Approaches to performance appraisal in TQM-driven organisations: does control vs learning approach matter?

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Abstract

While prior studies provide insights into how Total Quality Management (TQM) and Performance Appraisal (PA) are incongruent, they rarely offer any compelling evidence that identifies the reasons behind the incongruence. We argue that the 'why' of TQM goals (i.e., control and learning) have consequences for the PA processes and purposes. Drawing from attribution theory and the duality inherent in TQM, our aim is to investigate how an organisation's preferred approach to TQM could result in different PA processes and purposes particularly in relation to the manager's understanding, diagnosis, and attributions of employee performance variation. To reach this purpose, a qualitative, inductively oriented investigation was conducted. Our findings suggest the disutility of a unilateral focus on either control or learning in terms of designing a PA system solely for the purpose of supporting one goal at the expense of the other. Rather, mutual understanding of the causes of performance variation and a recognition of shared responsibility for performance outcomes should become the core of the organisation's approach to TQM – if the PA system is to achieve the aim of continuous quality improvement and learning. We also present several working propositions that not only delineate how each goal of TQM could lead to different PA processes and purposes but also are of value to guide future research.

Keywords: total quality management, performance appraisal, control, learning, attribution theory, qualitative case study

1. Introduction

Despite the many potential benefits of performance appraisal (PA) to modern organisations with continuous quality improvement and learning orientations (e.g., Total Quality Management and its variants), much of the extant literature reports negative and disappointing findings (Buckingham and Goodall, 2015; Murphy, 2020; Sutton and Rao, 2016). The prediction of the demise of PA by quality gurus (e.g., Deming, 1986) and their advocates has recently gained a momentum as Human Resource Management (HRM) scholars and practitioners alike proclaim the end to PA (e.g., Adler et al., 2016; Murphy et al., 2018; Pulakos et al., 2015). Cappelli and Tavis (2016, p. 1) note that "hated by bosses and subordinates alike, traditional PA systems have been abandoned by more than a third of U.S. companies" including high profile Fortune 500 multinationals (e.g., Google, Accenture, Deloitte, Microsoft, GAP) and consequently brought greater attention to adjusting PA systems to accommodate the changing nature of organisations, work, and workforce.

A flurry of articles in popular magazines as well as professional and scholarly journals have attempted to explain the reasons for the (in)effectiveness of PA systems in organisations (e.g., Adler et al., 2016; Mackenzie et al., 2019; Murphy, 2019; Tweedie et al., 2019). Taken together, these studies reveal greater emphasis on the psychometric properties and cognitive processes of appraisal systems (e.g., rater errors and biases, rating accuracy, and appraisal reactions), their high susceptibility to managerial manipulation, and the simultaneous pursuit of conflicting purposes as explanatory factors for the failure of PA systems (Murphy, 2019; DeNisi and Murphy, 2017; Pichler, 2012). More specifically, these barriers reinforce the directive and administrative character of PA systems which has a three-fold consequence: (a) it makes PA systems unfit for integrating into other subsystems and fulfilling its multiple purposes; (b) it undermines the validity of PA systems and severely limit management's ability to establish realistic bases for making judgments about employees' performance; and (c) it leaves employees little-to-no empowerment and inclination to interject their suggestions for improvement. These barriers largely confirm the findings of Franco-Santos and Doherty (2017) who detect a negative association between a top-down, directive approach (rigid focus on outcome-oriented performance measures) and employee motivation to go above and beyond the call of duty and even to stay with their organisation. As Chiang and Birtch (2010, p. 1368) asserted, the evaluative use of PA supports a directive control-

oriented style of performance management in that 'appraisal serves as a positive reinforcer and strengthens appraisal–reward contingencies'.

To address these barriers and tailor PA to suit the specific employee and organisation needs, many TQM and HRM scholars and practitioners (e.g., Bayo-Moriones and Tore, 2022; Cardy, 1998; DeNisi and Murphy, 2017; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995) lay the stress on the integration of TQM and HRM perspectives. The need for the integration of the two perspectives lies in the argument that the two perspectives have different, independent but linked theoretical roots: a technical perspective and a social perspective (Waldman, 1994).

Despite attempts to integrate the TQM and HRM perspectives of work performance and improve PA, recent evidence describes the current adjustments to the PA systems as cosmetic, fortuitous, and short-lived (Murphy, 2020). One explanation is that the integration of a socio-subsystem such as PA and TQM as mainly a technical system requiring factoring in a myriad of individual and situational determinants of work performance – if PA is to fit the TQM requirements (Dobbins et al., 1991; Manz and Stewart, 1997; Waldman, 1994).

Hence, there have been calls for more research that takes into account the broader organisational context as explanatory factor to account for the persistent incongruence between TQM and PA (e.g., Cardy, 1998; Dattner, 2013; DeNisi and Murphy, 2017; Murphy and Cleveland, 1995). This is what Murphy and Cleveland (1995, p. 228) and Levy and Williams (2004, p. 883) referred to as "the social context of performance appraisal" or "distal variables", respectively. While these variables are wide-ranging (e.g., internal such as organisational values and culture; HR strategies; organisational goals; TQM goals and purpose; and external such as economic conditions; legal climate; society's socio-political systems – see Levy and Williams, 2004) and collectively guide and inform the conduct of PA systems, we argue that it is the varying influence of these factors that lead to different outcomes of PA systems in organisations that espouse a continuous quality improvement and learning culture. In keeping with the recent scholarly tendency to focus on the social context of PA (e.g., Levy et al., 2018), there is a need to explore how different organisational approaches to TQM could lead to different PA processes, purposes, and attribution.

While TQM and HRM researchers continue to unveil the reason behind the ineffectiveness of PA systems (see Buckingham and Goodall, 2015; Cappelli and Tavis, 2016; Di Fiore and Souza,

2021; Murphy, 2020; Soltani and Wilkinson, 2020), few explore how the TQM's dual goals of control and learning could take up the lion's share of the variance in the effectiveness of PA systems. As Murphy and Cleveland (1991, p.72) observe, "the system that is used to appraise performance needs to be consistent with the culture and principles that guide the conduct of the organisation". In the absence of congruence, PA falls short of the requirement of TQM regarding its focus on the development of employees and consequently lose confidence of employees, leading them "to find a safe rate of output and coast along without much involvement in their work or desire to improve" (Ghorpade and Chen, 1995, p. 34). In this respect, attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Jones and Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1979) offers new insights by showing (i) how an overemphasis on either control or learning goal of TQM could lead to different diagnoses made by managers about the causes of performance variation, make PA system (un)fit for purpose, and consequently achieves or defeats the aim of continuous quality improvement and learning, and (ii) how managers can facilitate continuous quality improvement and learning by embracing responsibility for their efforts as a major predictor of employee performance and behaviour patterns as well as encouraging employees to take responsibility for their work.

The extant literature (e.g., Cardy, 1998; Wilkinson et al., 1998; Prince, 1996; Soltani et al., 2006; Cappelli and Tavis, 2016; Cardy and Munjal, 2016; Soltani and Wilkinson, 2020) provides rich and diverse views on how best to tailor PA to accommodate the requirements of modern organisations that adopt continuous quality improvement and learning systems. Despite these authors' differences in their orientation towards aligning PA systems and TQM, they converge in the view that a participative PA system could encourage employees to develop their potentialities for individual development and desirable organisational outcomes. The view has close affinity to Franco-Santos and Doherty's (2017) description of enabling performance management as driver of employee involvement, development and effective communication and consequently employee well-being. This is what DeNisi and Pritchard (2006) along with Chiang and Birtch (2010, p. 1368) referred to as "communication-development orientation".

Although these studies show how TQM and PA are incongruent, but without offering any compelling evidence i.e., about the 'why' of TQM goals. Thus, the current research lacks a clear and cohesive understanding of how the organisation's approach to TQM could inadvertently make PA system incongruent to the very idea of continuous quality enhancement and learning. This limits scientific knowledge as to how managers explain the underlying causal variant for

undesirable employee job outcomes and behaviours (i.e., the locus of causality) under each of the dual TQM goals. It is argued that the attributions line managers make about the dominant organisational approach to TQM would highly likely determine the design and conduct of PA process. Sitkin et al. (1994) argue that managers are to overcome the apparent paradox between the two fundamentally different goals by tailoring their organisation's balance between control and learning – if TQM is to succeed in converging the long-term interests of employees, shareholders, and customers through dynamic performance improvement (Grant et al., 1994; Zhang et al., 2012). The need for balancing the control and learning goals of TQM and the trade-off between them under different business environments has been used by organisation science scholars who view organisational ambidexterity as a solution for the paradox of TQM goals. Building upon earlier work of Duncan (1976) and O'Reilly and Tushman (2013), they view organisational control (exploitation) and learning (exploration) activities as complementary and mutually reinforcing (see He and Wong, 2004; Raisch et al., 2009). This is what Juran (1964) and Cameron (1986: 539) referred to as 'managerial breakthrough' and "the paradoxical nature of effectiveness", respectively.

The current study extends the previous work by exploring the question of how one can manage the duality inherent in TQM goals (i.e., control and learning) and make PA systems conducive to TQM organisations. This is because a singular emphasis on any of the twin goals of TQM would allow and encourage line managers to make attributions about the organisation's purpose in implementing the TQM programmes and that such attributions by managers have important ramifications for the design and conduct of PA. In sum, our aim is to investigate how each TQM approach could bring about different PA processes, purposes and attribution.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. TQM

Although TQM has evolved as an approach to quality, the term has been used in different ways. It is sometimes used as a synonym for quality control (see Ishikawa, 1986; Juran, 1980). It may signal that various quality improvement tools and techniques are to be used in an integrated way to monitor and deliver continuous process improvement (see Deming, 1986; Shewhart and Deming, 1986). It connotes an emphasis on an integrated approach guiding the management of organisation to build a continuous quality improvement and learning environment (see Garvin,

1988; Oakland et al., 2020; Sitkin et al., 1994; Foster and Gardner, 2022). Of these, the latter is rather accepted view of TQM as an adoptable and adaptable philosophy. It reinforces quality as a novel way of managing business which requires a new thinking and organisational culture for delivering customer delight and value co-creation through harnessing creativity and innovation in the workplace, enhancing economic performance of the organisation, and consequently building a sustainable future (Dahlgaard-Park et al., 2018; Gunasekaran et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2019; Vandenbrande, 2021). As such, it is consistent with the growing recognition of the role of quality management in the era of Industry 4.0 with unprecedented customer expectations (see Chiarini, 2020) and shifting paradigms in the quality world from efficiency and effectiveness to continuous learning and customer delight.

A review of the extant literature highlights several key elements that express the essence of TQM: quality, as a top priority for upper management; as a customer's judgment about the superiority or excellence of a product or service; as fact-based decisions; as an employee's ability to go beyond rules and take quality-focused actions; as the quality or capacity of management; and as everyone's responsibility. These principles serve as a compass to guide work design process in an organisation in such a way that meet and exceed customer needs. They are to be used in harmony to achieve the two fundamentally different goals of TQM: control and learning (Dean and Bowen, 1994; Deming, 1986; Sitkin et al., 1994; Waldman, 1994; Ooi et al., 2013; Prajogo and Cooper, 2010). The need for a balanced and harmonious relationship between the control and learning goals of TQM has its roots in the contingency theory of TQM effectiveness (Sitkin et al., 1994; Zhang et al., 2012) and is in line with the notion of ambidexterity as both an exploitative and explorative activity (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2013). The contingency theory of TQM presupposes that optimal performance benefits of TQM stem from the organisation's ability to balance and adapt appropriately the control and learning approaches to situational requirements during the implementation of TQM (Sitkin et al., 1994). For example, a mere focus on the TQM goal of control can be characterised by three basic aspects: (i) creating a stable work system for defect prevention or errors reduction; (ii) supporting a mechanistic and closed system structure through standardisation of production processes; and (iii) assuming homogeneity of customer expectations – an indication of 'conformance TQM' (Manz and Stewart, 1997). In organisational ambidexterity literature, this has been referred to as 'exploitation'. In March's (1991, p. 71) characterisation, 'exploitation pertains to the refinement of existing competencies'. It involves more effectively

streamlining existing processes and workflows to improve efficiency and 'exploiting familiar skills in addressing known problems' (Sitkin, 1994, p. 544). Contrarily, the learning goal of TQM is inherently exploration-oriented not least because it enhances the organisation's ability to explore the unknown and to identify and pursue novel solutions and consequently to offer desirable product and service features (Garvin, 1993).

Overall, TQM can be viewed as a socio-technical systems model (Waldman, 1994) that emphasises minimising errors and variances. As a widely recognised and used work design strategy, the TQM approach emphasises on interaction between task, structure, technology and people thereby enabling the organisations to reduce variations in work system design (Crosby, 1979) and delight customers (Deming, 1986; Garvin, 1987). While both quality control (exploitation) and learning exploration practices are effective in their own right, the exclusion of either of them would make the organisation trap in suboptimal stable equilibria (March, 1991; Papachroni et al., 2015). The interdependence between fundamentally different goals of TQM calls for their synergy and complementarity so as to achieve optimal performance benefits under different business environments (Zhang et al., 2012; Asif, 2019). So, for TQM to realise its potential in achieving continuous improvement in internal and external customer satisfaction and boosting efficiency and bottom-line performance, it is of immense importance to maintain a balancing act between the two fundamentally different goals of control and learning. In doing so, the control goal of TQM focuses on operational stability through "exploiting existing skills and resources to address known customer needs", and the learning goal of TQM ensures "generating new customer needs through exploring new skills and resources" – thereby improving bottom-line performance (Sitkin et al., 1994, p. 546).

The complex work systems of contemporary organisations and the complexity and scale of their objectives indicate that the TQM perspective requires management to establish well-defined control systems (Crosby 1979) to assure that employee performance remains within the established quality control parameters (Manz and Stewart, 1997) or "critical control function of management" (Merchant, 1982, p.43). Since the TQM's goal of control is indicative of a primary mechanistic or closed systems perspective, it can only connote standardisation and conformance assurance through maintaining a work system that detects and corrects nonconformity as early as possible

and that verifies the effectiveness of corrective actions. The implication, as argued by Bowman (1994, p. 130), is that "individuals are appraised and blamed and that performance variation goes misdiagnosed or even undetected". As such, it also pushes away employees from participation in PA process (Gardner and Matviak, 2022). However, the multidimensionality of quality, the interdependency of TQM principles and their explicit focus on the interface between organisations and customer heterogeneity necessitate combining the control goal of TQM and the capacity to learn (Powell, 1995; Sitkin et al., 1994; Waldman, 1994). The effectiveness of TQM, therefore, relies on the degree to which the dual goals of control and learning form the basis of PA system (or other related subsystems). Hence an overemphasis on either control or learning goal of TQM is likely to diminish the other – a reminder of the need for a balanced approach between control and learning in designing a work system (Sila and Walczak, 2017).

2.2. PA

PA has been defined as "a process in which one of more individuals in organisations (typically supervisors) observe and obtain information about the job performance and effectiveness of individual employees" (Murphy, 2019, p. 14). Such appraisal information drives key HRM decisions such as pay increases, promotions, transfers, and employee underperformance (Murphy et al., 2018; DeNisi and Murphy, 2017) as well as serving a developmental purpose with employee learning and development as primary responsibility for managers (Aguinis, 2019).

Despite its many potential benefits for both management and employees (Bayo-Moriones et al., 2020; Schleicher et al., 2019), recent evidence indicates considerable dissatisfaction with PA (see Adler et al., 2016). Overall, there are two perspectives on the utility and relevance of PA. First perspective emphasises on PA as an inevitable and a universally applicable activity to all types of organisations who can choose why, how, where, and when to conduct appraisal that they deem appropriate to achieve the intended objectives of appraisal (Wangrow et al., 2015; Mayrhofer et al., 2019). However, recent research questions the effectiveness of generic approaches to PA not least because "a failure to contextualize appraisal will ignore the "different, sometimes conflicting interests" that influence the form of appraisal adopted" (Armstrong, 2017, p. 50). There are frequent calls to abandon our obsession with the one-size-fits-all and instead adopt a more nuanced approach to appraisal (e.g., DeNisi and Murphy, 2017).

A second perspective has placed emphasis on contextualising PA research (Levy et al., 2018; Morley et al., 2021). Context connotes a set of quite distal (e.g., national culture, organisational culture, climate and values, organisational goals, economic conditions) to quite proximal variables (e.g., organisation's policies regarding feedback, employee past behaviour, appraisal goals and purpose – see Levy and Williams, 2004; Pichler, 2012). Altogether, these factors could explain contradictions related to the effectiveness of PA systems. Extant literature on PA suggests that context can have serious implications for PA decisions and processes. For example, while there is a consensus that constructive employee feedback can be an effective management tool, failure to understand cultural relativity could adversely impact on the level of ratings (Molinsky, 2013). Morley et al.'s (2021) study of home and host distal context and PA in multinational enterprises (MNEs) finds that distal context variables such as culture, legal/political, and economic systems in the home country from which the MNE originated affect the PA processes and purposes.

The importance of such contextual consideration by researchers interested in management and organisation studies (see McLaren and Durepos, 2021; Sila and Walczak, 2017) has become more evident with the rise of diffusion and adoption of TQM and other variations on continuous quality improvement and learning (e.g., six sigma, lean manufacturing, lean six sigma). Levy and Williams (2004) and others (e.g., Fletcher, 2001; Murphy and Cleveland, 1991; Waldman, 1994) argue that organisations that espouse TQM and demonstrate a strong industry-wide focus on continuous quality improvement and learning are expected to adjust their PA systems to accommodate the underlying values and guiding precepts of quality culture. DeNisi and Murphy (2017, p. 429) concluded that "most of previous research on PA has been decontextualised and that different aspects of PA process have not been theoretically and empirically incorporated". Such research is, therefore, frequently devoid of critical analysis of how or why appraisals succeed without considering why appraisals are done in the first place, and how the climate, culture, norms, and beliefs in organisations shape the appraisal process and the outcomes of appraisals. Decontextualised assessment of employee performance could lead to an organisational culture in which employees (as opposed to situational explanations) are to blame for poor performance – what Ross (1977) referred to as 'the fundamental attribution error'. While an overemphasis on either individual or situational explanation lessens the merits of PA system, organisations can establish a middle ground to accommodate the conflicting views of situational and individual explanations for deviation from desired quality outputs. In fact, the interdependencies inherent in

the dualities of control and learning goals of TQM recognises that while control is needed to monitor and correct employee underperformance, the TQM's goal of learning posits that continuous quality improvement requires a PA system to go beyond assessing a predefined set of job duties and account for risk taking and measuring employee contribution to an organisation's survival (Edmondson and Lei, 2014; Garvin, 1993; Bourne and Mura, 2018).

2.3. Attribution theory

Attribution theory was initially proposed by Heider (1958) and developed by other psychologists such as Jones and Davis (1965), Kelley (1967), and Weiner (1979). It provides insights into how people make causal ascriptions. For example, it explains how line managers interpret an employee's deviation, deliberately or carelessly, from expected behaviour or from quality policies and guidelines – i.e., an explanation of why events in their environment happened (Hewett et al., 2018; Martinko and Mackey, 2019).

At the heart of Heider's (1958) theory lies the notions of the locus of causality and errors of attribution. Locus of causality refers to the attribution of the causes of an event to internal (self) and external (environment) sources or both, which in turn, have consequences for their subsequent behaviour in relation to that event. On the other hand, errors of attribution refer to errors in how people make causal inferences e.g., an overemphasis on internal – as opposed to external – factors (the fundamental attribution error); when making attributions about themselves and others (the actor-observer effect); and the tendency to attribute one's success to internal and dispositional factors but blaming external/situational factors for negative outcomes (self-serving error).

Kelley (1973) extended Heider's theory and conceptualised the covariation principle (a reflection on both social- and self-perception), which connotes that "an effect is attributed to the one of its possible causes [the person/internal, the stimulus/external, the circumstance, or some combination of these factors] with which, over time, it covaries" (p. 108). Kelley conceptualised three sources of information that people use to make attributions: (i) consistency (the relative stability of an individual over time); (ii) consensus (co-variation of behaviour across different people); and (iii) distinctiveness (how unique the behaviour is to the particular situation). Building on the (high/low) level of these three sources of information, Kelley's covariation principle explains attributions of an individual's behaviour. For example, managers (observers) are highly likely to attribute poor employee performance or non-compliant behaviour to the dominant

organisational approach to TQM in the presence of high consensus, distinctiveness, and consistency. Later, Weiner (1979) placed emphasis on domain-specific contexts such as achievement (also referred to as attributional theory in the extant literature – Fiske and Taylor, 1991). The key tenet of Weiner's (2010) work lies in the antecedents of causal beliefs and their consequences. In search for cause of the outcome, Weiner (2010) proposes three distinct properties: "locus of causality/location within or outside of the person, stability/endurance over time, and controllability, which in turn influence affective reactions (anger, pride, gratitude, guilt, shame, and others) as well as expectancy of future success which, in turn, affects achievement strivings and reactions toward others' (p. 366).

While rooted in psychology, attribution theory has become an interdisciplinary theory in that it has been explored in discipline-specific contexts. Consequently, its initial focus on 'generic, content-free processes' (Nishii et al., 2008, p. 506) has now broadened wherein people utilise domain-specific knowledge structures to guide the attribution process rather than content-free attributional principles – what Nishii et al. (2008, p. 507) refer to as 'attributional theories'. Lord and Smith (1983) also proposed to move away from over-generalising attribution theories to organisational research and focused instead on building context-specific attributional models.

Consistent with Nishii et al., (2008), we argue that line managers' attribution about the design and conduct of PA follow their attributions about the why of the specific TQM approach (see Hewett et al., 2018; Martinko and Mackey, 2019). A theoretical perspective particularly relevant to managers' attributions upon which they design and conduct PA systems in organisations with a TQM orientation can be found in social attribution theory (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). This theory emphasises attributions of behaviour directed toward a stimulus. Since people can attach different meanings to social stimuli and process them differently, their understanding and perceptions towards that information may differ (Nishii et al., 2008). Accordingly, we argue that the design and conduct of PA in organisations with a TQM orientation may depend on the attributions that line managers make about the dominant approach to TQM.

We build upon this stream of attribution theory research and extend it to the design and conduct of PA in TQM-oriented organisations, as follows: First, this study aims to investigate how an organisation's preferred approach to TQM could result in different PA processes and purposes. Attribution theory can provide insights into how managers construct the meaning of PA outcomes

based on the dominance of either control- or learning-oriented focus of TQM or both. Second, attribution theory can explain self-serving bias in which managers overemphasise on quality control and conformance while oversighting continuous learning, often at the expense of appraising individuals and blaming them for system-level causes of performance variation. While this could underscore and reinforce the directive and control use of PA systems and bring managers order and predictability to their work, it is insufficient to make PA systems relevant to the core philosophy of TQM. In short, attribution theory offers a new lens through which to investigate how quality control and learning approaches to TQM are interpreted and enacted by managers in the design and conduct of PA systems (see Weiner, 2018).

2.4. TQM and PA: an attributional analysis

Variation or variability is the crux of the TQM philosophy – i.e., the difference between an ideal (a standard of perfection) and an actual outcome (Bowman, 1994; Evans and Lindsay, 2022). TQM philosophy views variability as a natural, omnipresent condition that always occurs in any business (Deming, 1986). Given the prevalence and consequences of variation for both managers and employees, significant attention has been given to understanding and knowledge of variation and factors causing deviation from expected outcomes in organisations that adopt process improvement methodologies such as TQM (see Malinova et al., 2022; Kumar and Sharma, 2017). Shewhart (1986) distinguished two types of variation within a system that are to be diagnosed and managed for quality improvement: common cause variation (i.e., system-based) and special cause variation (i.e., factors unique to the individual employee). Of these, the former constitutes the lion's share of performance variation (as high as 94% - see Deming, 1986) and the latter accounts for relatively little causes of performance variation (Lei and MacKenzie, 2020; Foster and Gardner, 2022). From a review of literature (see Deming, 1986; Waldman 1989; Waldman 1994) on causes of variation in relations to work systems and work performance, two issues relevant to TQM and PA emerge: the knowledge gap or management's lack of knowledge of variation in performance phenomena (e.g., work performance of employees), and consequently the management's tendency to overemphasise the special causes of variation to achieve a stable process (Fan and Niu, 2021). Together, these issues give TQM more form than substance as it makes quality tools to be misapplied and root causes of performance variation to remain misdiagnosed, thereby leading to loopholes in the PA processes, purposes, and outcomes (Smeds, 2022; Foster and Gardner, 2022). The knowledge gap on the causes of performance variation have led scholars and practitioners

(e.g., Deming, 1986; Adler et al., 2016; Cappelli and Tavis, 2016) to criticise PA systems for being unfit for purpose. As Deming (1986, p. 315) noted, 'no amount of care or skill in workmanship can overcome fundamental faults in the system' – an indication that common causes of variation are system-based, and that the responsibility lies squarely with the management. We extend this line of argument by suggesting that understanding variation is largely affected by an organisation's approach to TQM which ultimately creates a pattern of managerial behaviour to deal with performance variation through employee PA systems (see Bayo-Moriones and de la Torre, 2022).

As discussed earlier, TQM philosophy is underpinned by two fundamentally different goals of control and learning (Sitkin et al., 1994). The essence of a control-oriented TQM approach lies in the notion of 'process control', which is achieved by reducing variation through increased feedback and self-regulation (Bowman, 1994; Manz and Stewart, 1997). Viewed in this sense, a control-oriented TQM echoes the fulfilment of the requirements for a cybernetic control system – i.e., a feedback loop consisting of performance standards, performance measurement, comparing performance with standards, feedback information on unwanted variances or problems in the system (Green and Welsh, 1988; Sitkin et al., 1994). While a cybernetic approach to quality control involves a limited level of learning, it proves insufficient for building capabilities for performance. Godfrey et al. (1997) argue that cybernetics, as the most fitting metaphor for representing the TQM paradigm, fails to acknowledge that system involves people i.e., process control in TQM requires the exercise of control over the workforce (Legge, 1995, p. 246). From a labour process perspective, while empowerment is the rhetoric, control, in reality, lies in the hands of management. In short, a cybernetic control model of managing TQM and employee performance would only enforce the notion of employee accountability and compliance with rules and procedures but fail to acknowledge that the employee is not fully in control of his or her performance (Cardy et al., 1995; Deming, 1986).

Furthermore, a control-oriented TQM prioritises 'output' or 'results' as the main performance dimension which in turn restricts the capacity of the employee to go beyond minimum job requirements to perform extra-role behaviours (See Bowman, 1994; Ghorpade et al., 1995; Waldman, 1994). This is in line with some recent research which associates a control-oriented HR system with quality performance outcomes (Gambi et al., 2022). Hence, a singular emphasis on control to TQM implementation assumes that individual responsibility for variation substitutes for system-level responsibility. For Lawler (1994) and Adler and Borys (1996), an overemphasis on

work process codification is more conducive to abrogation of management responsibility for common cause variation, thereby undermining employee discretion and initiative. Instead of stepping in and owning the problem and model the expected behaviour (Knotts, 2021), managers are inclined to assign the locus of blame for poor quality on the actions of employees. Brown (1984, p. 54) recognised that 'attributions about the causes of poor performance or performance variation tend to be more employee-centred (internal) than they would be otherwise'. The implication of an employee-centred blame culture and employee's responsibility for poor quality is that it promotes short-term (results-oriented) thinking (Deming, 1986; Ghorpade et al. 1995; Srinivasan and Kurey, 2014). Management's obsession with the employee as the prime object of control (the source of quality variation) to ensure quality inevitably turns quality into measurable short-term results and that 'the attainment of those outputs becomes the central preoccupation of the workers' at the expense of continuous quality improvement and learning (Ghorpade et al., 1995, p. 34; Bellisario and Pavlov, 2018). Godfrey et al. (1997) have argued that the control function of TQM coupled with mere economic interest in TQM adoption by management could undermine the strategic objectives of TQM in terms of continuous process control, employee empowerment, organisational learning, and enhanced quality of service offerings. This echoes Sitkin et al.'s (1994, p. 544) observation that 'the guiding precepts of TQM can accommodate an effort to enhance an organisation's ability to uncover new problems and develop solutions independent of current problems'. Indeed, the extant research reinforces the exploration-oriented aspect of TQM as a precursor for enhancing employee capacity to create new and anticipate future needs of customers and fulfilling those needs (Douglas and Judge, 2001; Kovach, 2016; Jiménez-Jiménez et al., 2020).

In contrast, the learning orientation of TQM requires management to build a workplace culture of calculated risks (Garvin, 1993; Akwei and Zhang, 2018) where employees feel comfortable to voice their concerns over quality issues without fear of being blamed for performance variation (Edmondson, 2018). One way to enact such transformation is to develop a PA system that makes an employee a risk taker and encourages him/her to think beyond compliance (Manz and Stewart, 1997; Sitkin et al., 1994). The learning goal of TQM enhances an organisation's ability to use PA as an effective mechanism for addressing learning gaps. To that end, continuous improvement through PA should enhance experimentation rather than making employees follow rigid quality rules. Rather than relying on fixed employee performance

measures, the learning goal of TQM empathises improving managers' knowledge and skills in understanding of the root cause of performance variation and rewarding employees through a combined use of error-reduction and innovation incentives (Deming, 1986; Garvin, 1993; Hackman and Wageman, 1995; Ajgaonkar et al., 2022). The dynamism of learning in a TQM context puts 'unknowable' at the forefront, pushing quality from control to assurance to quality in its totality to support employees to continually experiment and explore their ideas and look for solutions – what Birkinshaw and Gibson (2004) has referred to as 'contextual ambidexterity' (see also Wang and Rafiq, 2014). Hence, we draw a parallel to the control versus learning distinction and argue that managers will interpret performance variation in accordance with an organisation's approach to TQM. The different focus of a control- and learning-oriented TQM serves as a platform for managers to make attributions about whether poor performance is due to internal or external reasons and subsequently the choice of actions to address the cause of poor performance.

Extant research highlights the importance of manager attributions of employee performance (see, for a review, Fedor and Rowland, 1989; Hewett et al., 2018; Sanders et al., 2020; Hewett, 2021). For example, it indicates that managers are rather insensitive to external constraints and tend to make more internal attributions of employees' performance – i.e., fundamental attribution error (Jones and Nisbett, 1972). Long-tenured managers tend to search more for internal explanations – i.e., actor-observer bias (Fedor and Rowland, 1989). More recently, Lyubykh et al. (2022, p. 125) correlate supervisor over-attribution of lower performance to employees' internal factors (i.e., conscientiousness), which in turn triggers higher levels of supervisory abuse. Higher affective and better working relationships with the employees could lead to attributions of performance to external influences (see Wegner and Finsteum, 1977). Employees' preference to seek out advice from their colleagues outside their supervisors' control could shape supervisor attributions of employee performance (Mell et al., 2022).

From an employee-centric point of view, manager attributions of employee performance have been shown to pose a challenge to managers in handling an employee's reaction to feedback particularly regarding source credibility (Bannister, 1986,), the primary focus (internal or external) of feedback (Levy et al., 1998), and the employee's internal attributions (Tolli and Schmidt, 2008; Mell et al., 2022).

Despite the contributions of these studies in explaining attributional preferences of managers and associated biases, they often described a manager's perception of causes of performance variation in a rather decontextualised manner (see Levy et al., 2018; Molinsky, 2013; Morley et al., 2021). It is therefore argued that attributions that TQM represents a control or learning orientation play a role in shaping attributions of poor performing subordinates made by managers (see Waldman, 1994). As such, they provide a reference point for managers to understand PA and consequently guide the conduct of PA process. While each of the two TQM goals has its own focus and emphasis, they are interdependent managerial processes that help organisations achieve their goals in an efficient and effective manner. To avoid fundamental attribution error (see Lyubykh et al., 2022; Kent and Martinko, 2018), there is a need to view the organisation as a total system which necessitates a delicate balancing act of attributing performance variation to the right causes and taking the correct counter and preventive measures to improve employee outcomes and organisational performance (Sanders et al., 2020; Dahlgaard et al., 2019; Jiménez-Jiménez et al., 2020).

Given previous attention to the social context of PA as well as the contentious and acrimonious debate over the utility and relevance of PA for modern organisations, we focus on the conflicting goals of TQM, management's choice of specific TQM goal and perception of performance variation, and the potential for the inherent risk of attribution errors in PA. We argue that an organisation's approach to TQM serves as a reference for the causal knowledge and reasoning about performance variation, attributions of employee performance and the conduct of PA process.

3. Research design and methods

3.1. Justification for qualitative case study

As part of a large research project on TQM/PA in manufacturing settings, this study aims to investigate how an organisation's preferred approach to TQM could result in different PA processes and purposes particularly in relation to the manager's understanding, diagnosis, and attributions of employee performance variation. Given the exploratory aim of the research, a qualitative case study method was adopted (see Yin, 2018). Qualitative case study methods also help develop an understanding of the important variables or concepts, which can shed light on the

perceived inadequacy of PA in use in contemporary organisations with a TQM orientation (see Childe, 2017; Voss, 2002; Whelan et al., 2018).

3.2. Sample selection and issues under investigation

To identify and select information-rich cases and research informants related to the phenomenon of interest, a purposeful sampling technique was adopted (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2018). We focus on the manufacturing sector and select a representative sample of automobile and auto-parts manufacturers. The reason for focusing on manufacturing sector was to make the sample of cases more homogeneous in terms of potentially relevant contextual variables such as the nature of the work processes involved, and the type of technology applied.

Our focus on the automotive industry was two-fold: the suitability of the operational and production characteristics of automobile and auto-parts manufacturers (e.g., full-scale mass production through continued insistence on standardisation: high clarity of task objectives and high predictability of expected problems as effective mechanisms for driving out process variation), suitability for adopting process improvement methodologies such as TQM and other variations on continuous improvement (e.g., six sigma, lean manufacturing), and the growing recall costs and settlements for poor quality (an 81.8% jump from the previous decade – see Wayland, 2019). While standardisation would lead to conformance quality and operational efficiency (e.g., less scrap or rework), it tends to favour a more structured, control and compliance-oriented management of quality by deflecting the blame for poor quality to those at the lower levels (see Bowen, 1994; Nishii et al., 2008). The auto industry's growing recalls problem (the ultimate indicator of vehicle quality) and its associated costs and settlements and the infiltration of Industry 4.0 technologies could also put employees into a negative feedback loop for poor performance beyond their control (e.g., person-job misfit, skills mismatch, pressure on employees to adapt to the increasingly capable machines and new ways of working). One way to enact this is to build upon the TQM philosophy and create a desire for organisational learning. Here managers would be more inclined to avoid fundamental attribution error by building resilience to effectively navigate sources of performance and base ratings only on performance within individual control (Cardy et al., 1995).

To observe such contrasting patterns in the data, we selected four cases (out of 21) from a sample of TQM-oriented organisations for theoretical reasons. Given concerns over external

validity in case-based studies, we selected the cases largely based on the extensiveness of their continuous improvement programs and attempts to integrate TQM into the performance management activities (e.g., PA processes and purposes). These criteria enabled us to compare the initial sample of case organisations and select those cases that demonstrated better outcomes in terms of alignment and/or function with TQM goals and efforts to put in place PA systems for supporting TQM implementation. Table 1 offers an overview of the organisations that were included in our study.

(Insert Table 1 here)

3.3. Interview protocol

We adopted a semi-structured interview technique as our primary data source to gather rich, empirical data (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The interview protocol covered several issues relating to the adoption preferences for TQM implementation, understanding of performance variation and mechanisms for variability reduction, causal explanation for nonconformity and under-performance, and managing employee performance (e.g., measures and accountability). Each interview took between 45 and 60 minutes in duration. The interviews took place between January 2011 and February 2012. The latest follow-up interview (albeit not planned) took place in October 2013. The aim was to understand how the interplay between TQM and PA unfolded over time – especially in terms of initial expressions of emphasis on control or learning goals of TQM and the manners in which each goal facilitated the conduct of PA and its focus on identifying the underlying causes for poor performance.

3.4. Data collection

To establish a criterion to evidence the quality of interview data, we relied on the notion of data saturation (Fusch and Ness, 2015). This varied between 9 to 14 interviews per case. Interviews were carried out with managers at senior, middle and supervisory levels. The selection of interviewees from various managerial levels and functional areas conforms to the notion of 'multiple perspectives' of qualitative research methods (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Waldman et al., 1998), we placed emphasis on general, quality/operations/productions and HR managers as key informants, largely owing to their direct involvement in the adoption decisions and implementation of quality improvement initiatives and PA systems. To enhance the validity of the information derived from the interviews and provide a

stronger substantiation for the research constructs, the interview data were supplemented by a certain level of examination of related documents to quality control and PA policies and procedures. Such methodological triangulation in turn helped mitigate, or at least limit, intrinsic bias in interview data (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Table 2 presents background characteristics of the research informants.

(Insert Table 2 here)

3.5. Qualitative data analysis

The analysis phase of qualitative case study design employed a systematic approach to the study of transcripts in a sense that data reduction and sense-making efforts were made to identify core consistencies, meanings, or specified characteristics within the text (Bell et al., 2022) – what Krippendorff (2018, p. 1) refers to as content analysis: "an empirically grounded method, exploratory in process and predictive or inferential in intent". This research technique hinges on the notion of 'coding': the process of naming or labelling things, categories, and properties. To aid the content analysis, due account was taken of the three-step coding process recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2014, p. 220): open, axial, and selective coding. The analytic process of coding started with open coding which entailed line-by-line analysis of the textual data with an aim to identify, name, categorise and describe phenomena found in the text. We further analysed the results of open coding (i.e., categories and properties) by relating them to each other, establishing causal relationships among them and forming more precise and complete explanations – what Corbin and Strauss (2014) refer to as 'axial coding'. Finally, the analytic process of coding completed with selective coding in that the identified categories and properties were organised around "a central explanatory concept" (p.161) until an "analytic gestalt" (p.144) allows the theory to emerge. To conduct the aforementioned analytic process of coding, we followed Saldana's (2016) coding procedures in the following manner. First, each member of the research team independently reviewed the transcripts and provided the principal investigator with a list of important categories. A consolidated checklist of the main categories of the data was then prepared. Next, several rounds of discussions were undertaken to rectify any differences. The reliability of the coding was finally established and resulted in an acceptable level. Like that of Harris and Ogbonna (2002), we adopted several strategies to improve the validity of findings (Miles et al., 2019). We invited an experienced qualitative researcher to review the analytic process of coding

and categorisation procedures. Finally, three key themes and several aligned sub-themes emerged: (i) organisation's approach to TQM (limits and (un)intended effects); (ii) variation (causes and explanatory factors); and (iii) job performance (measures, outcomes, and accountability).

4. Findings

In the interest of clarity and ease of reporting (narrative flow), we reviewed the descriptions of each case and examined themes, similarities, and differences across cases. Such repetitive, and recursive process in data analysis led us to divide the case organisations into two groups: first group labelled as 'Policy', and the second as 'Judgement'. Policy cases emphasised on manual for managers on quality control to address employee underperformance (three out of the four cases), whereas the only Judgement case gave credence to tailoring the focus of PA toward reinforcing the organisation's approach to TQM. In labelling the groups, we tried to choose a name that helps capture some facets of the fit between the PA systems with the organisation's approach to TQM. In Policy cases, top-down rigid quality control instructions towards TQM interventions served a two-fold purpose: to substitute for employee ownership of quality issues and "to force reluctant compliance and to extract recalcitrant effort" (Adler and Borvs, 1996, p. 69). While at Judgement case, formalised procedures gave managers the task of viewing employee performance deviations as both risks and learning opportunities (see Akwei and Zhang, 2018). In doing so, they were able to apply judgment to situations that fall outside an employee's control and (in the words of one middle manager) 'blow off quality control policies to favour and reward more creative and motivated employees'. Further details on the findings are presented below.

4.1. Organisation's approach to TQM: limits and (un)intended effects of TQM implementation

While both Policy and Judgement cases embraced TQM philosophy and other variations on continuous improvement, their different perspectives towards the adoption of TQM provided the context for its focus, integration with other subsystems, and its subsequent implementation. The consistent theme that was reflected in the Policy's approach to TQM was an effort to magnify the control and compliance function as the principal pillar of the quality strategy. The main thrust of the strategic quality planning at Policy cases was largely confined to strict compliance by all employees with formalisation requirements – i.e., quality procedures and work instructions. The cornerstone of their action plan hinged on communicating TQM as a pathway to eliminating errors and avoiding performance variation. The tone at the top of the organisation with respect to the

dominant control goal of TQM modelled a fit-for-purpose behaviour to other management teams and employees. To operationalise the control and compliance TQM going forward, the organisations adopted a zero-tolerance stance toward deviations from a defined standard for quality and of work behaviour. This enabled managers to intensify quality control procedures and exercise much more detailed control of the labour process in their action plans. Policy 3's quality policy states: 'Ensuring the highest quality standards in order to provide zero-error in the production system and zero-defect products….. It focuses on absolute compliance with quality – and HR-related policies…It disciplines employees for quality non-compliance'. Corporate quality document at Policy 1 states: 'It requires the highest quality standards in regulatory compliance…. Failing to do so (intentional or unintentional), will lead to extending the probationary period.… terminating employment contract'.

The implications of the organisation's dominant approach to TQM for line managers can be seen in the following comments. A senior plant operation manager at Policy 1 noted that his job was '…to find ways to articulate and drive the control and compliance focus of TQM from the top throughout the organisation'. One production team manager at Policy 2 talked about the need 'to strictly follow the tone-at-the top and seek compliance from those at lower managerial levels and production employees'. One quality control inspector at Policy 3 observed: 'Quality control policies are often developed in such a way that leaves us limited to no liability for non-compliance and performance deviation'.

Foremen and lower-level supervisors took the organisational directives for TQM implementation back to their departments and cascaded them down to the workers. As one production line supervisor at Policy 1 observed 'their [board of directors] action plan calls for a tight compliance regime to ensure we all understand quality as defect detection, reduction and prevention, measure it by deviation from the target, and manage it by identifying poor performers and holding them accountable'. In a similar vein, a spare parts supervisor at Policy 3 stated that 'the quality action plan sets the tone for all managers charged with conducting PA to develop task performance measures that hold employees accountable for deviation from the company's specifications for the activities'.

Overall, managers at Policy cases vociferously maintained that their quality policies and standards were required to maintain the control focus of TQM and ensure employee compliance

with quality standards. This was the point of reference for all managers to adopt an external locus of control orientation in identifying the causes of performance variation and employee underperformance. There was general agreement amongst the interviewees that the organisation's purpose of adoption and implementation priority of TQM provided a point of reference for the functioning of PA systems. The most common way in which managers found it safe and appropriate to implement the quality action plan was in the form of developing not only tasks performance measures but also operational techniques and activities (associated with individual's task). This issue is illustrated by the following observations by one assembly supervisor at Policy 1: 'We spend too much time for putting in place strong compliance and control systems, searching for deviation from quality requirements, expectations and identifying underperforming employees'. Perhaps most telling on this point are the remarks made by a long-tenured production team leader at Policy 3: 'It [quality planning] is merely an instrument for purpose of bringing stability to the system. It is a reminder for employees that we have to avoid any non-compliance with whatever means possible'. This leads us to the following proposition:

> **Proposition 1.** A TQM approach framed solely in terms of well-defined control systems will lead to a compliance-driven PA system that ensures meeting the internal quality control parameters.

The evidence from Judgement case study provides a rather different picture. While the control goal of TQM was seen to be necessary to ensure strategic quality planning is carried out and employees do what should be done, it was by no means a sufficient goal to sustain the momentum of TQM. Two key elements emerge: first, that incomplete understanding of the broad scope of TQM and its espoused goals could limit its potential to integrate into other subsystems (due to its general nature) and the synergy arising between them. In the words of the plant quality manager: 'An overemphasis on mere conformance to a prescriptive set of control system parameters is too risky… It drives employee behaviour towards achieving the parameter of conformance or job assignments. It also drives out the other priorities of TQM'. A quality engineering manager commented: 'Control alone would only allow passing the buck to employees for any non-conformance and failure to achieve the desired results in the short term. It is more about nit-picking, frequent check-in and looking for some poor unsuspecting employee to blame'. Evidence from the interviews and archival research indicated that it was the act of balance between the varying goals of TQM and their complementary – as opposed to their conflicting – nature

which set the tone for the entire organisation. The lever which was used to activate the TQM approach was to go beyond quality as conformance to encompass quality in the eyes of the beholder. It followed from this premise that neither the control nor the learning goal of TQM was given priority on the managers' agenda and that the integration of control and learning goals of TQM served as a basis for strategic quality planning and implementation. The control goal of TQM was seen to bring focus and help pinpoint unmet customers' needs and desires. A quality audit manager asserted that 'from my experience, it is difficult to focus on new or unmet customer needs without having the stable foundation for standardisation and conformance'. A pivotal device in forcing through a balanced mix of control and learning was to expand the process of PA to allow for both operational and individual (e.g., risk-taking behaviour) performance dimensions. This approach to PA was a mix of dispositional and situational attributions. As one senior manager (assembly operations) observed, 'our focus on control and learning aspects of TQM provide the opportunity for going beyond compliance and the rules of the game'. One senior HR manager remarked:

> 'To develop performance measures, we focus on both the components of employee job behaviour and work outcomes. So, when we assess employee performance, we do take into account the role that both the system and the individual employees play in determining performance'.

This in turn led to a balancing act to reflect two purposes: (i) to reduce variation and increase the stability of work processes, and (ii) to expand focus from mere compliance with internal processes to customer engagement. The exploitation of customer-specific knowledge (due to their heterogeneity) had led to a sense of congruence among managers at different echelons in that employee work activities and outcomes had to be aligned with the organisation's approach to TQM. The emphasis of the adopted TQM approach in the organisation put the emphasis on the need to integrate the inward and outward views of quality and relate it to employee job behaviour and work outcomes. Thus, we note the comments by a quality lab supervisor and quality system and yield manager: 'Quality control in itself is the right approach to guarantee meeting the requirements defined for our products and holding our employees accountable for any variation in the short term. But it could only lead to just mere satisfaction of the customer'; 'This [quality control alone] is not enough to predict changing customer preferences. It cannot predict customer preferences and actions'. The act of balancing stability through well-defined control systems and

flexibility through learning had several dimensions. Chief among them was the view that the control aspect of TQM served as a source of stability of internal processes in meeting the baseline customer expectations. The lever which was used to activate the TQM approach was to go beyond quality as conformance to encompass quality in the eyes of the beholder. As corporate quality policy states: 'Quality starts from within the organisation… The need to manage internal quality to match customer preferences and maintain customer satisfaction… It is about customer needs analysis… It involves manufacturing products with high internal and external quality'. Therefore, we expect:

> **Proposition 2.** A combined control and learning approach to TQM will result in a PA system that embraces both operational compliance and customer requirements.

4.2. Variation, causes and explanatory factors

The organisation's approach to TQM formed the basis for how variation was defined and managed across both Policy and Judgement cases. In Policy cases, the interpretation of variation as failure had two connotations: failure to meet the product specifications, and failure to adhere to quality control policies and procedures. In line with the organisation's approach to quality, they achieved conformance through tightly coupled system inputs and outputs characterised by top-down, prescriptive compliance, highly interdependent internal processes, and more homogenous and rigorous production methods. As one engineering supervisor at Policy 1 puts it: 'Deviation from product spec, work standards, instructions, and procedures is what we label as performance deviation'. According to an HR manager at Policy 3: 'Performance deviations are assessed based on the extent to which employees adhere to or deviate from workplace rules and regulations'. A quality control inspector remarked: 'Anything that ignores or violate quality control and other work standards is viewed as deviation'.

The interpretation of variation as non-compliance reinforced and supported the technical dominant orientation of TQM across Policy cases. This in turn gave support to managers dealing with performance variation in a sense that they viewed variation/product defects as employee responsibility. Managers at different levels viewed variation as an 'isolated individual event' which 'lies in the responsibility of individual employees' (Assembly supervisor). Many interviewees stated that while they were aware of the peculiarities of car and auto-parts production environment and encountered the same situational experiences of their employees, they had to

change their perception from the process to the end results and make internal attributions of employee performance. Specifically, their response to the causes of performance variation had been largely to disregard external constraints and pay attention to the messages from senior managers. A plant operations manager at Policy 2 made the point starkly, stating 'I need to judge the situation in line with the tone at the top'. He elaborated the point, thus: 'What can we really do in the middle- and first-line levels of hierarchy but to serve as agents in pushing the compliance and control focus of quality into the lower-level management and throughout the organisation'. In a similar vein, a (2nd shift) supervisor commented: 'We are the extended arms of middle managers in ensuring employee compliance with quality control procedures and responsibility for performance outcomes'. Our informal conversations with several first-line managers (maintenance, assembly, engineering, training/risk/compliance supervisor) highlighted two reasons for employees' deviation from work procedure or instructions and failure to meet desired standards of performance. These included putting policies, processes, and procedures ahead of employees, and the lack of employee influence over the work process and its outcomes. These issues in turn led managers at middle- and first-line levels to adopt the common language reflecting the senior management perspective and enforce employee compliance. To that end, the attribution that the managers made about the cause of employee performance variation involved the employee. An operations supervisor remarked: 'Detailed and inefficient processes particularly those which are manual shift our focus away from process improvement to the employee who deviates from the standard process. This is the main focus of our evaluation system'. A supplier quality manager commented:

> 'Our top-down approach to managing quality does not leave us enough confidence and time to redesign processes in a timely and efficient manner. The way we manage processes and assess employee performance prevents employees from seeing the big picture. What happens then is that they follow shortcuts and ignore complicated processes that do not make sense to them. This would in turn make it difficult for us to identify the root causes of process variation. Instead, we try to reduce variation by holding employees accountable for non-compliance and poor results'.

Thus, we propose:

Proposition 3. A control-oriented TQM will lead to the control of the quality of the end product/result (at the expense of the quality of the process), especially when the management controls focus is on individuals rather than the system.

In Judgement case, there was a more concerted effort to develop and maintain a common understanding of variation through the lens of continuous quality improvement. Their interpretation of variation as the principal product of 'poor process design' and recognition of its implications for the choice of object of appraisal enabled the management team to strike the right balance between the work process/systems and PA system. As a plant manager observed: 'We should not get ahead of ourselves. We develop work process and systems first and we then involve people. Our focus should first be on fixing the work process and systems'. The consequences of failing to prioritise systems/work process problems were explained by an assembly line manager:

> 'If you do it the other way round, you only start the finger-pointing, looking for a quick short-term fix to performance variation. The bottom-line is to blame employees for the wrong reasons and coerce them into compliance. But employees will resist and fire back. Their compliance is no guarantee of no variation'.

Referring to the limits of short-term fixes to process and systems-level problems, one technical quality program manager observed:

> 'When you only think in a linear way to examine poor performance, you often end up with reviewing past performance or to some extent what is happening now. You get nothing but going backwards and blame employees for the failures. Because this way of thinking can only lead to quick-fix solutions. It does not prevent problems'.

For most of our interviewees at Judgement, creating a common language and reporting system of process/performance variation applied throughout the whole organisation initially emerged as the key challenge on the road to the TQM cultural transformation. As one senior HR manager reflected: 'I recall that they [middle- and first-line managers] initially made noises about the way we [top management team] talked about the language of variation. What we have tried to communicate to our managers is the need to separate two types of variation: variation in the end-results or outcomes of a process and variation in the process itself'. He elaborated the point, thus: 'We have been trying to foster a sense of responsibility among our managers for poor performance. We should accept the fact that we are part of the reason for poor performance'. This implies that

creating a shared understanding of and responsibility for variability could lead to more effective use of PA. That is, it reduces the biased interpretation of the process results and the managerial tendency to focus on the individual (as opposed to the work system and production process) as the prime source of performance variation.

Managers' attempt to create a shared view of variation and its underlying causes through the lens of continuous quality improvement led to complementary actions on two fronts: a balanced emphasis on improving work processes and building ownership in the process, and a shift in focus from the employee to the process as the prime object of appraisal. In this respect, the follow up on initial TQM training in the form of tailored quality control courses was seen to be instrumental in cementing in the minds of the managers the idea that the process itself not the mere results of the process matters most to the organisation in its pursuit of continuous quality improvement and learning. The intention was, as one senior plant manager put it succinctly, 'to get it and stick to it'. To that end, there had been considerable emphasis on organisation-wide continuous improvement training from the top. Continuous improvement training programmes at Judgement had three distinct characteristics. First, the goal was to develop management knowledge of variation and statistical thinking so that they could use hard data to understand how and why quality varies in either process, output, or both. Second, on the job training mode at different hierarchical levels and functional specialty enabled managers to follow a steady and calculated pace and 'to see it for themselves' (Senior HR Manager), 'get in touch with the reality of the factory floor and variation in a manufacturing process' (Plant Manager) and 'accept responsibility for variation in both process and employee performance' (Quality Assurance Supervisor). Finally, and third, the nature and focus of training programmes enabled managers to put their knowledge into action and take deliberate steps to go beyond identifying sources of variation and devote their time to develop processes that prevent problems. An HR manager put the point succinctly:

> 'We have come a long way in shifting our fixed thinking of employees as the main focus of PA system. We now focus more on developing processes that enable employees to complete their assigned tasks and encourage everyone to take on responsibilities outlined in outside of their job description'.

When viewed all together, these characteristics serve to suggest that performance variability is subject to both quality control and learning. While the quality control system ensures that

employees perform their tasks within the limits of the system and that any variation is detected in a process, the improvement and learning aspect of quality ensures that employees have the latitude to define the variation and craft their tasks in such a way that go above minimising variations to encompass altering work processes that match heterogeneous customer needs. In formal terms:

> **Proposition 4.** A combined control and learning approach to TQM will lead to the control of the quality of the process, especially when the process is mediated by management controls focused on shared responsibility for identifying and managing sources of variation and achieving quality outcomes.

4.3. Performance measures, outcomes, and accountability

The organisation's approach to TQM and consequently understanding sources of performance variability underpinned and opened a window for PA reform. Understandably, the contours of the PA reform associated with the organisation's approach to TQM varied considerably in terms of performance measures, outcomes, and accountability across Policy and Judgement case organisations.

Despite the initial optimism surrounding TQM adoption at Policy cases, the enthusiasm and hype waned when it came time to implementation – forcing managers to default to the old PA system in two related ways: line manager attributions of employee performance based on conformance to quality measures and responsibility for non-compliant actions (i.e., internal attributions of employees' performance), and insensitivity towards contextual settings and constraints on employee performance. Hence, there was a strong tendency on their part to hold employees accountable for poor performance outside their control. As such, the inability, or reluctance, to differentiate between the individual or the situation as the main cause of the manifested performance coupled with the need for conformity to formal rules led them to fail to see and hear the cause of performance variation through the employee's eyes and ears. An assembly supervisor at Policy 3 states: 'It's easier said than done. We implement TQM as a production, factory-level plan. Our quality control policies and evaluation criteria are all meant to guide employees to adhere to quality criteria and performance expectations'. Perhaps most telling on this point are the observations made by a long-tenured HR manager at Policy 2:

> 'In addition to education and training programmes for quality management, we have created internal quality-focused newsletter. We provide learning materials to employees.

> But when it comes to developing quality manual and employee handbook, we put compliance first as the standard for judging quality and assessing employee performance. Everything has to follow from there'.

A quotation from an assembly inspector at Policy 1 illustrates this point: 'The quality policy and monthly newsletter are less about enabling employees to fit quality with their jobs. It is the other way round'. In a similar vein, the company's quality control manual (at Policy Case 1) and PA forms (at Policy Case 2) laid stress on 'preventing defective products through strict employee compliance with quality standards' and 'performance outcomes that each employee is required to achieve in the assigned job', respectively. In many regards, the PA reform associated with the organisation's approach to TQM at Policy case organisations represented the conventional PA – figuring out which employees are at fault (rather than finding out what went wrong) and identifying employees as chief culprit of poor quality (rather than finding out the culprit behind employees' poor performance). What is important about these quotations is that they signalled a considered rejection of the management's actions by the employees on the shopfloor. As one long-tenured maintenance supervisor who had been promoted to quality assurance inspector at Policy 1 observed:

> 'Employees sniff out management's intention from behind quality policies. All are designed in such a way that opt to leave no limit to vertical authority and shift the blame back onto shopfloors for poor performance. They are not meant to allow employees to know their worth to the organisation. They must be followed for employees to meet performance expectations. There are signs that employees do not feel trusted, and I should say that employees also distrust management'.

But, to what extent does the organisation's approach to TQM and knowledge of performance variability affect PA process?

The prime performance measure at Policy cases was specific job-related behaviours for achieving the prescribed goals for the appraisal period. Evidence from the interviews and PA forms revealed that such behaviours were limited in scope as they only focused on the role's essential or core duties of an employee. As such, employees were expected to display a determination to achieve the results that were intended for the job and reflected in specific job outcomes and deliverables. According to a senior quality control manager at Policy 2, 'we have a results-driven

PA system. We have a strictly defined job structure and set of job behaviours that are to be followed by employees to ensure the results'. The comments of the production manager provide additional insights as to how the organisation's approach to TQM and knowledge of performance variability set the tone for the purpose of PA and how managers utilised it to judge the employee in all the areas of performance and under all circumstances: 'Job-related behaviours specified in a job description must lead to the expected results under any circumstances as part of satisfactory job performance. The bottom line is that employees are to demonstrate accountability'. While the focus of PA was to evaluate individual performance based on task attainment behaviour, the assumption was that employees had control over their different task elements and variations in the processes. The evidence suggested that PA at Policy cases adopted a single stance with respect to holding employees accountable for poor performance. There was no consideration that poor performance was the manager's responsibility. In fact, too specific and narrowly defined task performance and goals encouraged managers to resort to blaming employees for poor performance and taking more credit for high levels of compliance in operations. In sum, we suggest the following:

> **Proposition 5.** Performance measures defined solely in terms of control-oriented focus of TQM (i.e., task performance) will lead to more internal attributions of employee performance (i.e., employee control), especially when the purpose of PA is on the attainment of individual work results (i.e., results accountability).

In Judgement case, we see the importance of the institutionalisation and transformation of TQM in enabling organisation to exercise the control function of quality and promote continuous quality improvement and learning. A primary lever of the institutionalisation of TQM at Judgement case was an emphasis on improving work systems (e.g., standardisation of work processes, operating procedures, production methods and standards, machinery or technology used, production sequencing, safety measures in car manufacturing process) as a jumpstart to enhancing individual performance. According to a quality document, continuous improvement programmes 'must promote greater involvement of employees in the strategic quality planning and follow up implementation…quality and HRM systems must run in parallel…continue to run in parallel…it involves helping employees to shift their efforts towards internal customers with an aim to identify and fulfil external customers' needs and expectations'. The monthly company email newsletter states 'the results of quality control are to support employee development … drive and

improve employee performance… it sets future employee performance goals related to customer delight'. A production planning manager reflected: 'Employees are only part of the work system. I mean we first need to improve the system and production processes in such a way that help employees perform better in their jobs'. Our analysis of the data was suggestive of a convincing case of the emphasis on system improvement. But to what extent did the precedence of system or process over individual lead to the development of quality-focused work performance measures, outcomes, and accountability?

The choice of employee performance measures was explicitly grounded in the organisation's joint optimisation of the control and learning goals of TQM. As one senior management reflected: 'The control goal of TQM and its measures are means of reaching a larger achievement, I mean, ensuring the viability of the organisation'. The control measure of employee performance laid stress on the in-role performance: the core task achievement of each employee, whereas the learning goal of TQM put the stress on the idea of extra-role performance: employee's desire to go above and beyond the call of duty. The management puts forward two types of job performance behaviours to reinforce the alignment between the control and learning goals of TQM on the one hand and the PA and rewards on the other. These included performing expected job requirements and exceeding formal job requirements. According to plant HR manager, the aim was to: 'See quality beyond meeting the specification requirements and expand it to the point that employees take accountability for their actions'. A production and continuous improvement manager remarked: 'Performance measures are defined to enable employees to see the big picture and apply TQM whenever they see fit in their actions both within and outside the workplace rules'.

Training became crucial to the way the organisation maintained the right balance between control and learning and together with PA, it gelled together the company's quality management system and its objectives. It was clear from the company's training records that keeping employees' skills up-to-date with the goal of helping the employees improve their performance was instrumental in making them aware of 'everything happening on the shopfloor and around their jobs'. According to the company's training documents, employee training and development programmes '…help employees enhance their skills and reach their full potential… bring employee interests and values into closer alignment with organisational goals… help staff stay up to date on quality assurance standards and customer expectations'. To this end, informants were of the view that their choice of performance measures were entirely objective as the two types of

individual performance measures put the onus on the management to be willing to share responsibility for performance outcomes. To assist employees to embrace the philosophy of 'doing their jobs right the first time', TQM programmes were geared towards streamlining internal processes and procedures and reducing deviations from standards. As such, managing quality at shopfloor with a focus on ergonomically designed workstations, quality control circles, employee job fit, and improving general workplace conditions allowed employees to remain within the control parameters established by the management. What was perhaps more instructive was that despite the painstaking arrangements of workers, workstations, product variety and production processes, employees were instructed from the top to fill the workstation checklist for the work done in each stage and report poor quality issues to management, especially those that could incur an external failure cost – an indication of managers' tendency to accept employee self-assessment, to embed in the employee's situation, and to seek more information about variation in employee performance – i.e. a recognition of the external attributions. A production assistant manager reflected upon his employees' reactions and remarked:

> 'If you want to build a culture of quality, you need to help your workforce develop an understanding and commitment to quality. But this is only one side of the equation. The other side is our own commitment to quality and accepting the consequences of our decisions and actions. So, when there is evidence of non-compliance and under-performance, we use the employee self-report data and seek their views on how to reduce variation and improve quality'.

A production line manager remarked:

> 'We provide minimal rewards for what we call "short wins, small gains". Operations and production techniques provide us the opportunity to achieve short-term wins, I mean conformance assurance. So, we keep big incentives for big wins, for those employees who can please customers by creating needs for them. Our performance review system serves this purpose. It makes us feel the failure costs and the pain of nonconformance and errors and learn from them. Without such initial purpose, it's of no use'.

The recognition of the importance of PA for diagnostic and developmental purposes created a shift from the mere focus on error reduction to error prevention and rewarding employees for going above and beyond to delight customers. For a senior quality assurance manager, this shift to

appraisal focus was based on the view that 'rewarding employees for innovation and providing them both goal- and learning-oriented feedback enable employees to take a fair or small dose of calculated risk'. Typically, this meant to eschew TQM as a means of ensuring employee compliance with quality standards and PA as a tool in the hands of managers to monitor employee non-compliance level in favour of a management system that engendered shared responsibility and accountability in pursuit of quality and customer delight. The plant general manager described the shift as 'allowing employees to take moderate risk…to stick to their guns without fear of falling outside the rules…to share failures and embrace learning from experiences'. In tandem with this shift, managers became much more closely involved than before in building more resilient work relationships. For an HR manager (employee relations), employee performance data, metrics and evaluation were employed to serve several purposes, namely, 'to monitor the routine aspects of quality control, and to enable managers to put themselves in their employees' shoes… to have the same situational experiences, ...to justify grounds for the variation in employee performance' – an indication of managers' tendency to become an active agent in employees' learning through participating in the assigned tasks to their employees. Hence, we offer:

> **Proposition 6.** Performance measures defined based on an appropriate balance between the control and learning-oriented focus of TQM (i.e., task performance and quality improvement) will lead to greater influences attributed to external causes, especially when the purpose of PA is on continuous quality improvement (i.e., shared quality accountability).

5. Discussion

Using qualitative data from a sample of four cases, we offered an attributional analysis of TQM-PA (mis)fit. We argued that the attributions that managers make about the organisation's primary goal of TQM – i.e., the 'why' – could lead to different managerial diagnostic evaluations of performance variation which in turn make PA system (un)fit for purpose of the continuous quality improvement and learning. We also presented six propositions that explore the organisation's approach to TQM in terms of its effects on TQM implementation, diagnosis of person- or system-causing variation and attribution, and the choice of performance measures, outcomes, and accountability for performance outcomes. A summary of these themes/subthemes is presented in

Table 3. The implications of these findings for both theory and practice are discussed in greater detail below.

(Insert Table 3 here)

The theoretical contribution of the study is threefold. First, previous research has suggested that optimal subsystem integration of TQM with HRM subsystems function (PA in the current study) hinges on many factors among which the reorientation of organisational goals for and approaches to TQM is of paramount importance (see Deming, 1986; Beer, 2003). Our research confirms the arguments of Sitkin et al. (1994) and Grant et al. (1994) along with other scholars (e.g., Waldman, 1994) that the organisation's approach to TQM defines the nature, scope, and determinants of work performance. Our findings suggest the disutility of a unilateral focus on either control or learning in terms of designing a PA system solely for the purpose of supporting one goal at the expense of the other (see Beraldin and Danese, 2018). In Policy cases, the control-oriented TQM led to managerial myopia in the sense that it caused them to place excessive focus on the control of short-term results to the neglect of enabling employees to think outside of the box and take on more risks without fear of PA outcomes. This in turn narrowed the scope of work performance measures and content of the assigned tasks, thereby viewing employees as the main constituent of the process and holding them accountable for deviating from expected short-term results. While Policy case organisations failed to disentangle the apparent paradox of TQM goals, a more balanced view of TQM was clear in the Judgement case. In order to unlock the ultimate potential of TQM, Judgement case made a trade-off: neither overly controlling nor overly solicitous of promoting exploratory learning and employees' innovative behaviour – what Duncan (1976, p.167) refers to as 'the ambidextrous organization' (see also Benner and Tushman, 2015; Asif and de Vries, 2015). The key to management's approach at Judgement case was the mutual understanding of the causes of performance variation and a recognition of shared responsibility for performance outcomes (Gino and Staats, 2015; Srinivasan and Kurey, 2014; Prim et al., 2021; Potter, 2021). These findings are consistent with Franco-Santos and Doherty (2017) along with others (e.g., DeNisi and Pritchard, 2006; Chiang and Birtch, 2010) who delineated various approaches to the application of performance management practices (PA included) into two types i.e., directive and enabling. Directive performance management approach is evaluative (short-term) in nature and reinforces the use of formal control rules and close supervision to achieve operational efficiency, reduce variation, ensure compliance, and attribute poor performance to the

failure of individual employees. In contrast, the Judgement case could be characterised in terms of reinforcing a communication-development (long-term) approach. In this capacity, it enables a participatory performance management process which allows for a re-thinking of employee performance and renewed approach to the determinants of job-related behaviours. Franco-Santos and Doherty (2017) along with Chiang and Birtch (2010) are of the view that effective communication, resource provision, developing a continuous-learning culture, recognising workplace excellence, and supporting employee development and autonomy serve as enabling of performance rather than its control – a claim very much consistent with the current research.

Second, prior research has long highlighted the insufficient attention to the impact of context and potential weaknesses that arise from it – drawing awareness to the need for TQM and HRM scholars to take proper account of it in truly understanding and developing effective PA systems (Levy and Williams, 2004; Mayrhofer et al., 2019; Morley et al., 2021). Such context awareness on the part of the organisational scholars has the potential to better inform appraisal practice. Our study extends this insight by showing that distal or contextual variables such as the organisation's approach to TQM or the preferred management goal for TQM affects the PA purposes and processes. Our findings suggest that the precedence of either goals determines different sources of performance variation and an attribution about the cause of the poor performance (see Nishii et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2021).

Third, prior research has long recognised the need for advancing theory development and providing a valid conceptual basis on which to guide future research efforts in incorporating TQM in organisations (Waldman, 1994). Our research provides a fresh lens through which to comprehend the intricacies of the organisation's approach to TQM and its effect on the PA purposes and processes. We drew on attribution theory to explicate how contextual effects (an organisation's approach to TQM) affect supervisor's interpretation of performance variation and attributions for an employee's poor performance (see Fedor, 1989; Repenning and Sterman, 2002; Lyubykh et al., 2022; Xing et al., 2021). For example, the control-oriented approach to TQM at Policy cases led managers to view control as their own resource and make dispositional attributions for performance failure. As one supervisory-level manager remarked, 'the top-down approach to TQM is our cue to use the stick [of control] and policies. If we do not, we will end up with shooting ourselves in the foot'. Similarly, a middle manager observed: 'We are snowed under every day and must cover our rear end. We cannot afford to get nasty feedback from the top'. Echoing

Repenning and Sterman (2002, p. 286), our findings are suggestive of 'self-confirming attribution errors' in a sense that managers were less likely to blame the production system and, instead, 'increase the frequency and granularity with which worker performance is monitored'. As the Judgement case experience shows and others have argued (Sitkin et al., 1994; Deming, 1986; Adler and Borys, 1996), while the act of balancing the two goals of TQM is an uneasy task for managers, it is the balancing act of control and learning that serves as critical determinant of PA effectiveness. As one senior manager at Judgement case puts it succinctly:

> 'No manager is in favour of abolishing the control aspect of TQM. It is a must-have function of management. What we do differently is to exercise good control…We base our control system on shared goals and shared responsibility for performance outcomes. It is more about giving employees the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and take ownership of their learning' (see also Xing et al., 2021; Prim et al., 2021).

The practical implications of our study are three-fold. First, the propositions derived from our qualitative case study provide managers a roadmap to carefully assess their preferred approach to managing TQM and its potential consequences for PA process. They make managers aware of (i) the limits to each of the TQM goals; (ii) the need for understanding variation; and more importantly (iii) the implication of each approach for defining, assessing, and rewarding work performance. Second, the propositions offer managers an opportunity to revisit their current (control or learning) approach to TQM and assess the potential for internal integration with other sub-systems (e.g., PA in the current study) and external alignment with customer needs and priorities. Managers should avoid a one-size-fits-all prescription for managing TQM. It is important then to pay attention to the strategic orientation that drives TQM and its integration into HRM practices (e.g., PA process). A mere focus on control as the ultimate goal of TQM is not entirely beneficial to creating a culture of continuous quality improvement and learning not least because it narrows down the scope of TQM as conformance to existing customer expectations (see Manz and Stewart, 1997). As such, it gives middle- and supervisory-level managers an impression of freedom of choice and increased latitude to exercise control over the workforce as the object of PA and consequently holds them accountable for non-conformance and performance variation. Hence, managers should avoid a predominant focus on control and instead expand the scope of TQM to encompass a learning orientation to managing TQM. Achieving this balance is the key to determining a TQM-focused work performance on two fronts: it considers the reciprocal effects

of persons on situations and situations on persons – person/system fit (Waldman, 1994, p. 518; Asif, 2019), and it secures the influence and autonomy of employees far beyond reducing variation for fulfilling the needs of a relatively homogeneous customer segment (the how) to encompass dimensions of job performance that take into account consumer heterogeneity (the what and why) for achieving desirable outcomes (Manz and Stewart, 1997; Leffakis and Dwyer, 2014). Failure to do so may make them fall into the capability trap (Repenning and Sterman, 2002). Third, the propositions highlight the iterative and mutual causal links between the control and learning goals of TQM. This requires managers to cautiously define the PA purposes and processes that maintain their natural balance. In so doing, they prevent the attributional errors that undermine the synergy derived from the control and learning measures and the credibility of the PA process and also avoid unwanted or adverse reactions on the part of managers and employees.

The study also has two limitations which in turn pave the way for further research. A primary concern in qualitative case-based research relates to the lack of external validity i.e., 'difficulty in drawing deterministic inferences due to sample selection bias' (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 547). We tried to overcome this concern by selecting our sample case organisations based on the formal adoption of TQM and its variants, extensiveness and fidelity of their quality improvement programmes, and attempts to integrate TQM requirements into PA purposes and processes (see Crosby, 1979; Waldman et al., 1998). To further address this concern, future research could choose a polar type theoretical sampling approach which involves sample extreme cases (e.g., very high vs very low performing or award-winning versus non-award-winning companies) to observe contrasting patterns in the data (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Wu and Choi, 2005). Second, our key informants were only drawn from managers (at different echelons and functional areas). We tried to overcome this concern by methodological triangulation that involved the use of multiple data sources (e.g., interviews and documentary analysis). To further overcome the potential shortcomings of a single perspective, future research can employ multiple perspective interviews and draw inferences from both managers' and employees' opinions. An analysis of employee perspective of the PA purposes and processes under a TQM regime could be used as a litmus test for a true culture of continuous quality improvement and learning.

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Table 1. Overview of sample case organisations

Cases	Products & service offerings	Decade of founding [Market share] Size [Ownership] Geographic scope of operations	Examples of TQM programs	Goals of TQM programs	Purpose/focus of PA	Effectiveness of TQM programs
Policy 1	Innovative engineering and manufacturing solutions	1990s [Medium] +300 [Private] International	EFQM Excellence Model, ISO/TS 16949, Lean Six Sigma	Exercise control to reduce non-compliance quality through holding employees accountable for performance variation	A mere means of assessing employee non-compliance with quality performance standards and workplace policies	Slow progress (reducing human errors due to strict adherence to rules and procedures)
Policy 2	Carbon composite structural products and engineering services	1980s [Medium] +250 [Private] International	EFQM Excellence Model; ISO/TS 16949, Lean Six Sigma	Control (as an ongoing exercise) for fulfilling manufacturing requirements and efficiency improvement through identifying non-compliant workplace behaviour	Pure administrative use of PA with a focus on past-oriented, short-term performance results	Stalled progress (compliance mentality)
Policy 3	Gaskets, plastic injection, and rubber mouldings	1990s [High] +300 [Private] International	EFQM Excellence Model; ISO/TS 16949, Lean Six Sigma	Exercise control to force compliance, ensure employee adherence to quality standards, discipline employees for poor performance, measure and report cost of quality	Results-oriented / achieving pre-defined job-specific goals assigned to employees	Minor progress (tougher compliance workplace; Playing the blame game)
Judgement	Design and manufacturing processes (electronic controls)	1980s [High] +750 [Private] International	EFQM Excellence Model; ISO/TS 16949, Lean Six Sigma, Investors in People (IIP) Accreditation, Quality Circles	A mix of control and learning: control as a means of ensuring quality from within (inside-out) and learning as a means of ensuring quality from outside (out-side in) / continuous process improvement through upgrading employee skills and exploring new customer needs	Balancing accountability for performance outcomes with shared responsibility for performance variation/balancing conformance to performance requirements and flexibility for moderating- risk-taking/capacity to learn and change	Steady progress (reciprocal responsibility for performance variation/willingness to take responsibility for continuous quality improvement)

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the interviewees

Cases	[Tenure with organisation] Rank	Years of work experience: Max [Min]	Number of interviewees in each case	Level of education of interviewees: Postgraduate [Bachelor]College/diploma	Additional sources of data collection
Policy 1	[8 years] Supervisory to middle-level management	14[7.5]	n = 10	4[5]1	Informal discussions with participants during 'employee engagement workshop (n = 4), Performance appraisal policies, Non-participant observation of employee training and development workshops; Employee handbook
Policy 2	7 years] Supervisory to middle-level management	12 [9]	n = 12	5[5]2	HR portal, Quality control Policy, Employee handbook, Non-participant observation of quality control workshop, Informal discussions with participants during quality management workshops (e.g., ISO 9001:2015 and IATF 16949:2016 training workshops) (n = 3)
Policy 3	[9.5 years] Supervisory to senior-level management	16[10.5]	n = 14	8[6]0	Quality policies and objectives, Performance review policies & forms, Informal discussion with participants during annual company gathering (n = 4), non-participant observation of continuous quality improvement (ISO, supply chain quality) and employee development (e.g., soft skills training) workshops
Judgement	[6.5 years] Supervisory to middle-level management	11[8]	n = 9	2[5]2	QMS documents, Non-participant observation of two quality control meetings, Informal discussion with participants during sustainability/corporate social responsibility (n = 3) as well as quality/innovation (n = 4) workshops, Performance appraisal policy

Table 3. The 'why' of TQM approaches and its implications for PA and attribution

	PA purposes and processes				Attribution of employee performance	Degree of TQM-PA (Mis)Fit
	Purpose of PA	Focus of performance variation	Object of PA	PA measures [Outcomes] Accountability		
Control directed	Evaluative	End result of the process/outcomes	(Fixing) Individuals	Identifiable aspects of the work assignment [In-role job performance] Employee accountability	Mainly internal	Partially fit
Learning directed	Developmental	Process itself / quality from within	(Fixing) System	More emphasis on system-level performance [extra-role performance] Shared accountability	Mainly external	Largely fit
Combined control-learning	Multifunctional	End-to-end: balancing internal and external quality	Fixing System (including people)	Combined use of job assignment and quality/system improvement [in-role and extra-role performance] Shared accountability	Partially internal, Mainly external	Largely fit-for-purpose