Chapter 1. Introduction
During the eighties, service companies became increasingly aware of the necessity for improving their services. The development involved rational as well as relational aspects. Empirical research that was carried out in thirteen Dutch service companies made it become clear to me that improving services implies a hard struggle. But why? In the present study an attempt is made to answer this question. In order to do so, we need to have a closer look at the factors that influence improving services.

Chapter 2. Tracing the problem
A number of cases from the research are presented to illustrate that improving services is, in essence, a matter of altering attitudes as well as interactions.

Chapter 3. Defining the problem
My study is intended as a first exploration. The problem is: "Which are the critical factors influencing the improvement of services and which are the conditions to be satisfied?". First, I would like to elucidate the distinction between 'improvement' and 'innovation'. If an attempt is made to introduce improvements, the existing state of any thing (among which attitudes and interactions) is maintained; whereas in the case of innovation the subject in question is abolished and replaced by a new one. Accordingly, I have distinguished between the competence of the person in charge of improvement and that of any 'innovator'. In my view, there are three kinds of services: matter-, data- and interaction-related services. Special emphasis is placed on interaction-related services, since all service providers are judged by their non-routine interactions.

The process of improving services is studied from two points of view: quality engineering and change management.

Chapter 4. Quality engineering
The concept of quality as it is used in interaction-related services does not refer to objects or characteristics. It has a quite special reference to those encounters where people may either take offence or develop an interest.

In quality engineering improving is essentially a process of reducing variation in product characteristics and process parameters. Among quality engineers tools like Statistical Process Control are commonly used. Views such as 'facts; no opinions' are held.

The question must be raised whether these tools and views are applicable to the improvement of attitudes and interactions. In that context we had better rely on specific ideas developed in other branches of social engineering, e.g. 'regularity as a defence against authority'.

Summary

Stimulating to perfection
Critical factors for improving services

Chapter 1. Introduction
During the eighties, service companies became increasingly aware of the necessity for improving their services. The development involved rational as well as relational aspects. Empirical research that was carried out in thirteen Dutch service companies made it become clear to me that improving services implies a hard struggle. But why? In the present study an attempt is made to answer this question. In order to do so, we need to have a closer look at the factors that influence improving services.

Chapter 2. Tracing the problem
A number of cases from the research are presented to illustrate that improving services is, in essence, a matter of altering attitudes as well as interactions.

Chapter 3. Defining the problem
My study is intended as a first exploration. The problem is: "Which are the critical factors influencing the improvement of services and which are the conditions to be satisfied?". First, I would like to elucidate the distinction between 'improvement' and 'innovation'. If an attempt is made to introduce improvements, the existing state of any thing (among which attitudes and interactions) is maintained; whereas in the case of innovation the subject in question is abolished and replaced by a new one. Accordingly, I have distinguished between the competence of the person in charge of improvement and that of any 'innovator'.

In my view, there are three kinds of services: matter-, data- and interaction-related services. Special emphasis is placed on interaction-related services, since all service providers are judged by their non-routine interactions.

The process of improving services is studied from two points of view: quality engineering and change management.

Chapter 4. Quality engineering
The concept of quality as it is used in interaction-related services does not refer to objects or characteristics. It has a quite special reference to those encounters where people may either take offence or develop an interest.

In quality engineering improving is essentially a process of reducing variation in product characteristics and process parameters. Among quality engineers tools like Statistical Process Control are commonly used. Views such as 'facts; no opinions' are held.

The question must be raised whether these tools and views are applicable to the improvement of attitudes and interactions. In that context we had better rely on specific ideas developed in other branches of social engineering, e.g. 'regularity as a defence against authority'.
Chapter 5. Change management

In accordance with divergent theories about change management, there are various current ideas regarding the critical factors that are of influence on any change. I have selected factors and ideas that are relevant to any attempt at altering attitudes and interactions. When improving attitudes three kinds of change come into play: increasing the know-how, emotional enrichment and change of behaviour. When improving interactions the crux of the matter is making flexible fossilized patterns of interactions. When an attempt is made to alter attitudes and interactions, an ‘improvement setting’ may be created, which contains the following characteristic activities:

1. Regular meetings. Those involved should meet regularly since ‘time out’ is indispensable.
2. Linking up. In the interaction differences come to the fore that must be discussed, and channels of communication are opened.
3. Giving account. During the meetings everyone’s contribution to the improvement of attitudes and interactions should be accounted for.
4. Allowing for confrontation. Those involved should be invited to exchange their ideas and feelings about what may be improved.
5. Taking one another seriously. The atmosphere during the meetings should be one of mutual trust and respect. Communication should be ‘symmetrical’: the participants have the right of initiative, participation and freedom of movement. Their observations should be truthful (Habermas).

The basic idea is that attitudes and interactions may only alter when certain conditions are met. These conditions are: (1) there is mutual communication, (2) the person who demands the alteration has to be important to the other one, and (3) trust and respect is felt on both sides.

I have classified the critical factors and ideas according to five dimensions in any change process: the social dimension, the dimensions of content, of giving sense and of arrangement, and the conditional dimension.

Each of the following five chapters focuses on one particular dimension of improving services as a change process. Theory is compared with practice on the basis of observations in thirteen Dutch commercial service companies. Within each dimension, various critical factors are in play, which apply to that very dimension. The following is a listing of the insights that have been reached regarding these several factors (names in italics).

Chapter 6. The social dimension

Participation: only a small number of people were actually engaged in the process of improving services, and usually only intermittently. Some people and certain groups were excluded on purpose.

Influence: in some firms the improving process was successful in spite of the fact that top management was not involved. It appeared that ‘leading by example’ may - in practice - have special importance. For service providers turned out to develop a kind of respect towards those managers and facilitators who they regarded to be competent in their fields and who showed sympathy for the providers’ work.

Communication: messages about quality, often in the form of slogans, are a very delicate matter. Rhetoric is not received well. Those who advocated the quality messages, did not ask for feedback. Yet, when it was given, it was not heard.

Interaction: to improve interactions a facilitator is needed who is also a quasi-expert on
the contents of what is to be improved.
Role fulfilment: in rendering service the master-apprentice relation is a suitable model for skill development.

Chapter 7. The dimension of content
Intention: not the goal is important, but the process by which ‘the ten thousand’ objects for possible improvement are brought to attention. People have different perceptions of possibilities for improvement: managers see casual hot topics and long term priorities; employees tend to be susceptible to casual irritations and daily problems.
Changeability: attitudes and interactions are more difficult to change than physical objects and attributes. People tend to shift from what they want to improve to what they are able to improve.
Attitude change: although most of the persons involved were aware of the importance of changing attitudes, they did not know how to realize it. They emphasize development of knowledge or enrichment of feelings, often very briefly.
Interaction change: the presence and interventions of facilitators were essential for the change of attitude and interaction. They were the only persons able to create an ‘improvement setting’ (see chapter 5). When exercising their profession it appeared that specialists in quality engineering have their special way of making flexible fossilized patterns of interaction. Realizing the additional conditions was not within their reach in many cases, however.
Transparency: people were aware that in their firm communication was poor, but they did not realize that this had any relation to the use of vague terms.
The exploration of what is to be improved should be continuously revived.

Chapter 8. The dimension of giving sense
Motives: many of those we interviewed in the 13 companies considered the drive for improvement as due to inner, personal motives, rather than external pressure or business rationales. We found two different kinds of motivation: the need for achievement versus feelings of concern. The motives of those high in power were different from those low in power.
Accountability: anyone who is involved in an interaction may be called upon to account for his contribution to the improvement of the interaction.
Solidarity: in few companies there was a link between strategic and operational change, and hence between the concerns of top managers and employees. Quality standards are a connecting link, on condition they are not imposed unilaterally. The feelings of concern grow when opinions and experiences are shared on the do’s and don’ts of rendering service.

Chapter 9. The dimension of arrangement
Views on improving: we found two kinds of imagery: static and dynamic visions. We also found two different ways of developing a vision: (1) top management presents its vision to the employees as a ‘fact’ and (2) a vision is developed collectively under circumstances that resembles those of the improvement setting (chapter 5).
Improvement practice: we found four kinds of practice: (1) learning to solve problems, (2) increasing customer orientation, (3) directing, structuring and equipping and (4) the ‘Great Time Out’. The first form, problem solving, was observed in companies where the practice of improvement as a whole had no success. Under the influence of the facilitators the improvement teams changed their interaction patterns, but there were no
similar changes in the rest of the company.
We found a relationship between the views about improving and the chosen form of the change process observed.

Chapter 10: The conditional dimension
Directing attention: although attention for improving services was widely present, it remained rather superficial. A point of interest was that where innovation is under way, no attention is left for improving.
Offering perspectives: in some companies, the perspective was distorted: people looked forward to recognition, but all they got was statistics.
Creating a climate: in general we found a varying climate in the 13 companies, depending on the person of the top manager and the relationship between the persons in charge of improvement and top management. In some cases those people seldom met. 'Regularity' could not be used as a defence against 'authority'.
Determining interventions: when intervening two quite different approaches are applicable: one may follow a previously outlined schedule and one can improvise on the basis of a certain view (structure versus process). In none of the companies the first mentioned approach was followed in the improvement process; there were no schedules. However, in many cases it was also not clear which views were held. On intervening we observed that many initiatives were taken but never brought to a good end. It appears that improving services is rather a problem of persistence and feeling concerned than of lack of planning and need for achievement. It is evident that process rather than structure is decisive.

Chapter 11. Conclusions and recommendations
This study began with the question why improving services is a struggle. The problem was stated as: "What are the critical factors influencing the improvement of services and what are the conditions to be satisfied?". It was found that many critical factors play a part. There are indeed so many factors, that the process of improving services is hard to understand, and hence is hard to manage. The critical factors and related ideas may help to analyze an improvement process. In any case, much will depend on the presence and competence of the persons in charge of improvement. In service companies these persons have to focus on changing attitudes and interactions. Their task is to create an improvement setting in which, on a regular basis, people meet others who have a certain importance to them, and in which people confront one another with opinions and experiences about rendering services. A regular 'time out' and 'symmetrical communication' are crucial for the ongoing process of improving services.
Ideas from change management are useful for improving services. A person who wants to stimulate others to improve, should not take up a soloist stance with his or her ideas, but must be constantly available to the others. This very attitude may be expected from a genuine service provider. Quality engineering may provide change management with important ideas. Quality experts assist others in solving technical problems. In order to do so they must make themselves familiar with other people's jobs. This is necessary also for improving services, but not sufficient. Persons in charge of improvement should be able to experience the varying emotions that are provoked when rendering service through the very presence and influence of other people. They should learn to understand other people's job. This will invite respect and create confidence. 'Love of the job' is essential for managing the improvement of services.
The research was done in thirteen Dutch commercial service companies. It was intended
as a first exploration. The results have taken the form of conclusions on ideas about critical factors influencing the improvement of services. The conclusions have been formulated in a way as to stimulate further research.