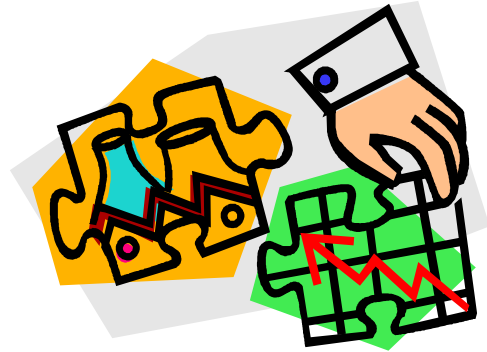


Beyond Continuous Improvement

by Mitchell Ditkoff

In today's nano-second, downsized, caffeine buzzed business world, large companies are increasingly demanding that "their people" find new and better ways of getting the job done. During the inglorious days of the 1950's, an efficiency expert might be called in, a bespectacled, uncharismatic gentleman with a



fascination for predictability, control, order and replicability. "A place for everything and everything in its place", was his motto. It wasn't a great leap of faith for managers to buy into this "consulting service" since it seemed likely to yield increased productivity and reduced costs. Indeed, it often did. Eventually, this service matured into an "organizational intervention" and was renamed and repriced. The name? "Reengineering". The price? A lot. And the theory upon which all of this was based has also been one difficult to find fault with: most company's "processes" are sadly misconfigured and, like the average American city, have grown to incredibly convoluted proportions without much thought for elegance, orderliness and true necessity. Systems all too often are disconnected from organizational needs, bringing with it an extraordinary amount of confusion, frustration and late night existential howling at digital moons. Businesses have become "businesses" unnecessarily, with undue resources being committed to working around unfriendly and counterintuitive work processes.

Curiously, the root of the word "reengineer" is "*engine*" (as in the machine that powers forward movement) and the root of the word engine is "*gine*" – from the Latin "ingenium", meaning "genie" – the spirit that drives the engine – (from the same root as the word "genius"). What reengineering enthusiasts have unfortunately forgotten is that it's the "genie/genius" that drives the engine (and its company forward) that has all too often become ritualistically excised from the formula. The result? Organizational "solutions"

become overly “systems driven” and do not give proper due to the “genie” – the collective intelligence, creativity and brain power of the people who actually do the work.

The “Quality Movement”, in many ways has also marched down this same people-less road. A corporate version of “smart bombing”, most quality programs assume that left-brained, analytical, continuous improvement tools and techniques are sufficient to generate substantial organizational improvements.

Wrong. Well, at least partly wrong.

Root cause analyses, histograms, fishbone diagrams and the like do have an important role to play in an organization’s effort to operate optimally. Indeed, when predictability, control and measures are the key drivers, continuous improvement tools can be very useful. However, (big pause here...drum roll...and a paradigm shift to go), predictability, control and measures are not the only parameters that guide a company’s success.



America’s addiction to continuous improvement fundamentally ignores several key principles of the creative process. Wasn’t the universe itself created out of chaos? Invention, innovation, ingenuity and creativity are not merely “processes” that can be replicated by getting everyone to follow the dots drawn by some reductionist-driven consultant. For that,

something else is needed – something that embraces chaos, paradox and discontinuity. The invention of penicillin? A surprise to the inventor. Accidental. The invention of Teflon? An experiment gone awry. The discovery of Velcro? Certainly not a function of a fishbone diagram. Time and again the literature speaks of breakthrough moments and breakthrough ideas being preceded by a breakdown of the existing order. “You can’t get there from here”, could be their motto. Logic is replaced by alogic, analysis by intuition, fixed laws by mutable laws. Is light a wave or a particle? Both and neither, depending, of course, on who the experimenter is. And what about the Theory of

Dissipative Structures which posits that everything in this universe eventually falls apart only to reorganize itself at a higher level? Oops.

RIP to TQM.

True innovators, entrepreneurs and change agents need to wean themselves from their addiction to organizational law and order to allow more discontinuity in their lives.

Indeed, honoring the laws of discontinuity is the most responsible thing a sentient change agent can do. Otherwise he/she/it is, at best, moving the chairs around on the Titanic. (The boat is sinking, but you know exactly how many chairs are on board and at what rate they are sliding into the sea.)

How then, does a company introduce “discontinuous improvement” into their culture? How does a company intentionally stir the soup, challenge the status quo, and otherwise catalyze breakthrough thinking without the whole “thing” defaulting down to some kind of corporate Lord of the Flies?

This is the heart of Idea Champions work. In fact, not only the heart, the mind and body as well. We help organizations make the shift from left-brain analytical control to whole brain thinking. We teach individuals, teams and entire corporations how to access the “genie” that drives the engine. We don’t just provoke, we invoke and evoke. We **AWAKEN** a level of intelligence and collaboration that greatly enhances an organizations’ ability to survive and thrive well into the 21st century must be awakened.

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