Organizational Change as an Orchestrated Social Movement: Determinants and Implications of Recruitment to a “Quality Initiative”

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April 2002

* Paper prepared for presentation at the Social Movement and Organization Conference, Ann Arbor, May 2002. This research was supported by a grant from the Citigroup Behavioral Sciences Research Council.
Abstract

Many attempts at organizational change take the form of “orchestrated social movements,” where elites seek to set social movement-like processes in motion rather than establish new organizational rules or roles. Programs are rolled out with symbolic support and references to long-term career and organizational benefits, but few material resources. A small cadre of professionals plays the role of activists, involving workers and managers in training sessions and problem-solving teams. The hope is that positive feedback between the converted and the unconverted will lead new behaviors to diffuse and become self-sustaining.

We examine one such process, that of a “quality initiative” at a global financial services corporation. A survey of bank employees is analyzed to develop insight into the determinants of recruitment? A survey of bank employees indicates that attitudes to the program reflect individual values, forms of personal involvement, experience with related programs, expectations of program durability, and the attitudes of co-workers. We argue the fragility of the initiative is explained in part by its difficulty in recruiting adherents, coupled with the fact that workers rather than managers are its strongest supporters.
Organizational Change as an Orchestrated Social Movement: Determinants and Implications of Recruitment to a “Quality Initiative”

Understandings of organizational change, like organizations themselves, are informed by cultural assumptions of rationality, authority, and functional integration. The focus is on formal adoption and on the subsequent implementation of new procedures or roles. In principle, implementation involves the way managers or executives design work systems, create positions, modify incentives, and elicit compliance. The process may be messy and contested in practice --- organization members may resist and strategies backfire --- but the organizing frame of programmatic implementation remains.

This paper argues that some sorts of organizational change may be fruitfully approached as social movements. The point has been made before, most notably by Zald and Berger (1978), who discuss efforts to overthrow organizational leaders as coup d’états, whistle-blowing and factional conflict as bureaucratic insurgency, and union conflict and prison riots as mass movements.

We study a different sort of social movement, which we term an “orchestrated social movement.” Here elites seek to set mobilization processes in motion rather than implement new organizational rules or roles. Programs have symbolic support but few material resources. A small cadre of professionals plays the role of activists, involving workers and managers through training sessions and new work activities. The hope is that positive feedback from the newly converted will lead novel behaviors to diffuse and become self-sustaining.

A note on our usage. We think the term “social movement” combines two central connotations: a processual component referring to activist-led mobilization of formally
autonomous actors around a cause, and a substantive component indicating that the mobilized group are challengers who contest structured inequities and lack ready access to power. The substantive connotation often carries the weight: for example, Tilly (1984: 306) defines a social movement as a “series of interactions between power holders and persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation...” Here, we put the stress on process, referring to “orchestrated social movements” rather than “orchestrated activist-led mobilizing efforts.”

The paper examines the quality initiative of a multinational bank, here named Global Financial, to illustrate and develop our idea. We first describe the symbolic framing of Global Financial’s program and some of its core elements. We then examine sources of employee attitudes towards the initiative. A survey of bank employees points to the role of individual values, forms of personal involvement, experience with related programs, expectations of program durability, and the attitudes of co-workers. Finally, we consider the implications of who was recruited, and who wasn’t, for the fate of Global Financial’s quality initiative.

We should note that a case could be made that the “total quality” movement examined here stands in opposition to institutional power centers in the American corporation. Quality departments are marginal relative to finance and operational units, and seek to promote forms of organizational innovation that question established routines and lines of authority. While we see the force of this perspective, we develop a more conservative analysis of total quality as led from the top, and thus closer to the characteristic social movement in form than in content.
Global Financial’s Quality Initiative

Global Financial’s Corporate Quality Initiative began in the 1st quarter of 1997. It was not the first total quality effort mounted by the organization --- most notably, there had been a substantial quality program in the Credit Cards business in the early 1990s. Quality departments were also well institutionalized within Global Financial, most prominently in the Consumer Bank, and these departments were regularly involved in a variety of programs. But the Quality Initiative stood out as the bank’s first corporate-wide quality program and the first total quality effort that had the personal support of the bank’s CEO.

The quality initiative was announced as a vehicle for profound organizational change. The organization’s internal newsletter portrayed it as “the bank’s breakout strategy...” Global Financial’s CEO introduced the initiative in a taped interview distributed to all employees. In response to the question “The quality initiative—why now?”

“We must distinguish our presence. Its demanded by the world, will deliver services in a framework that’s never existed. This program will touch every Globalbanker, all 92,000. We’re living in a world where must energize everybody in the company, and historically we haven’t done that.”

Quality was framed as offering something for everyone. For the organization, the aim was to reduce errors in customer interactions and speed up operations.

“Let’s improve by a factor of 10. So if it takes 6 months, let’s do it in 6 days. If it takes 6 hours, let’s do it in 6 minutes.”

For employees, a vision of greater autonomy and responsibility was offered.

“The hierarchical management structure will have to give way to some collective activities that will improve our effectiveness in the marketplace. Decisions won’t flow from a management level to people on the line who are expected to
implement those decisions...

We’re telling everyone, choose a process, figure out what and where the problems are, work together to come up with solutions, and then put your solutions to work.”

The CEO described one set of individual benefits in the following terms:

“This is going to be a much better place to come to work for every Globalbanker....We all spend a lot of our time fixing mistakes or overcoming problems. Its not only time consuming; it’s frustrating and stressful....Dealing with our customers on matters of substance, rather than on problems that originate somewhere else, will automatically make us feel far more empowered.”

But it was not expected that the initiative could be fueled solely by its intrinsic appeal. The CEO added long-run personal advantage to the list.

“The best people in the company are going to surface. Its going to change a lot of career paths.”

Career opportunities related to the total quality program were not built into the bank’s evaluation and compensation structure, however. They depended instead on the initiative of individual managers. Managers who got “on board” might well set up major projects under the quality umbrella and reward team leaders and participants who identified productivity improvements. But managers who saw total quality as limited or ineffective would not.

For a symbolically central program, Global Financial’s Quality Initiative possessed minimal organizational infrastructure. A Corporate Quality Office was formed under the directorship of one of the firm’s 12 executive vice-presidents, a long-standing corporate leader who had established the quality program in Credit Cards while directing that unit. A total of sixteen quality professionals made up the staff of the Corporate Quality Office. They were aided by an executive on loan from Motorola, whose Six
Sigma™ methodology and cross-functional process improvement approach the bank built its program around.

The Corporate Quality Office did not act alone, of course. It worked in partnership with the bank’s established quality control departments, whose personnel within the United States alone numbered some 674 officers and 211 non-officer employees. But the Corporate Quality Office lacked line authority over these much larger units, whose directors reported to business heads within their divisions.

Early in the initiative, external consultants were central to program activities. They included Motorola staff who instructed bank employees in statistical methodologies and cross-functional process improvement techniques, as well as independent corporate culture consultants. For example, one of us observed a quality training session led by a quality professional from Global Financial’s Consumer Bank, a senior trainer from a consultancy specializing in corporate culture, and an independent consultant. As Global Financial personnel became licensed in the methodologies formally adopted by the bank, the proportion of in-house trainers and facilitators grew.

The idea was that quality was “everyone’s job.” Expansion of the bank’s quality personnel and the formation of a powerful corporate office with line authority were avoided as fostering a quality bureaucracy. When asked who was responsible for the initiative, the CEO replied “each of us. This is how we are going to work....I’m going to have a few projects on my personal quality.”

Operationally, the quality initiative involved three main activities. First, all bank employees were to receive formal quality training. This training was organized to cascade through the organization, with executives and top managers participating in a first wave
of training, followed by their direct reports, and on down through front-line workers. Quality training involved two broad components: a statistical language for describing and analyzing organizational problems and a behavioral focus on team building, cooperation, and organizational values.

Second, operational units were asked to report their performance on a series of “quality metrics.” Operational units counted “defects” in customer interaction, like delays in account openings and credit decisions. The Corporate Quality Office maintained a database of scores across sub-units, whose participation was voluntary. In keeping with the central office’s lack of line authority, business units were also permitted to redefine metrics to fit local circumstances.

Third, managers could form cross-functional performance improvement (CFPI, or quality) teams to address business challenges. Team sponsors identified the team’s “critical business problem” and recruited participants, while quality personnel provided facilitation and support. The average project lasted about a year, with participants adding project tasks to their regular responsibilities.

Each of these activities was substantial in scope. While we lack a count of how many employees received quality training, the survey reported below suggests a figure of 82 percent among US employees. Two quarters after the initiative began, 36 of the bank’s 46 major business units were reporting scores on quality metrics. And over 1200 quality teams were formed across Global Financial.

**Employee Survey**

In April 2000 we conducted a random sample survey of Global Financial employees working in the United States. Names were selected from a May 1999 employment roster,
with the sampling frame defined as regular employees working 35 hours per week or more who had been hired before July 1998. Although 750 surveys were mailed, we later received personnel data indicating that 649 sampled individuals were still with Global Financial in December 1999 (i.e., 101 of the sampled employees had left the bank in the last seven months of 1999). 245 completed surveys were received, for a response rate of 37.8% (under the implausible but conservative assumption of no additional turnover between January and April 2000).

The quality initiative was thus more than two years old when our survey was mailed. This meant that the early resource constraints and growing pains of the initiative had been overcome, but it also meant that the bloom was off the rose. The great majority of quality initiative activities that would ever occur at Global Financial had already taken place, and this fact was apparent to many of our potential respondents. We think all of this strategic, because employees were well positioned to offer mature assessments and because the larger context did not promote forced enthusiasm for a new program.

A comparison of background characteristics shows modest differences between survey respondents and non-respondents. 53% of respondents and 52% of non-respondents were men. The average respondent was 41 years of age, had been with Global Financial 10.6 years, and received a salary of $69,991; non-respondents were also on average 41 years old, had been with the firm 11.1 years, and received a salary of $67,832. However, respondents were significantly less likely to be managerial or professional personnel. 74% of respondents but 82% of non-respondents were FLSA exempt.
Attitudes towards the Quality Initiative. While research on social movements often studies participation in specific events (like marching in a demonstration), we examine attitudes instead. An organizational change initiative is much less of a public phenomenon: it involves not collective action but many small-scale activities occurring in different parts of the organization. In addition, employee behavior cannot be treated as chosen in the sense that participation in protest movements can, since quality activities may be assigned to the employee by his or her supervisor. We are on safer ground studying how employees evaluate the total quality program than asking whether they had engaged in specific activities.

We found that Globalbankers held strong views on the quality initiative and total quality more generally. One Globalbanker we surveyed told us “I think the focus on customer satisfaction is key to our long-term success” while another commented “Please don’t make me go to other quality classes.” And some bankers developed sophisticated analyses of the relevance of quality methods --- for example, a relationship manager described the (manufacturing based) quality model in these terms:

“I think manufacturing and services work very differently. Manufacturing seeks the elimination of variability. But on the trading floor, the key is to capitalize on anomalies in the market, not suppress them. Also, our jobs are very personal in nature, where you have to adapt to customer needs...
However, the operations that support me do benefit from a manufacturing approach to processes. The back office, also.”

We asked respondents for their opinion of the effectiveness of quality initiatives across five contexts, ranging from the most immediate (“this quality initiative...applied to the work you do”) to the most general (“quality initiatives in general...applied to firms of all types”). While all responses were positively correlated, a factor analysis suggested
two components: *local endorsement* (combining perceptions of the effectiveness of Global Financial’s quality initiative for the respondent’s work and for the respondent’s department or division) and *generalized endorsement* (of total quality for firms in financial services and for firms of all types).¹

A second common attitude expressed frustration. Many at Global Financial described the quality initiative as “the flavor of the month.” This characterization could refer to the intrinsic superficiality of total quality. Or it could imply a critique of Global Financial. In one employee’s words,

“I have never thought that Global Financial is committed to quality. To me quality, if it is to be effective within a corporation, has to be as important as the bottom-line... To me, Global Financial’s quality efforts are more ‘show’ (for the public, press, and share-holders).”

We measure *frustration* through responses to the statement “For me personally, Global Financial’s Quality Initiative has led to frustration with ‘flavor of the month’ programs” (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree). While measures of endorsement capture one aspect of successful mobilization around total quality, frustration captures the potential “demobilization” of Global Financial’s workforce.

Figure 1 indicates that Globalbankers express a mix of all three attitudes. When considering one’s own work and one’s own department, respondents are lukewarm at best towards the quality initiative, with 15 percent describing it as “not effective” and only 6 percent as “highly effective.” Somewhat higher levels of generalized endorsement are stated, with less direct skepticism and a stronger tendency to view quality initiatives as very effective. There is also a real sense of frustration, with many agreeing and few

¹ We also asked about the effectiveness of the quality initiative for Global Financial as a whole. Responses here stood between and were correlated with views of both local and generalized effectiveness. We do not
disagreeing with the statement that the initiative has generated frustration with flavor of the month programs.

One might expect that endorsement and frustration would be inversely related. But there is no correlation between either form of endorsement and our measure of frustration. Once we control for generalized endorsement, however, the relationship between frustration and local effectiveness turns modestly negative. Two years into the initiative, we see a tendency to critique Global Financial’s program coupled with a more positive stance towards total quality in the abstract.

**Sources of Employee Attitudes**

We consider how attitudes towards Global Financial’s quality initiative are rooted in individual values, concrete forms of involvement, experience with related programs, expectations about the program’s future, and the views of co-workers. We then consider how attitudes vary across occupational positions within the bank, comparing managers, supervisors, professionals, and front-line workers.\(^2\)

With the possible exception of occupational position, each of the above factors has a long pedigree in explaining recruitment into social movements. Much social movement research focuses on the impact of individual values, prior or concurrent protest

\(^2\) Our social movement perspective leads away from the literature on employee attitudes towards organizational programs, though a number of our findings are quite consistent with other research --- see Marchington et al 1994 and Zeitz 1996.
experience, network connections to movement supporters, and calculations of the probable efficacy of action in selecting participants from this pool. For example, McAdam (1988; McAdam and Paulsen 1993) considers the impact of attitudes, relations to other participants, and membership in related organizations in explaining recruitment to Freedom Summer.

*Individual values.* Some employees may be drawn to total quality because its underlying philosophy is compatible with their own. Total quality involves a vision of organizational change that is at once scientific (decision-making as statistical problem-solving), social (organizations as collections of teams), personal (individual commitment and skill development), and political (empowerment within top-down leadership). Drawing on academic reviews (i.e., Hackman and Wageman 1995), practitioner discussions (i.e., Garvin 1988; Juran 1995), and Global Financial’s quality training documents, we asked Globalbankers about eight core ideas, which we refer to as “TQM principles.”

Factor analysis indicated that evaluations of all eight items load on a single factor, distinguishing those who endorse TQM principles from those who do not. While support for TQM principles is not linked to frustration with the quality initiative as a “flavor of the month” program, it is tied to both local and generalized endorsement of TQM programs. The link to local assessments is modest (r = .12, p = .07) while that to generalized endorsement of quality initiatives is somewhat stronger (r = .28, p < .01).

It may seem surprising that these relationships are not larger, since we are correlating responses to two sets of questions about the effectiveness of TQM: one as an

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3 These principles are “focus on customer satisfaction,” “focus on cross-functional processes,” “group effort rather than individual effort,” “openness to experimentation and change,” “development of interpersonal skills,” “empowered to directly implement change,” “roles based on expertise, not status,” and “structured problem-solving techniques and statistical tools.”
abstract set of principles and the other as a concrete program. But the modest relationship between the two, particularly when the focus is on the respondent’s own workplace, echoes much social movement research. Individual values often turn out to be necessary but distant sources of recruitment, identifying a pool of potential supporters whose behavioral choice to act or not is shaped by more proximate factors (see Klandermans and Oegama 1987). Here, the relationship seems even weaker, perhaps reflecting the ambiguity of the “total quality” frame and the extensive opportunity for employees to contrast rhetoric and reality.

*Forms of Involvement.* Formal program activities sought to directly involve employees. Quality training includes instruction in statistical methods and methods of group decision-making, role-playing scenarios designed to promote cooperation rather than competition, and discussion of the bank’s corporate culture. Developing and implementing quality metrics drew attention to customer interactions and needs. Participation on cross-functional process improvement teams gave participants an extended and meaningful experience of team-based problem-solving. We asked whether Globalbankers had been involved in the initiative in each of these ways.

Figure 2 shows that employees who received quality training and participated on quality teams are more likely to endorse quality activities within their workplace. Participation on quality teams also spills over to boost endorsement of quality initiatives in general. By contrast, work with quality metrics has scant influence on employee attitudes.

*<Figure 2 about here.*>
These effects are consistent with much social movement research emphasizing the importance of personal experience in building commitment. Here, the most intensive and demanding form of involvement (quality team participation) has the largest and the broadest effect, while the least “experiential” form of involvement (quality metrics) has a negligible impact. Our own observation of quality training and team formation showed us that employees embraced (as well as sometimes distanced themselves from) a powerful set of messages about individual commitment, personal authenticity, and support of the work group.

*Experience with related programs.* In evaluating efforts at organizational change, Globalbankers were neither naïve nor inexperienced. Many had been involved in other quality programs, both within and outside Global Financial. And total quality has much in common with other organizational change efforts, like business process reengineering (whose approach to process improvement is almost indistinguishable from quality’s CFPI projects) and corporate culture programs (whose attempts to build commitment and trust across levels are almost indistinguishable from efforts to “embed” quality). We consider three measures of related program experience: other quality efforts at Global Financial, past involvement in related programs,⁴ and current involvement in related programs. To simplify a complex picture, we distinguish here between those who have had no experience of each sort of program, one program experience, or two or more program experiences.

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⁴ These eight programs are quality circles, problem-solving groups other than quality circles, reengineering projects, self-managing work teams, culture change initiatives, flextime, telecommuting, and gainsharing/group incentive pay.
Figure 3 indicates that prior or concurrent program experience generally boosts support for the quality initiative, as does experience with related programs. But there are signs of sharply diminishing returns. In most cases, experience with one program produces stronger endorsement than does experience with two or more programs. This is true of other quality programs at Global Financial and of past involvement in related programs. Current involvement has more consistent though more muted effects, tending to raise generalized endorsement while lowering local endorsement (perhaps through competition for employee attention and energy).

Frustration tends to grow with program experience. It rises most sharply with past involvement in related programs, where those with any level of prior experience are significantly more likely to see the quality initiative as simply the “flavor of the month.” Frustration also increases steadily with quality program experience and current involvement in related programs.5

These results speak to the long-term viability of the quality movement. If prior experience with quality and related programs leads to individual commitment and support, total quality might win the war despite losing most of the battles. But if exposure leads to cynicism or resignation, past programs will tend to undermine and ultimately extinguish new initiatives. Our results suggest a race between positive feedback (through

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5 We also examined the impact of experience with quality programs at firms outside Global Financial, which tends to depress local endorsement but have little relation to generalized endorsement or frustration (perhaps because of the wide variety of experiences that respondents were reacting to).
a generalized sense of the effectiveness of total quality) and negative feedback (through frustration with ‘flavor of the month’ programs).

While it is unclear which feedback process is more consequential, Figure 4 helps explicate how attitudes are interrelated by crosstabulating local endorsement and frustration. Interestingly, numbers of the two “pure” types (those who endorse and are not frustrated, and those who do not endorse and are frustrated) shift very little with past program experience. Instead, the main impact of past program experience seems to be to turn contented skeptics (those who do neither endorse nor are frustrated by total quality) into frustrated advocates (who endorse total quality but are also frustrated by it)!

Perceptions of program trajectory. Globalbankers were well aware that change programs often have little staying power, and were wary about boarding a sinking ship. To do so meant not only wasted effort but also potential political damage (for example, if quality team proposals antagonized “process owners”). On the other hand, overt skepticism towards a successful and long-lasting program could be costly.

We asked respondents about the trajectory of the quality initiative in four contexts: change over the last year within their department, change over the last year within Global Financial, expected change over the coming year within their department, and expected change over the coming year within Global Financial. These were scored on a five point scale, where 1=Discontinued, 3=Same Level of Activity, 5=Greatly Increased Activity. All four perceptions were strongly correlated (the lowest correlation was .65,
p<.01), suggesting that bankers used recent experience to estimate where the program was going next, and may have generalized from the quality activities of their unit to those of the larger organization.

Figure 5 shows how expected change in the quality initiative over the next year is related to assessments of total quality. The first two panels indicate that bankers who expect program activities to decline evaluate quality initiatives less positively, while those who expect activity levels to increase see quality as more effective. A more surprising pattern emerges when we examine employee frustration. While those who expect program activity to decline are more frustrated than those who expect it to increase, both groups are more frustrated than those who see the program as stable. Big increases in activity may suggest that the program is the “flavor of this month” just as big decreases make it clear that the program was the “flavor of last month.”

<Figure 5 about here.>

Social networks. Relationships to other participants are one of the strongest conduits of social movement mobilization (Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olsen 1980). While social networks in public settings arise in a free-form way, relationships in organizations are more structured. We asked how the quality initiative was viewed by three groups of co-workers: the respondent’s direct reports, the respondent’s peers, and the respondent’s supervisor. Questions took the form: “To the extent you can judge, how does .... view Global Financial’s quality initiative?” (responses on a five point scale: 1=Not Important, 5=Critically Important).
Table 1 indicates that respondent attitudes are strongly tied to the views of their supervisors, peers, and direct reports. Globalbankers are much more likely to view the quality initiative in their workplace as effective if supervisors, peers, and direct reports see the program as important. But more than a practical local assessment is involved. Endorsement by peers and supervisors also translate into generalized perceptions that total quality initiatives work. Frustration, by contrast, is uncorrelated with the views of co-workers.

 But can perceptions of what others think be taken at face value? While it makes good sense that our views are influenced by those around us, it is also plausible that we believe others agree more closely with us than they really do. Advocates of total quality may feel surrounded by the converted, while skeptics may see co-workers as similarly critical of the program. Such “apparent consensus” may arise out of perceptual biases, or because colleagues edit what they say to avoid controversy. We suspect that the correlations shown in Table 1 combine a direct form of network influence with measurement error tied to perceptual bias. In future work we hope to assess the strength of this bias by correlating perceptions with objective measures of departmental program activity.

Organizational position. Finally, we consider the employee’s position as a manager, professional, supervisor, or (front-line) worker. Occupational position speaks to key
aspects of individual identity, orientation towards the firm, and the costs and benefits of 
the quality model.

Advocates contend that total quality makes work more fulfilling. According to 
Joseph Juran, “the human being exhibits an instinctive drive for precision, beauty, and 
perfection.” Adler (1993) argues that team-based opportunities to redesign work 
processes turn Taylorism into a “learning bureaucracy.” While this implies that all sorts 
of employees can benefit from total quality, it also suggests that the benefits may be 
greatest for front-line workers, whose occupational position furnishes the least autonomy 
and opportunity to challenge organizational rules.

Critics view total quality as intensifying managerial surveillance while offering 
the pretense of solidarity (Parker and Slaughter 1993; McCabe et al 1998; Sewell 1998). 
While some workers may be “bewitched” by these promises, the bulk are likely to be 
“bewildered” by its apparent appeal for others or “bothered” by its impact on the 
organization (Knights and McCabe 2000). Absent a strong argument for false 
consciousness, a critical analysis suggests that managers and supervisors should be more 
supportive of total quality than professionals or front-line workers are.

A third argument is that quality is something the top gets the bottom to do to the 
middle. Supervisory authority is undercut by the expanded role of front-line workers, 
who are empowered to make policy proposals directly to higher managers. Managers and 
workers gain power while foremen and supervisory managers lose power. This argument 
is often buttressed by a cultural analysis of supervisors as least prepared to practice the 
sort of participatory, enabling style of leadership required in an empowered workplace.
We identify four occupational groups: managers, supervisors, professionals, or front-line workers. These categories are derived from responses to the survey questions “Do you supervise the work of others?” and “If yes, do individuals who you supervise themselves supervise others?” Respondents are coded as managers if they replied “yes” to both questions and as supervisors if they responded “yes” to just the first question. Among those without supervisory responsibilities, we distinguish professionals from front-line workers on the basis of their EEO occupational classification (professionals are designated for EEO purposes as managers, professionals, or sales; front-line workers as technicians, office and clerical, craft, operatives, and service workers).

Figure 6 indicates modest but consistent differentials in attitudes across the four groups. Front-line workers endorse total quality most strongly (a statistically significant differential when we compare workers to all other groups). Professionals are least likely to endorse the initiative, though the gap between their views and that of managerial and supervisory personnel is small. Frustration towards the quality initiative is less connected to organizational position, though it is notable that managers express this sentiment most strongly.

These results are more compatible with a positive assessment of total quality as addressing worker concerns than they are with the critique that it “tightens the bars of the iron cage.” This interpretation is strengthened when we compare response patterns of local and generalized endorsement. As the focus gets closer to the employee’s own work
situation, the gap between front-line workers and the other occupational groups widens. But the differentials shown in Figure 6 are not large, and explain much less variance than do individual attitudes, forms of involvement, experience with related programs, and network influences.

*Multivariate analyses.* The bivariate relationships discussed above may conceal substantial interdependencies. For example, employees with underlying values supportive of total quality may be more likely to participate on quality teams, and employees with more extensive experience with total quality may have more current involvement as well. We thus develop multivariate models, focusing on a reduced set of factors that capture the major relationships discussed above. Since network influences are both the largest influences on employee attitudes and also a source of concern about possible bias, we examine models that first exclude and then include supervisor and peer support for the initiative.

Table 2 shows that multivariate relationships are largely consistent with the bivariate relationships discussed at length above. Individual values, personal contact with the initiative, experience with related programs, and expectations that the initiative is on an upward trajectory all lead to endorsement of quality initiatives. Support for TQM principles boost the generalized effectiveness of total quality. Front-line workers endorse the quality initiative within their unit more than managers, supervisors, and professionals do.

<Table 2 about here.>
Table 2 also underlines the way employee frustration and generalized endorsement stem from many of the same roots. Respondents sympathetic to TQM principles are more frustrated, not less, as are employees with extensive prior involvement in related programs. Belief that the quality program was gaining steam tended to counter these frustrations, though perhaps not for long.

Peer and supervisor support for the initiative (added in models 4-6) markedly boost assessments of total quality, especially within the respondent’s workplace. These effects also interact with a number of the relationships noted above. Most importantly, the impact of occupational position and expected program trajectory diminish sharply and lose statistical significance when peer and supervisor support are added as explanatory factors.

The relationship between social network effects and expected program trajectory is transparent. Departments where co-workers and supervisors see the initiative as important are also likely to be departments where the quality program activities are maintained or are increasing. And expectations of the program’s future trajectory in the bank are strongly connected to observation of one’s own department in the recent past.

More puzzling is the relationship between social network effects and occupational position. Why are differentials across occupational positions connected to the influence of supervisors and peers?

To investigate, Table 3 shows how perceptions are structured within Global Financial. The rows indicate whose views are perceived; the columns, who is doing the perceiving. For example, the value of 2.98 in the last column of the first row indicates
how respondents who we code as supervisors rate the views of the bankers they report to (and who if they were included in the sample would be coded as managers).

<Table 3 about here.>

Table 3 indicates widespread and systematic misperception. Very consistently, the same occupational group is seen as more supportive from “below” than it is when viewed from “above.” For example, front-line workers describe supervisors as rather supportive of the quality initiative (an average score of 3.64) while managers see supervisors as more skeptical (an average score of 2.35). These differences are probably tied to characteristic presentations of self --- bosses may feel obliged to boost corporate programs within their units, and subordinates may tend to respond with skepticism. Peers, who are perhaps in the best position to judge, rate each group’s support for the initiative at levels between the (over)-estimates of subordinates and the (under)-estimates of superordinates.

The net result is that lower-level employees receive more positive messages about how the bank regards total quality than do higher-level employees. At the extremes of the organizational hierarchy, the CEO receives only negatively slanted impressions while front-line workers receive only positively slanted impressions. The greater tendency of front-line workers to endorse the initiative thus seems in substantial part a product of where they stand in a system of (mis)communication.
Implications of Employee Attitudes

At best, Global Financial’s quality initiative failed to win the “hearts and minds” of the bank’s workforce. Our survey, conducted well after the bloom was off the rose, found modest to low support and much frustration with the quality initiative. More bankers saw the quality initiative as ineffective than rated it as highly effective. And about half of all respondents reported frustration with “flavor of the month” programs.

Even more consequential than average levels of endorsement and frustration may be the way these attitudes are distributed across occupational positions. The most favorable assessments come from non-supervisory personnel “on the line,” while managers, supervisors and professionals are significantly more skeptical. This is bad news politically, since the views of executives, managers, and professionals count for much more in determining the fate of an organizational program than do the views of the organizational rank and file.

In fact, Global Financial’s quality initiative was brought to an end approximately eight months after our survey was conducted. Some members of the corporate quality office including its director left the bank, and the office itself was attached to Global Financial’s Consumer Bank and given a narrower mandate. The quality initiative had had a short (though not uncharacteristically short) run of little more than three years.

The proximate cause of the quality initiative’s demise was a change in bank leadership. The CEO whose “personal conversion” had helped launch the initiative left the bank, while the new CEO viewed total quality with unabashed skepticism. A highly favorable political opportunity structure (Tarrow 1998) was replaced in short order by a distinctly unfavorable one.
We would argue, however, that the absence of a critical mass of internal adherents made the quality initiative politically vulnerable. The new CEO’s criticism was politically astute precisely because the program was neither taken for granted nor normatively legitimated within the bank. The fact that front-line workers rather than top managers formed its strongest constituency further reduced the quality program’s viability, making its elimination an attractive way to symbolize the change in power.

The longer-term implications of the attitude formation process are less clear. Global Financial’s quality initiative was one chapter in a long list of organizational reform programs stressing cross-functional processes, participation, empowerment, and teamwork. Just as the experience of prior quality and related programs broadened the base of adherents to this quality initiative, so this program helped shape the way bank employees may respond to future social movement-like organizational change efforts.

Our analyses provide some support for the argument that the quality initiative boosted the prospects for future efforts. Employee endorsement of quality initiatives in general is quite substantial. And the most favorable views come from those with the most extensive involvement in the initiative --- bankers who participated on quality teams and whose departments maintained high and increasing levels of quality activity. These departments might continue to use quality methods, like cross-functional process improvement teams, though not under the corporate quality initiative’s imprimatur.

The flip side of pockets of commitment, however, is the more common experience of frustration with the initiative and the gap between what was promised and what was delivered. Indeed, the most strongly voiced sentiments in our survey were those of employees who felt that the bank had failed to carry through. For example, one
employee described “A lot of lip service but no senior manager commitment,” while another said “it has turned into a ‘flash in the pan’ program. No data is given to us, no follow-up information or training programs have been implemented.”

There are thus real signs that the net impact of the corporate quality initiative may have been to undercut future efforts. It is telling that employees who had experienced multiple programs were less impressed by total quality than employees who had experienced a single program. And frustration increases with prior experience. This sort of larger trajectory is familiar from the study of social movements, where cycles of protest wind down from exhaustion as well as from adverse shifts in political opportunity.

**Discussion**

Students of organizations generally invoke the notion of a social movement to describe extra-organizational institution building and political action. Davis and Thompson (1994) develop this line of argument to dissect the rise of shareholder activism. Robert Cole employs the same imagery to describe the diffusion of total quality within the American business community: “In the course of responding to the Japanese challenge, a social movement developed, filled with zealots, nonbelievers, inspirational leaders, opportunists, and institutional builders” (1999: 231). The product of the quality movement, thus understood, are organizations like SEMATECH and Goal/QPC and national awards like the Baldrige (also see Cole 1989).

We think a social movement framework has utility for understanding mobilizing efforts inside as well as across organizations. This follows the lead of Global Financial’s quality director, who spoke to us of “skeptics” and “converts” and of strategies for
moving Globalbankers from the former to the latter category. We see this director as orchestrating a social movement rather than implementing a program, and have sought to explicate some of the determinants and mechanisms underlying recruitment (or more fashionably, “micromobilization”).

What we find is consistent with much study of the social protests that form the backbone of social movement research. Support for the change program is strongly connected to the concrete personal experience of involvement. McAdam (1988) details how the collective experience of Freedom Summer’s orientation camps had a defining influence on idealistic young middle-class youth. Similarly, if less dramatically, Globalbankers who had participated on quality teams and who had been involved in a variety of organizational change efforts were more supportive than those who were not.

Endorsement of total quality is also driven by relational and organizational context. The presence of ties to other participants is a robust predictor of social movement mobilization in many settings, and Global Financial is no exception. Those whose peers and supervisors supported the initiative were likely to be more supportive themselves. And bankers in departments that established many quality activities were more supportive than those who saw the initiative announced and then not carried through.

Finally, social movements are uninstitutionalized activities that operate on the margins of success, with burnout a common companion to mobilization. This is clearly true at Global Financial, where program activities bred not only endorsement but also frustration. This frustration is sufficiently great that the net impact of this program may have been to erode the opportunity for related efforts in the future.
Parallels between attitudes towards a quality initiative and participation in social protest are striking because the two contexts are so different. Social protest centers on the dramatic conflict between the politically marginal and the politically privileged. Whether individuals can be mobilized for risky forms of collective action with unclear payoffs is highly problematic. Stark opposition between the benefits and costs of action (framed as why people would put themselves in harm’s way, or in paler form as a social dilemma) motivates the study of micromobilization in these contexts.

An organizational reform initiative contains much less drama. Action is on a smaller scale, and there is no equivalent to the public and episodic character of social movement participation. While we see the program as social movement-like in form, we would not describe it as collective action. Organizational reform is structurally closer to a religious movement (Snow 1976) than it is to a political movement.

Undeterred by the threat of conceptual slippage, we would point to three strengths of a social movement framework for the study of organizational change. First and foremost is its dynamic character. In our reading, the main line of analysis in this area develops contingency arguments about the technical, infrastructural, and cultural conditions that facilitate or oppose change. For example, Sitkin et al (1993) argue that total quality is best applied to well-defined work technologies, while other approaches are more appropriate where technologies are ambiguous or poorly understood. McDuffie (1995) documents the multiplier effects of complementary human resource practices. Douglas and Judge (2001) identify the impact of features of organizational structure on the success of firms implementing TQM.
While contingency arguments are of central importance, they provide a static picture driven by exogenous structural conditions. Comparative statics are buttressed by close attention to the way programs gain or lose momentum. Direct attention to the process by which support is won or lost explicates mechanisms through which structural effects operate and points to causal factors --- like network effects --- that arise within mobilization efforts themselves.

Second, a social movement framework adds a political analysis to the cognitive emphasis of much work on organizational change. For example, Robert Cole’s *Managing Quality Fads* (1999) provides a probing analysis of the difficulties of organizational learning, detailing the way Hewlett-Packard first underestimated and then misunderstood the total quality approach. To questions like “what is this program?” and “what evidence is there that it works?” a social movement analysis adds “who supports it?” “how were they mobilized?” and “how much influence do they have?”

Finally, a social movement framework suggests that many organization members contribute to the ultimate fate of a change effort. There is a strong tendency in the organizational literature to treat top management commitment as the holy grail that ensures program success and durability. We must recognize the force of this insight, given the prominent role of one CEO in establishing the quality initiative studied here and of a second CEO in ending it. But mixed evaluations of the program and the backlash of frustration among the bank’s employees remind us that social movements can be orchestrated but not managed.
References


Figure 1. Attitudes towards the Quality Initiative

**Local Endorsement**

- **Frustration**
  - Not frustrated: 50%
  - Very frustrated: 30%

- **Generalized Endorsement**
  - Not effective: 50%
  - Highly effective: 40%

- **Frustration**
  - Not frustrated: 50%
  - Very frustrated: 50%

*Questions:

- "How effective is Global Financial’s Quality Initiative when applied to your work and your department?"
- "How effective are quality initiatives in general when applied to firms in financial services or firms of all types?"
- "For me personally, Global Financial’s Quality Initiative has led to frustration with ‘flavor of the month’ programs”
Figure 2. Forms of Involvement and Attitudes towards the Quality Initiative

**Local Endorsement**

- **Quality training**: $F = 5.06$ (P < .05)
- **Quality metrics**: $F = 1.56$ (P = .21)
- **Quality team participation**: $F = 16.16$ (P < .01)

**Generalized Endorsement**

- **Quality training**: $F = .94$ (P = .33)
- **Quality metrics**: $F = .46$ (P = .50)
- **Quality team participation**: $F = 6.29$ (P < .05)

**Frustration**

- **Quality training**: $F = .15$ (P = .70)
- **Quality metrics**: $F = 2.53$ (P = .11)
- **Quality team participation**: $F = .29$ (P < .59)
Figure 3. Experience with Other Quality Programs and Attitudes towards the Quality Initiative

Local Endorsement

Experience with Other Quality Programs

Past Experience with Related Programs

Current Experience with Related Programs

Generalized Endorsement

Experience with Other Quality Programs

Past Experience with Related Programs

Current Experience with Related Programs

Frustration

Experience with Other Quality Programs

Past Experience with Related Programs

Current Experience with Related Programs

Mean Local Endorsement

Mean Generalized Endorsement

Mean Frustration
Figure 4. Past Program Experience and Combinations of Attitudes towards the Quality Initiative

Combinations of Local Endorsement and Frustration

- Blue: endorses and is not frustrated by the Quality Initiative
- Yellow: endorses but is frustrated by the Quality Initiative
- Red: neither endorses nor is frustrated by the Quality Initiative
- Green: does not endorse and is frustrated by the Quality Initiative
Figure 5. Expected Program Trajectory and Attitudes towards the Quality Initiative

Local Endorsement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Mean Local Endorsement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>decreased</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>same</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>increased</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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</table>

Generalized Endorsement

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<td>same</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
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<td>increased</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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Frustration

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<th>Mean Frustration</th>
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<tr>
<td>same</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>increased</td>
<td>3.7</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Expected Change in Program Activity Next Year

F = 17.17 (P < .01)  
F = 8.37 (P < .01)  
F = 2.98 (P < .10)
Table 1. Correlation Coefficients between the Views of Co-Workers and Attitudes toward the Quality Initiative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Views of Co-Workers</th>
<th>Local Endorsement</th>
<th>Generalized Endorsement</th>
<th>Frustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Reports</td>
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<td>.45 ***</td>
<td>-.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>.67 ***</td>
<td>.52 ***</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>.61 ***</td>
<td>.46 ***</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*** p < .01 (two-tailed)
Figure 6. Occupational Positions and Attitudes towards the Quality Initiative

**Local Endorsement**

- Mean Local Endorsement
  - Workers: 3.4
  - Professionals: 3.2
  - Supervisors: 3.0
  - Managers: 2.8
  - Mean: 3.0

**Generalized Endorsement**

- Mean Generalized Endorsement
  - Workers: 3.4
  - Professionals: 3.2
  - Supervisors: 3.0
  - Managers: 2.8
  - Mean: 3.0

**Frustration**

- Mean Frustration
  - Workers: 3.8
  - Professionals: 3.6
  - Supervisors: 3.4
  - Managers: 3.2
  - Mean: 3.4

F = 3.46 (P < .05)

F = .73 (P = .54)

F = .64 (P = .56)
Table 2. Unstandardized Coefficients from OLS Regressions of Attitudes towards the Quality Initiative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Local Endorsement</th>
<th>Generalized Endorsement</th>
<th>Frustration</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.30)</td>
<td>(.29)</td>
<td>(.29)</td>
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<td>(.14)</td>
<td>(.17)</td>
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<td>Participated in quality team</td>
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<td>.44 ***</td>
<td>.25 *</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.16)</td>
<td>(.13)</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involved in other quality programs</td>
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<td>.18</td>
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<td>(.14)</td>
<td>(.12)</td>
<td>(.14)</td>
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<td><strong>Related Program Experience</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Expected Activity</strong></td>
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<td>Decrease</td>
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<td>-.16</td>
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<td><strong>Occupational Groups</strong></td>
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<td>Managers</td>
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<td>(.17)</td>
<td>(.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>-.39 **</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>-.23</td>
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<td>(.16)</td>
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<td><strong>Network Influences</strong></td>
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<td>Supervisor’s view</td>
<td>.24 ***</td>
<td>.19 **</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peers’ view</td>
<td>.37 ***</td>
<td>.21 ***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(.07)</td>
<td>(.08)</td>
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</table>

| N  | 197 | 185 | 196 | 184 | 195 | 183 |
| R² | .36 | .60 | .25 | .39 | .12 | .15 |

*  p < .10 (two-tailed)  
** P < .05 (two-tailed)  
*** P < .01 (two-tailed)
Table 3. Importance of the Quality Initiative across Occupational Positions as Seen by Different Occupational Positions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Positions</th>
<th>View from Above</th>
<th>View from Peers</th>
<th>View from Below</th>
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<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Front-line Workers</td>
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