Societal Quality: The Means to Thriving in a Healthy Planet

N. (Ram) Ramanathan
Independent Counsellor in Quality-based management & Adviser (TQM), SRF Limited

Man's quest to conquer nature through science and technology combined with a spirit of enterprise has yielded an unprecedented quality of life – better nutrition, health and lifespan, human rights, education, and luxuries. However, exploiting the earth as though it were infinite has accelerated the depletion of resources, pile-ups of waste, greenhouse gas emissions, pollution and bio-extinction. Our food and water, and our luxuries carry enough toxins to cause widespread lifestyle diseases. Something is wrong.

Quality Management (QM) has a concept of societal quality, which means avoidance of harm to society during production and use of products. Nonetheless, despite many positives for the consumer from years of quality management and a slew of environmental laws and standards, harm to society has been intensifying.

Despite initiatives such as GRI (at company level) and SDG (at national level), metrics for reduction of harm are hardly part of management dashboards. These don't figure in the targets of designers either, except as regulations mandate them. Quality assurance in production processes seldom includes sustainability metrics.

Radical reforms have been suggested for pricing the use of finite resources, emitting greenhouse gases or pollutants, and for funding tree cover and other conservation activities. Quality management does help cut wastes, which adds to profits while mitigating planetary damage, but left with only voluntary measures, good companies cannot compete with polluters who pay nothing for damage or clean-up. Pricing and mandating of societal quality are therefore essential.

Nevertheless, the strengths of QM are to 1) devise, deploy and plan for achievement of appropriate metrics, 2) cut wastes relentlessly, 3) make the design process robust (in meeting sustainability goals) and 4) do all this with everyone's involvement. This paper explores how QM can be put in the service of corporates to achieve genuine societal quality, thus enabling continued thriving of humanity in an increasingly healthy planet.