

### Reality-based tool

British Gas has set itself one year to migrate to ISO 9001:2000 and the transition should be a smooth one as in implementing the 1994 version, the company has already “discovered” for itself most of the quality management principles on which the revised series is based, such as the leverage obtained from mutually beneficial supplier relationships. This should not be surprising as ISO 9000 is not a model which someone has dreamed up as “a good idea”, but is a reality-based tool, built on experience, which synthesizes good management practice by effective and efficient organizations worldwide.

Mr. Pratt dispelled my confusion and, I hope, gave those working quality managers in the audience something of substance to take back to their companies.

So all ended well; literally, as the closing session, highlighting the links between sustainability and business performance was excellent – and is also accessible, along with the whole Q2002 conference proceedings on the IQA Web site: [www.iqa.org/q2002](http://www.iqa.org/q2002).

*And the moral of the story? A dash of charisma and a sprinkling of consummate communication skills add spice, but too much can spoil the dish. I’ll take what works...and the vegetable soup.* ■

