Re-conceptualising Total Quality Leadership:

A framework development and future research agenda

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to theoretically explore the concept of leadership in a Total Quality Management (TQM) context by developing a new theoretical framework of understanding Total Quality Leadership (TQL) as well as by opening the dialogue in researching further key elements of TQL.

Design/methodology/approach: The approach that the paper adopts is conceptual. Based on exploration of the wider management and leadership literature of empirical and theoretical studies, this paper develops a framework of TQL.

Findings: The suggested TQL framework is composed by three main pillars, namely the proactive, adaptive and the relational. The former consists of elements like anticipation of current business environment complexities and filtering of information that enhancing practive decision making. The second pillar refers to adaptation, autonomy and feedback while the last one emphasises on the importance of aspects like social interactions, engagement and empathy. The paper explains why the specific pillars with the additional elements are critical for TQM success.

Originality: Given the tremendous challenges that organisations face due to increased complexity and demanding competition of the business environments globally, the role of leadership as the major 'soft' aspect of TQM approach, seems to be vital more than ever. But the type of TQL appropriate to enhance total quality success nowadays, is still (and should be) under continuous exploration. This conceptual study attempts to provide new theoretical insights of TQL as well as to open the dialogue around the main elements composing TQL and how the future research agenda is formulated.

Classification: *Conceptual Paper*

Key-Words: *TQM, TQL, Leadership, Proactive, Adaptive, Relational, Anticipation, Autonomy, Feedback, Social Interactions, Engagement, Empathy, Theoretical Framework, Research Agenda*

Introduction

In a changing business context, organisations traditionally react by adjusting their strategies as well as their operations, attempting to respond to the emerging challenge. This tactic seems to work, in an incrementally changing context, which was the norm two or three decades ago. Nevertheless, in the current business world dominated by radical and global challenges, in a business environment where complexity thrives and organisations face tremendous pressures that they threat their survival, the aforementioned reactive adjustment is not enough. In a permanently turbulent global business context, organisations need to enhance proactive adjustments and being prepared for the future (unknown) challenges (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012). They need to become as Taleb & Douady (2013) suggest *Anti-fragile* organisations. Anti-fragility means, among other things, that the organisation has autonomous mechanisms of responding to complexity. These mechanisms

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are directly related to individual and collective behaviours of all organisational members. This is the point where antifragility is linked to Total Quality Management (TQM). TQM emerged with the promise of making quality output everyone's business inside the organisation (Oakland, 1989). The 'total' element of TQM implies that every organizational member is involved in quality improvement processes (Psychogios & Priporas, 2007). Developing an organisation to be able to survive while dealing with complex challenges, requires the involvement of all people.

The question that emerges is to what extent and under which conditions total involvement can be a reality within organisations that they target in total quality outcomes? Put it differently, what makes organisational members to be willing to actively participate and involve in a proactive manner in organisational processes that can enhance the quality of organisational outcome? After many years of research on TQM approach, one can argue that its promises cannot (especially those related to continuous customer satisfaction) be achieved without considering its 'soft' side and especially proper leadership in organisations (Ershadi, et al, 2019). Leadership seems to be the major micro-level factor of the 'soft' side of TQM, under which all other 'soft' elements can be included (motivation, employees' empowerment and engagement, and interpersonal communications and collaboration) (Pool, 2000; Mosadeghrad, 2014). However, the type of leadership that is required nowadays needs to be adjusted to the complex and turbulent context that organisations experience. This paper argues that leadership for TQM needs to abandon its traditional approach and accommodate new ideas and concepts that seem necessary for leading people in today's business environments. In this respect, this study adopts a meaning of 'Leadership' that it is not linked to the traditional top-down, one-on-one dual approach usually concentrated on one person (leader-manager) and his/her capabilities that attempts to achieve organisational targets.

Instead, the term 'Leadership' in this paper is used as a behaviour that all people, from all hierarchical levels can enact inside organisations (Chiu, et al 2016; Dimitriadis & Psychogios, 2020).

Following this rationale, the present paper seeks to explain the role of leadership in a current complex business context as well as to argue in favour of a new approach of Total Quality Leadership (TQL) that is needed. Overall, this paper responds to the call for papers for the Special Issue of *The TQM Journal* referring to new insights and ideas for advancing both sides of TQM and tries to address two main research questions:

1. What kind of leadership is needed nowadays TQM programmes through which firms try to adjust to the new complex and demanding competitive environments?

2. What are the main aspects of a total quality leadership approach that seem to respond effectively to the aforementioned need of a TQM organisation?

This study contributes to theory of soft TQM by proposing and discussing a new conceptual framework of TQL, opening new dialogues and paths for future research in the field.

A short overview of TQM

Awareness of quality and TQM as a managerial approach on the path of reaching excellence, customer satisfaction and sustainable competitive advantage has been growing for many years and led to its wider adoption and implementation (Ooi, et. al., 2011). TQM refers to a holistic method of corporate management based on the active participation of all managers

and employees, taking the whole value chain into account and placing the quality at the centre of all activities. Continuous striving towards fulfilment and enhancement of customer satisfaction is the ultimate goal of TQM, which also ensures long-term success and becomes beneficial for all stakeholders. Fundamental is the assumption that the systematic implementation of the quality concepts and standards leads to corporate success and, as such, this approach encompasses all organizational levels from suppliers via employees to the consumers (Lasrado, 2019).

TQM represents one of managerial approaches with focus on the fulfilment and even exceedance of customer's needs and expectations through the application of specific 'hard' and 'soft' aspects (Vouzas and Psychogios, 2007; Gadenne and Sharma, 2009; Khalili et al., 2019). Although the actual quality improvement is coming though the proper application of 'hard' aspects of TQM like techniques, systems and tools, it has been argued that the 'soft' side is equally important as it is associated with the organisation itself as an alive human system (Psychogios & Wilkinson, 2007; Psychogios & Priporas, 2007). In this respect, Oakland (1993) states that TQM is an attempt to improve the company's competitiveness and effectiveness through mutual collaboration of everyone inside the organisation. The soft side of TQM includes various management concepts and practices like employee involvement, teamwork, continuous training, participative management style, cultural change, etc (Vouzas & Psychogios, 2007). The common denominator of these concepts is without any doubt leadership (Ulle & Kumar, 2014). The question though that emerged (and continuously emerges) is the following: what kind of leadership is needed in order not just to promote TQM ideas and promises, but also to apply them effectively and continuously in organisations? Although, there is some research about the 'soft' side of TQM in general and TQL in particular, more investigation is needed in order to understand further the interdependences between

leadership and TQM (Verma, 2014; Khalili et al., 2019). While many studies have been focused on the effects of culture, national (Noronha, 2002a, 2002b, 2003 and 2007) or organisational (Psychogios & Tsironis, 2012; Tsironis & Psychogios, 2016) on TQM implementation, there are fewer ones concerning the effects of leadership on TQM application. In this respect, it is time to remove the blinkers and try to understand after almost 40 years of TQM emergence, what actually leadership means for TQM and how organisations can reach what has been called TQL (Ulle & Kumar, 2014).

The role of Leadership in TQM: The rise of TQL

Probably the most challenging promise of TQM is the emphasis on continuous improvement of all organisational aspects, including products and services with the ultimate goal of continually responding to customers' needs and improving the overall quality of the outcome. This in turn is not the result of the effort of a specific group of employees, but it comes as consequence of total employee involvement, ongoing improvements of behaviors and working processes across the organization (Psychogios 2010). In other words, people are the key-elements in keeping TQM promises alive, meaning that people leadership behaviours are vital in achieving the never-ending goal of continuous improvement in organizations. Therefore, TQM success is directly associated with shared leadership forms (Chiu, et al 2016).

In the traditional TQM literature, the concept of leadership is related to top management commitment in setting and achieving quality management strategies and facilitating their implementation by allocating the necessary resources and measuring the outcome of the overall performance (Zairi, 1994). This is obvious in the work of many well-known quality gurus (Deming, 1982 and 1986; Crosby, 1979 and 1984; Juran, 1992; Oakland,

1993). For example, for Deming leadership plays a central role in all 14 points for quality improvement that he suggested (Sosik & Dionne, 1997). The same applies in the work of other quality gurus, like Juran (2003) that suggests that effective leadership for quality management implementation requires top management to go beyond normal expectations and focus on higher level of customer satisfaction and continuous improvement.

The truth is that top management commitment is vital in leading employees towards implementing and practicing TQM (Ahire & O'Shaughnessy, 1998; Ahire & Ravichandran, 2001). For example, Ugboro & Obeng (2000) found that customer satisfaction is positively influenced by sound leadership of the top management. Additionally, the implementation of TQM increase employee satisfaction, and it helps organizations to improve their image and quality awareness among customers (Yang, 2006). Top management commitment and leadership towards TQM purposes seems to be summarised under the label of TQL. But what are the main principles of TQL?

The concept of TQL is primarily focused on the development and utilization of proper leadership behaviours and approaches for leading people towards TQM goals, namely continuous improvement, increased levels of employee involvement and customer satisfaction (Grant & McKechnie, 2009). The origins of this concept can be found in Deming's (1986) quality philosophy mirrored in profound knowledge, leadership practices and PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) learning cycle. In this respect, TQL is related to specific traits and responsibilities of total quality leaders, namely teaching the followers about the importance of teamwork for organizational success, acting as coaches, not relying only on formal authority but rather develop interpersonal skills and knowledge as well as encouraging

participation, innovation and continuous learning (Houston & Dockstader, 1998). According to Ulle & Kumar (2014), a TQL-driven organisation is based on commitment and teamwork of everyone within the organization, which in turn enhances employee involvement, continuous improvement and customer satisfaction.

The above TQL drivers considered essential for delivering TQM promises. However, the question that now rises is related to the extent to which this type of leadership mainly linked to top-management of organisations is enough to enhance employee involvement, focuses on continuous improvement and customer satisfaction in nowadays complex and challenging business environments. Leadership is a very dynamic phenomenon that heavily depends on the context that is applied (Dimitriadis and Psychogios, 2020). Current business contexts are highly influenced by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) (Horney, et al., 2010). In such a context, TQM success substantially influenced by humans (Njuguna, 2016). In this respect, there are evidence highlight the importance for effective leadership into organisations rather than effective leaders (Harung et. al., 2009; Giles, 2019). Effective leadership is linked to the ability of the many (rather than the few) to acclimatize and act promptly and efficiently in their organizations trying to address the business problems and deal with such precarious conditions (Swart et. al. 2015). In a VUCA context, TQL is based on the strong need for participation, commitment and continuous improvement and adaptation of leadership behaviours from all members within the organization.

Anyieni et al (2016) argue that in nowadays businesses it is only a matter of when and in which direction the company will change to achieve quality outcomes, but also to understand that this change requires the participation of all inside the organisation. Organisation leaders shall provoke a strong sense of urgency among all followers, ensuring

that the gap between current and desired state is not too wide causing followers' demoralisation (Appelbaum et. al., 1998). They need to enhance an environment of collaborative leadership approach while collectively sharing tasks and responsibilities (Bligh et al., 2006; Kocolowski, 2010). Such behaviours from top-management help other members to become more confident to take up the lead when the situation calls for it, as well as to follow their peers if their expertise and competence is required (Chiu et al., 2016).

In sum, in current complex business environments, where TQM promises seem even more challenging, what seems to play the most important role for TQM success is the expect that organisational leaders understand that leadership should not be only their responsibility, but also the responsibility of all organisational members. In other words, current view of TQL approach, should target to create an organizational climate based on strong social relationships, shared sense of belongingness among members and leadership at the forefront (Psychogios and Garev, 2012). Involving through leadership responsibility, all employees into goal setting and decision-making, and additionally provide them with autonomy, knowledge and tools for serving the customers, seems to be more than any other time the key for TQM success nowadays. Therefore, it is critically important to understand the basic principles of TQL taking into account the current complex business contexts.

Towards a TQL framework

This section explains the main principles that need to drive current TQL approach. Based on robust empirical evidence as well as theoretical arguments it is argued that there are specific elements that are linked to the way of understanding TQL. In particular, it is supported that TQL should be based on three main aspects of leadership, namely, pro-active, adaptive, and

relational. Next sections analyse, discuss and propose the specific elements of the three leadership aspects that synthesise a new theoretical framework for TQL that opens new paths of research in the field.

Pro-active Leadership for TQM

Since for-profit organisations have been impacted by VUCA world, their competitive environment became challenging and aggressive, that in turn made difficult to sustain competitive advantage or to adapt it accordingly (D'Aveni et al. 2010). In a disruptive and turbulent business context, where uncertainty and volatility rules, sustaining traditional sources of competitive advantage most probably is not an option anymore (Dagnino, et al 2021). In contrast, what seems to matter is the ability of the firms to generate a temporary competitive advantage (TCA) (D'Aveni et al. 2010). According to Sirmon et al, (2010) TCA is related to advantageous destruction taking place frequently as an outcome of dynamic and interactive competition. Companies can leverage a TCA as an outcome of market position to improving their technological resource and capability position that can enhance their ability to sustain a competitive advantage within current complex business environment (Huang, et al, 2015).

This is one of the key elements that TQM requires; the ability to use a string of TCA in order to respond to increased uncertainty of global competition demands (Netland and Aspelund, 2013; Connelly et al. 2017). Responding to the need of advancing quality of products or/and services in a turbulent business context, requires the ability of the organisational leaders to recognise well in advance the strategic need to develop new (temporal) competitive advantages. In this respect, leadership means to enable the firm to strategically pursue TCA (Wang et al. 2016) in a proactive manner. To put it differently,

managers should develop and stimulate competitive actions (Marcel et al. 2011) on a continuous mode in order to proactively respond to uncertain and aggressive competition. Proactive leadership seems to be the first main aspect of TQL. Proactive leadership means the ability of organisational leaders to generate and enact future-focused initiatives and actions that continuously aim to allow organisations respond to the complexities of the business environment (Wu and Wang, 2011). Proactive leadership for TQM is related to the ability of managers to recognise well in advance the uncertainty of competition and take continuous proactive actions. The above arguments can lead to the following proposition:

Proposition 1: The emerging complexity of current business environments requires

anticipating competition demand uncertainty for achieving TQM outcomes

Proactive leadership for developing a competitive advantage and responding to complex competition it means increased ability to take fast and complex decisions (Lin and Rababah 2014). Proactive leaders should reduce the time of taking decisions related to competitive actions (Iriyama et al. 2016), or at least should consider as learning opportunity possible time delays in deciding to respond (Luoma et al. 2017). A key action to increase speed of decisions in order to respond to uncertain demands of competition in a proactive manner is through continuously filtering information that is a key aspect of achieving TCA (Reina et al. 2014). In this respect, the following is proposed:

Proposition 2: The emerging complexity of current business environments requires

filtering of information that enhancing proactive decision making *for achieving*

TQM outcomes

Adaptive Leadership for TQM

Current business environments and organizations can be seen as inherently complex. Complexity any situation that cannot be fully understood (Dimitriadis & Psychogios, 2020). Complex is something that we cannot easily understand and ultimately control. Complexity is dominant nowadays, since it seems to be the rule rather than the exception in today's business contexts (Psychogios & Garev, 2012). Current business contexts and organisations can be seen as complex adaptive systems comprised of numerous autonomous agents, which engage in a non-linear and unpredictable behavior (McMillan, 2006). A complex system is characterized by dynamism, fast pace evolution, non-predictability, uncertainty, non-linear connections and endless information (Stacey, 2010).

Endless information seem to feed a phenomenon called as *Infocracy that* seems to be dominant in this VUCA business world, fast replacing the previous paradigm, namely *bureaucracy* (Clawson, 2011). *Infocracy* requires an orientation towards continuous adaptation and not towards a single optimum outcome. This is in line with the TQM purpose of continuous improvement. The new paradigm of organizing based on complexity aspects claims that organizational reality is being co-created by all people participating in the process (Stacey, 2010). Therefore, adaptation is the main response to this endless and complex co-construction of reality. To put it differently, organisations that enhance adaptive leadership behaviours contribute to the development and sustainability of a holistic overview of business, which in turn is of vital importance for survival in complex business environments. Adaptive leadership is situation-dependent and contain manifold behaviours such as engagement of all people, entrepreneurial attitudes, mutual trust and constant redesign of organizational structures and policies (Psychogios & Garev; 2012). Similarly, TQM concept of continuous improvement prerequisites that people, as the most critical component of organisations, need to be continuously adaptive to the emerging circumstances (Emison,

2004). People, need to understand that they play a critical role in formulating the complexity around them and consequently they need to develop adaptive capabilities in order to achieve continuous improvement on both individual and collective levels. Based on the above arguments the following proposition can be suggested:

Proposition 3: The emerging complexity of current business environments requires continuous adaption of behaviours of people within organisations for achieving TQM outcomes

Adaptation means that organisations overall have the ability to adjust to new situations that emerge due to complexities occurred. In complex business context, TQM goals should also adjust following the demands of the business environment. This in turn requires people to be able adjust quickly and effectively responding to the new challenges. The question that rises is whether they can do so, by following standardized procedures usually required by quality management strategies (Psychogios, et al, 2012). Obviously the answer is no. What people need instead, is a level of autonomy, especially around the things (targets) that they are responsible for (Wilkinson, 2004).

Autonomy in an organizational context, is defined as the freedom of an individual to perform tasks and control work (Drafke & Kossen, 2002). It seems that autonomy of people in organisations has attracted the attention of many scholars. Morgenson et al. (2005) argue that autonomy facilitates the spread of authority and motivation in organisations. Autonomy gives individuals the chance to take responsibility for their work future in developing more skills (Pangarkar and Kirkwood, 2012). Autonomy is linked to effective collective and individual performance (Parker et al., 2001) as well as to wellbeing (Leach et al, 2003). Finally,

autonomy reduces bureaucracy and ensures that the job is completed promptly (Saragih, (2015).

In addition, TQM places autonomy in its core. Autonomy helps workers to solve problems as they arise and look for better ways to improve quality (Harley, 1999). In order to achieve the quality outcome, TQM paradigm suggests that the nature of quality supervision requires the dedication of all employees, thus encouraging involvement at all levels. As Weiss (2006) suggests, this means that, as a duty, performance quality supervision is allocated across all levels of enterprise, thus neglecting rigid job description limitations and encouraging employees to take initiatives. Autonomous work groups exclude the necessity of custody and encourage not only employee participation and dedication but also, growth in interest for professional development (van Mierlo et al, 2006). In similar vein, Psychogios, et al (2009) indicate that the sense of autonomy at work have positive influence on the levels of people engagement while striving to improve the quality outcome. They found that, the higher levels of people autonomy the more enhanced levelled of quality outcome at work. Additionally, engaged employees need to feel that they can control the situation (Rock, 2008). When employees consider that they have a choice, it is less likely that they will resist changes, especially those required from TQM. Providing employees with autonomy (choice and control over it), increases their engagement (Scarlett, 2016). In this respect, the following is proposed:

Proposition 4: The emerging complexity of current business environments requires more autonomy of people in organisations for achieving TQM outcomes

Beyond the adaptive and autonomous nature of leadership behaviors of TQM purposes another critical aspect is feedback. Complex business systems have an innate capability to

self-organize, since relationships within them are guided by continuous feedback loops (Stacey, 2010). Feedback is understood as a process of giving and receiving daily frequent information that is pertinent to the work or task being performed, in order to ensure that there is a common agreement of what "good performance" looks like (Psychogios et al, 2018). Therefore, feedback is not related only to the formal process of evaluating the annual performance of an employee, but instead should be seen as a daily process related to the performance of a task and/or a process (Psychogios, et al, 2019). This type of feedback can be positive as a *self-reinforcing* process, as well as negative as a *self-correcting* one (Sterman, 2012). In addition, continuous feedback provides information about work characteristics and attempts to direct effort (Fedor, et al, 2001), and is seen as an integral part of the daily learning process (Ashby and O'Brien, 2007; Becker, 2004).

Feedback seems to be essential for TQL purposes as well. In recent research work (Psychogios et al, 2018, 2019), it was found that feedback is a core cue through which routines at the workplace can change. Feedback provides information about work characteristics and attempts to steer performance in a given direction (Fedor et al, 2001), and is seen as an integral part of the learning process (Ashby and O'Brien 2007). In our study it was found that feedback could be used as a way to influence the change of organizational behavioural patterns towards TQM goals. In particular, we have found that there are specific dynamics that occur during the process of feedback and help people to make sense, facilitate, endorse and monitor this process (Psychogios et al, 2018). In a more recent study, we found that feedback can enhance quality outcome when it is more informal than formal, it is target-driven, and finally, it is benefits-oriented (Psychogios et al, 2019). In this respect, I suggest:

Proposition 4: The emerging complexity of current business environments requires continuous informal feedback for achieving TQM outcomes.

Relational Leadership for TQM

A significant barrier in implementing TQM is the lack of leadership commitment that increases employee resistance to continuous change (Talib & Rahman, 2015). Unsuccessful attempts to introduce TQM are often related to inadequate leadership that ties strongly people together and can create a quality-oriented culture (Mosadeghrad, 2013). In other words TQM application lacks of relational leadership. Relation-based approaches emphasize the interaction among people in organisations (Dihn, et al., 2014). In other words, the emphasis is placed on the way that humans in organisations interact and influence each other, at finally attaining mutual goals through an ongoing change process (Erdogan & Liden, 2002). So, relational leadership is understood as a dynamic, continuous and evolving phenomenon that occurs in interdependent relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Therefore, leadership is enacted in the context of ongoing dynamic relations (Holmberg, 2000) formulating continuously the outcomes. But this is exactly what TQM requires; a continuous approach in leading people relationships in organisations attempting to achieve high quality goals. Within a context like this, three aspects are significant for TQL, namely social interactions, engagement and mutual care.

Research evidence suggesting the importance of the social interactions and social environment overall in employee performance and engagement (Zhang et al, 2009). Evolutionary psychology has suggested that humans are able to evolve and change due to environmental and social interactive circumstances (Pinker, 2002). Social interaction allows and increase learning capacity that in turn helps people to develop more sophisticated skills

such as the ability to be flexible and adaptive to new demanding situations. In other words, social skills are major abilities to deal with severe competition, conflict situations or other issues (Psychogios and Dimitriadis, 2021).

Employees as social beings continuously seek social connections and good relationships (Scarlett, 2016). Social interactions can affect their mindset and resulted in better and more robust connections among them (Lieberman, 2013). In addition, social process of connections can create this notion of inclusiveness (Riva and Eck, 2016). Therefore, strengthening social interaction will enable people connect more profoundly, reinforcing and rehearsing better ways of connection (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008; Eby et al, 2000). Connected in a group can help employees grow in confidence during the continuous changes and improvements required from TQM approach (Prodanovska & Mitreva, 2013). In the case of TQM social interactions and connections are hidden to the process of improvement of everyday work; to the increased conformity of repeated tasks with quality standards; and to the reach of operational excellence, is using best practices (Vrellas & Tsiotras, 2014). In similar vein, it can be argued that less connections and social interactions can immensely affect employee performance and ability to continuous improve quality outcomes.

In this respect, TQL in organisations should seek to enlarge employee interactive networks, integrating new people, creating a sense of belonging and fostering diversity and creativity (Dimitriadis and Psychogios, 2020). In addition, acknowledgement of the contribution of others and their progress can develop a growth mind-set, increasing engagement and overall performance (Whiting et al, 2012). Strengthening social interactions can in turn increase social intelligence and interpersonal competencies among employees (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008) that enhance effective ways of dealing with workplace problems (Lin & Kwantes, 2015). In a similar vein, organisations with open and inclusive social

interactions inspire more their employees' emotions to reach total quality goals (Ashkanasy and Daus, 2002). In short, as people pay most attention to social issues, leadership for TQM should show employees the benefits of the coming changes from the social perspective. Based on the above I propose:

Proposition 5: The emerging complexity of current business environments requires strengthening social interactions in organisations for achieving TQM outcomes.

Strong social interactions in the workplace can also increase employee engagement that is equally critically for achieving the quality outcome. Engagement is critical for the success of TQM that requires the inclusion and engagement of all employees (Ugboro & Obeng, 2000; Taylor & Wright, 2003; Chang, et al, 2010). Employee engagement is defined as individuals' commitment and willingness, to participate in organisational processes, solve problems or deal with coming changes (Antony, 2018). Many times the focus of TQM on continuous process of quality improvement can result in increasing uncertainty among employees, making hard to maintain the required levels of engagement, affecting both their emotional and cognitive capabilities (Psychogios, 2010). In this respect, evidence suggest that employee engagement can be increased by focusing on reward policies both extrinsic and intrinsic (Delaney & Royal, 2017). This is happening since rewards positively affect cognitive and emotional functions of people (Chiew & Braver, 2011). Both of them (emotional, and cognitive) are very powerful motivators, increasing problem-solving and creative capabilities (Habermacher, 2011) and therefore increasing engagement.

Thus, a way to increase employee engagement on a continuous basis in order to achieve total quality targets, we need to emphasise more on positive reinforcement and rewards. Especially relational rewards is what we need more rather than the extrinsic ones. Two are

the supportive arguments. Relational rewards seem to work better, having more long term results on employee engagement in an uncertain context (Prouska, et al, 2016), like those that we experience nowadays (especially under the threat of the Pandemic – Covid-19). In addition, relational rewards are linked to social interactions that enhancing employees to become active learners and search for healthy connections within an organisation that can result in strong positive (rewarding) emotions (Tang and Posner, 2009). For example

Therefore, social interactions can be seen as rewards that play a significant role in employees' engagement, which includes trust, feelings of belonging, respect, communication, gratitude, and appreciation (Habermacher, 2011). In other words, when an employee perceives that is treated fairly and supported, his/her engagement is increased having a positive effect on involvement and trust (Wang and Hsieh 2013). Trust is not only positively related to employee engagement but it is one of the most important elements, enabling reach desirable outcomes such as those of TQM (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). Based on the above I propose:

Proposition 6: The emerging complexity of current business environments requires increased employee engagement in organisations for achieving TQM outcomes.

Employee engagement is also enhanced from empathetic relationships in an organisation. Talib & Rahman (2015) have identified poor leadership communication as the single most significant barrier of TQM application. Further barriers related to interpersonal relationships are reflected in a lack of empathy, trust, mutual care and respect among employees (Taskov & Mitreva, 2015). Furthermore, Ulle & Kumar (2014) argue that in the context of TQL the most difficult thing to reach is to develop an organizational climate of belongingness or "all in one team". Thus, comprehending the ways that people in

organisations care about each other might help us understand the way that they relate to each other (Adolphs, 2009). The process of creating empathetic relatedness is often connected with the process of social influence, change and interaction with each other (new approaches, values, attitudes, behaviors, ideologies) (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). The language of communication can also create relatedness especially when during any dialogue between employees true interaction emerges (Uhl-Bien, 2005). To improve empathy and improve relations, organisations should not focus on the process of communication (Hosking, & Fineman, 1990), but instead to promote a communication process where both sides are able to empathise and mutually care about each other (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

In addition, empathy requires relational integrity among people who should be morally accountable for their actions, be reflexive and ethical practitioners, and often lead conversations in forms of relational dialogues (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). This requires a more 'alive' process of leadership that needs to create a dynamic dialogue with employees, involving many voices, questioning, listening, sharing ideas and highlighting the importance to change and improve which is vital in the TQM process (Chiles & Choi, 2000). As Cunliffe and Eriksen, (2011) support an open dialogue as a form of conversation should be inquiring, challenging, answering, agreeing, objecting and extending, aiming to reveal the character and perceptions of people in organisations. In a similar vein, Shotter (2010) argues that relational integrity can enhance empathy if it is responsive and ethical in interpersonal relations, creating a continuous flow of dynamic dialogue, thus creating mindfulness through looking, listening, and anticipating. In other words, empathy is materialised through an active relational process of being and co-exiting and co-interacting in organisations.

Furthermore, empathy requires a level of mutual care among people both towards them and the surrounding world. Mutual care should be present during conversations and

meetings (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). The role of leadership is vital as well, since it can trigger mutual supportive attitudes, creating the necessary climate in the organization affecting employees' behavior and performance (Eby et al, 2000; Salati and Leoni, 2017). Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) state that when exhibiting empathy to others their minds become fused into a single system that enhances mutual care and compassion. In similar vein Psychogios and Dimitriadis (2021) argue that relational leadership is expressed through two-way strong ties between leader and follower that can end up in high levels of performance that is vital for TQM requirements. Based on the above the proposition is:

Proposition 7: The emerging complexity of current business environments requires cultivating empathy among people in organisations for achieving TQM outcomes.

Conclusions: Framework Development & Future Research Agenda

Based on the above analysis and argumentation I propose that TQL should be placed on a different comprehension level that is linked to leadership as a proactive, continuously adaptive and relational process of achieving TQM goals. In particular, I suggest that TQL based on the pillars proactive, adaptive and relational should emphasise on anticipation of competition demands, filtering of information, continuous adaptation, autonomy, informal feedback facilitation of social interactions, engagement and mutual care, as figure 1 illustrates.

TQL should be primarily proactive. Proactive leadership for TQM refers to the ability of leaders to anticipate the uncertainty of nowadays complex and aggressive business environments and develop what has been called as TCA (D'Aveni et al. 2010). Proactive leadership for TQM meaning that companies can enhance their ability to sustain a

competitive advantage (Huang, et al, 2015) and respond to competition demands. Since TQM requires to continuously advancing quality of products or/and services, organisational leaders should recognise well in advance the need of developing temporal competitive advantages as a respond to uncertain competition demands (Wang et al. 2016). In a similar vein, TQM leadership requires filtering of information from people in organisations in order to speed up decision making that seems to be vital for generating a TCA (Reina et al. 2014).

Figure 1: TQL Framework
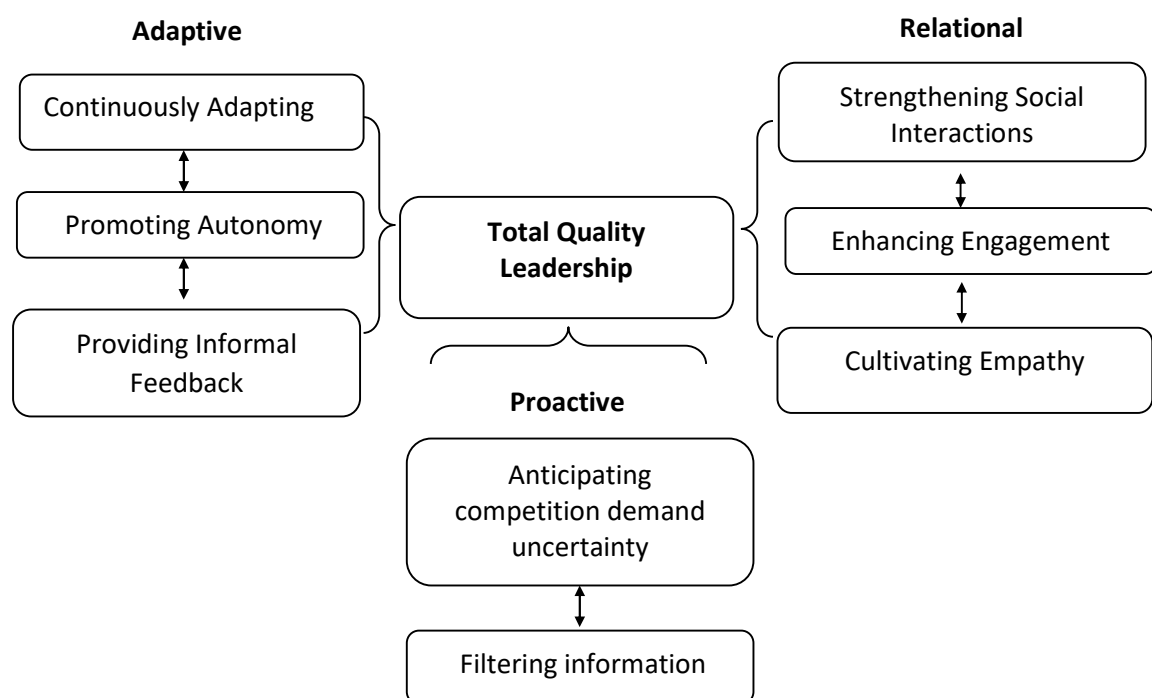
Secondly, TQL should be adaptive, since continuous and radical change dominate. In this respect the adaptation should be continuous. As Obolesnky (2014) supports leadership should be adaptive to respond to external environment complexities. It should be complex adaptive leadership. Leadership started with control, moved to motivation, then to transformation and finally to adaptation. Adaptive leadership deals heavily with systems, and places them in the centre of analysis (Obolensky, 2014). It is the systems that are adaptive

and leaders have to operate in a constantly changing environment within those systems. In order to be able to develop continuous adaptation behaviours, please need to act autonomously. In a TQM context autonomy means that people have the responsibility to deal with organisational issues on their own, resulted in responding better to quality targets (Harley, 1999). Instead of focusing on rigid duties defined by formal job descriptions, people should be encouraged to take responsibility (Weiss, 2006). Autonomy is the key to enhance their total and continuous engagement in organisational processes as TQM requires (Psychogios, et al, 2009). Autonomy though means greater risk of making mistakes. This risk can be minimised by providing multilevel informal feedback. Continuous informal feedback is the key in changing inflexible and anti-TQM logic organisational routines (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Feedback provides useful information about TQM direction (Fedor et al, 2001), and it is necessary for enhancing on a continuous basis learning and development (Ashby and O'Brien 2007). For this reason, I argue that beyond informal, feedback should be TQM goals and benefits oriented (Psychogios et al, 2019).

Thirdly, TQL requires a more relational oriented approach to leadership. Based on the relational approach, leadership happens within the process of relating with each other (Dihn, et al., 2014). This relationship is not static but dynamic taking place in continuously evolving context (Uhl-Bien, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006). In this respect, TQL as a relational approach needs to invest on social interactions. Strong social interactions is the key to achieve TQM promise of total and inclusive employee involvement (Riva and Eck, 2016). Social interactions can influence, in a mutual beneficial manner, employees' minds and direct it towards TQM goals (Psychogios, 2010). In addition, strong social connections can enhance engagement of people in organisations (Habermacher, 2011). Total employee engagement is very important for TQM success of (Chang, et al., 2010). Therefore, a critical aspect of the relational pillar of TQL

should be to continuously enhance engagement of people, based on developing strong ties among them and increasing mutual trust (Wang and Hsieh, 2013). Finally, engagement can be enhanced by nurturing empathetic relationships. TQL should emphasise mutual supportive attitudes, affecting employees' performance, which is vital for TQM (Salati and Leoni, 2017). Empathy and compassion make stronger the relational ties among people, increase their commitment to each other (Psychogios et al, 2019) that in turn can enhance high levels of TQM performance (Deming, 1986).

Overall, the suggested TQL framework makes two vital contributions. First, it expands TQL theory by reconceptualizing leadership within TQM context to fit the needs of current organizations operating in a very demanding and uncertain competitive enviroment. The framework respond to the increased complexity of nowadays business environments that they still need to deliver high quality products and services. Second, this framework elicits new concepts in TQL approach going beyond the traditional ones. In particular, this framework emphasizes on proactive, adaptive and relational pillars of TQL that should be the primary drivers of leading TQM in current organizations.

More conceptual and empirical studies are needed within the leadership and TQM fields to establish the exact processes that the above three pillars and their components influence TQM implementation. Future research should be open to new ways of studying leadership not abandoning the traditional socio-psychological approaches, but introducing new innovative combined methodologies. For example a series of studies based on experimental approaches can shed a light in understanding the components discussed for each pillar of the suggested TQM framework.

In addition, deeper scrutiny of pacing in terms of causal relationships of the aforementioned elements of the two pillars on various TQM aspects is needed. Primarily we need to develop ways to measure more specifically the components of proactive, adaptive

and relational pillars. In this respect, we need to develop empirical exploratory studies using mixed methodologies, attempting to specify the components of each pillar. A first step is a series of qualitative studies attempting to discuss the pillars with practitioners from all hierarchical levels. The scope of these studies is to enrich our understanding of the pillars based on the way that organizational actors make sense of them. For example, how managers and employees make sense of informal feedback and how this practically occurs in organisations? Or how they practically enhancing engagement and cultivating empathy? The outcome of such studies would be to develop specific items that consist each of these elements discussed in this paper. A second step would be a series of quantitative studies aiming in exploring further the items developed. The target would be the development of concrete and reliable measurements of each of the components proposed in this paper.

The development of valid measures will allow the initiation of further studies. These studies will aim to investigate the links and casual relationships among the eight components of the framework and various other organizational and TQM issues. For example, an interesting future study could be to explore longitudinally the effects of informal feedback in achieving continuous TQM outcomes. In a similar vein, investigating the way that autonomy impacts total quality outcomes could provide with valuable lessons regarding the level of empowerment and delegation required.

Furthermore, future studies can adopt a more dynamic view of investigating leadership in a TQM context, by challenging static perspectives and utilizing on process approaches in research. In this respect, it could be interesting to explore whether there are any limits in autonomy of people in dealing with TQM issues. In other words, it is critical to find out how people make sense of autonomy and if there should be defined limits that can

help them contribute more to TQM success. For example, do we need unlimited autonomy of people (managers and employees) in organizations to achieve TQM targets or it is preferable to explore different types of autonomy? Would a concept of bounded autonomy fit better to the need of allowing people to take ownership of TQM targets while they need to follow standards and procedures?

The above and many more research issues could open widely the dialogue and knowledge related to the leadership that we need nowadays for TQM and the way that we can practice it. All in all, TQM organizations that can thrive in complex business environments will be those who find a way to understand the need of new leadership paradigm. In this respect, a more proactive, adaptive and relational aspects of TQL are needed to be adopted by all people developing a new cultural ecosystem in organisations. To put it simply, the ability of people to lead and be led is critically important for an organization to achieve designation as TQM class. Total quality leadership is far too important to be left to formal leaders only in an organisation. As Owen (1990) argues "the leadership we need is available in all of us. We have only to make it manifest" (p. 157).

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