



**Teaming for Success with ITEA**  
**By Carol Dekkers, Quality Plus Technologies, Inc.**  
Dekkers@www.qualityplustech.com

***Introduction***

We've all been to workshops where teamwork principles are taught through simulated case studies, and ultimately team building is not *really learned*. Last week I attended preliminary judge's training for ASQ's International Team Excellence Award (ITEA) – and it truly was different. Selected from an applicant pool of over 450 quality-centric professionals, I didn't really know what I had signed up for when I received the acceptance e-mail from workshop facilitator Jeff Porada of Wyndham Vacation Ownership. Jeff has been involved with the ITEA process for several years, first when it was within the scope of the AQP (Association for Quality and Participation) and now under the auspices of ASQ with whom AQP merged. The assigned pre-work was non-trivial, the effort to attend two days of training and preliminary judging was entirely voluntary, and a firm commitment to attend and complete a conflict of interest form was required. When the group of thirty-some strangers met for the first time on day one and departed as three cohesive teams committed to staying in touch over time and distance, even the most cynical quality gurus would have been impressed. Here we were – all experts selected as preliminary ITEA judges to judge an actual team competition – and we witnessed ourselves having potential to become a high performance team already by the end of day 2. This article highlights the ITEA competition and how the concept of teamwork pervaded the preliminary judging training and evaluation.

***ITEA – what is it?***

While the acronym ITEA sounds remarkably close to a Swedish furniture store, the only similarity between the two is the international extent of its customers. Within ASQ and throughout the world, the International Team Excellence Award (ITEA) is an annual event that represents a gold standard in team recognition and appraisal. Having said that, it is also one of the “best kept secrets” for those of us whose prior exposure was through a perfunctory annual announcement in an ASQ Journal. One of only two ASQ software division members out of 32 judges at the 2008 Daytona Beach preliminary judging events, I had little notion of the depth and breadth of the evaluation criteria, nor of the rigors of the entire ITEA application and judging process. Software division colleague, Kristal Ray of Oracle, agreed. Since its inception in 1985, more than 800 teams, representing a myriad of industries, and tens of countries, have applied and competed in the ITEA. Of these, software development or IT (information technology) teams were in the minority; most teams hailed from government, military, healthcare, manufacturing, or other disciplines. (Side note to software division readers: with the ever increasing percentage of corporate investment being taken up in technology and the IT focus on six sigma, process maturity, and project management, one would expect to find more software and systems teams in the competition. Perhaps the ITEA suffers from even greater obscurity in our professions.)

The annual ITEA competition process – from the initial publication of the criteria guidelines to the final awards ceremony – takes up almost the entire year. Announcements are made sometime around the end of June, completed team applications are due in September, and an approximately two-month series of regional preliminary judging sessions follow and are



wrapped up with final selections made by yearend. (For the 2008-2009 process, there are eight regional training /preliminary judging events planned throughout the US. Kristal Ray and I attended the 1<sup>st</sup> session in October in Daytona Beach, FL). In January, teams are notified of their results, the finalists are invited to participate, and the final judging and awards are held at the ASQ annual congress, which in 2009 will be held May 18-20 in Minneapolis, MN. The process has evolved over the years into what Jeff Porada likened to a demonstration of “Fourth Generation Management”, a concept advanced by Brian Joiner in his book of the same name. In the advance judge training workshop, Porada explained that 1<sup>st</sup> generation management embodies the concept of “if you want it done right, do it yourself”, 2<sup>nd</sup> generation involves a form of delegation called micromanagement, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation embraces results-driven management, while 4<sup>th</sup> generation management focuses on the process to achieve desired results. The ITEA competition evaluates teams from around the world on how well the overall team and its interaction with stakeholders functions through their selected process improvement or root cause project to achieve desired results. It is not the grandiosity or the dollar figure cost savings gained by the results that matters to the competition but rather whether best practice processes and teamwork prevailed and led to successful and sustainable outcomes/results.

### ***The ITEA “Criteria”***

Currently there are 5 excellence item areas which are judged based on 37 total questions in the ASQ ITEA criteria:

1. Project Selection and Purpose (27 points);
2. Current Situation Analysis (27 points);
3. Solution Development (27 points);
4. Project Implementation and Results (27 points); and
5. Overall Team Management and Project Presentation (18 points).

Specific questions and their scoring guidelines are available to applicant teams, judges, and interested parties at the ITEA website <http://www.asq.org/communities/itea/index.html>.

Judges for the preliminary round sessions must attend a one-day intensive training workshop regardless of prior involvement in ITEA competitions or other quality focused initiatives such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) or other state or country-specific Quality Examiner awards. The daylong training is a combination of lecture, interactive discussion, and hands-on case study exercises, intended to address the variations in judging that could emerge without a thorough review and dissection of the 37 criteria questions. The process is quite innocuous – assigned teams begin to work and come together through the dynamics of dissent, agreement, varying perspectives, and a mutual respect for the expertise and value of consensus building. By the end of the first day, camaraderie began to build and knowledge transfer about the what’s and how to’s of judging was underway. This in no small part was how the workshop facilitation team intended the day to go. Similar results are anticipated at the remaining preliminary judging venues.

The second day was fully focused on teamwork, individual judging, and consensus building and all teams emerged drained yet energized with new emerging friendships and a sense of what it takes to work as a diversified team. Part of the judging process involves the preparation and documentation of feedback to the evaluated team applications. Our team discovered that one must temper constructive criticism with skillful words and motivational encouragement and this



process took time, skill, and diplomacy. For some team members, it took patience as we worked together to craft the appropriate and useful responses that would provide the submitting teams with actionable and value-laden feedback, to support their overall project score. While only a fraction of our fellow preliminary judges will move on to become a finals judge in the next phase of the competition at the finals in May in Minneapolis, there was value to the entire team by participating in the evaluation of applicant projects even at the preliminary level. Some preliminary judges will become advisors for their own or other companies who want to apply for the 2009-2010 or beyond ITEA competitions.

### **Conclusion**

The ASQ ITEA process provides a valuable and cost-effective means for project teams across all industries to gain valuable feedback and actionable recommendations from a group of diverse quality experts on a judging panel. There are few other opportunities outside of hiring a consultant where one's team and one's project can be assessed based on objective criteria and compete against other teams who are evaluated on the same basis – but may come from another industry or country. As the 2008-2009 ITEA competition progresses through the other 7 regional workshops to the finals and ultimately the award in May 2009, I encourage members of the software division and all other ASQ divisions to watch closely and consider what teams within your own industry specialization could gain from this valuable service. I will leave you with this final question – where else can a process improvement or root cause analysis team gain objective external feedback for minimal cost, and have a group of highly motivation and industry leading quality experts voluntarily assess their work? If your company or your industry is new to the ASQ International Team Excellence Award process, why not make this the year that you learn more about ITEA and expound on the added value that having ASQ membership can provide to your ongoing improvement efforts?

### **About the author**



Carol Dekkers is the founder and CEO of Quality Plus Technologies, Inc., a management consulting firm that works with customers who want to increase their success through measurement, investment in technology solutions, and process improvement. Ms. Dekkers has co-authored several books including her most recent *The IT Measurement Compendium: Estimating and Benchmarking Success with Functional Size Measurement*, and *Program Management Toolkit for software and systems development* – both published in 2008. Ms. Dekkers is a professional engineer (Canada), a project management professional (PMP), a Certified Management Consultant (CMC), and works with companies in the US and throughout the world. Carol is a frequently quoted expert, workshop instructor, consultant, and speaker whose presentations have been featured at major quality and software conferences in over 25 countries. To contract with Ms. Dekkers for consulting, training or speaking or to comment on this article, contact her by email at [Dekkers@qualityplustech.com](mailto:Dekkers@qualityplustech.com)

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