

Old Management Thinking is Hobbling Our Schools

By John Bachmann

Early in his research on organizations, Edwards Deming, the father of Total Quality Management, made a startling discovery. He found that, on average, 85% of the “problems” in typical organizations are caused not by the employees doing the front-line work but by managers and management policies. He went on to prescribe remedies built on 14 “points” to counter what he called management’s “seven deadly diseases”.

Central to Deming’s prescription was the need to adopt an entirely new managerial approach that focused on correcting processes, rather than blaming people. Perhaps the most revolutionary of his 14 points was the admonition to “drive out fear”.

When things go wrong, a “new-think” manager asks “what?” and “why?” — what went wrong; why were procedures not followed? Conversely, an old-line manager asks “who?” — who is responsible, who messed up? When people are afraid of being blamed for mistakes and problems, they work sub-optimally, and a deplorable portion of an organization’s resources are squandered on internal politics. Very few people want to do their jobs badly. Most employee mistakes are not the result of sloppiness and an uncaring attitude. In fact, most errors are the result of poorly-defined procedures or inadequate training.

Unfortunately, old-line management thinking still permeates Canadian school systems at all levels from the ministry to the classroom. It affects how the system works today and how it responds to new ideas that might reshape it tomorrow. This dated thinking serves the purposes of school board, ministry and teachers’ federation power brokers at the expense of the other system stakeholders. It has, for example, used fear of criticism to keep teachers part of the status quo, even though they have been most victimized by the system’s resistance to change.

Nothing flushes out this obsolete managerial thinking faster than the topic of testing and the availability of test results for comparison purposes. The immediate response from the establishment is to assume that published test results will be used to beat up teachers instead of improving processes. Left unchallenged, this out-dated thinking will continue to thwart real change. Education is a process, a complicated process, but a process nonetheless. Like any process, education has (or should have) certain key components.

Basically, our schools seek to transform inputs (i.e., unskilled, ignorant and immature students) into outputs (i.e., skilled, knowledgeable

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individuals able to cope in our world). In order to ensure that any process like education yields the best results for the available resources, we must compare outputs against appropriate standards. If results are unsatisfactory, causes must be determined and corrective actions taken by fine-tuning processes, not berating people. Many defenders of the educational status quo vigorously object to viewing the education process this mechanically. They wrap themselves in an “enlightened” concern for the “whole child”. “Children are not widgets”, they sanctimoniously announce, as if this were a revelation to critics of the system. In fact, the costs of not adopting a modern management mind-set of continuous process improvement are very real and very human. Everyone in our public schools, from over-loaded teachers on the verge of burn-out to disadvantaged students who do not get the extra help they need, pay the price for this hide-bound thinking.

Even if we can get agreement that education is a process, the public system is quick to assert that we cannot apply management methods to it because of the variability of the inputs and the complexity of the outputs. Both points have trouble surviving even the most cursory scrutiny. Yes, there is tremendous variation in the abilities and backgrounds of students entering the public school system. And yes, much of the variation is due to factors beyond the control of the schools. However, this situation supports the use of more testing, not less. An industrial analogy (that will no doubt further inflame the “children-are-not-widgets” crowd) might be instructive here.

Let’s say that Alcan produces aluminum billets that Boeing uses to build airliner wings. Alcan does this by transforming inputs into outputs that are then compared to standards. As most air travellers can appreciate, the most critical step is the last. Just because the grade of ore (the input) being supplied to Alcan’s smelter varies, the output cannot also vary significantly. Allowing wings to fall off an airliner in mild turbulence is not one of the acceptable ways of accommodating variations in the ore coming out of the ground!

In other words, the final result is non-negotiable. Alcan must modify the transformation process by, for example, using more or different chemicals or larger amounts of electricity in the smelting process. But Alcan will not be able to keep the process under control (i.e., producing acceptable results) unless it is constantly testing inputs and outputs. In a very similar fashion, we should view the output of our public schools as non-negotiable. In order to succeed as capable and well-adjusted individuals in society, all students need to acquire certain skills and knowledge. When we excuse the less-advantaged from high expectations, we unwittingly consign them to a limited future and the continuation of a cycle of dependence on social assistance — in terms of our

analogy, we design them to have their wings fall off in the turbulence of every-day life.

At the opposite end of the process, we are often told that the “outputs” in education are too complex to allow the use of simplistic devices such as standardized tests. This argument mirrors that of old-line thinkers in my own industry (which is the distribution of automation components and systems). These managers pooh-pooh our reliance on hard measures such as the percentage of orders filled from local inventory, our promptness of quotations and turn-around times for repairs. They note that superior customer service goes far beyond these measures. And to some extent they are right.

There are many intangibles, such as courteous greetings by our receptionist, that can make a difference, even if they are hard to measure. Just because we cannot measure everything, however, is no reason not to use the hard measures that we do have. If we do not do at least some “testing”, we are reduced to operating anecdotally with a real danger of focusing scarce resources on non-essential issues. Similarly, testing in our schools may not provide a complete picture of a student’s knowledge and skills, but appropriate testing is an 80% solution that allows us to keep adjusting the process to better serve our students and optimize the use of increasingly-scarce tax dollars.

Studies show that 20% to 40% of work in any organization is not really work, it’s rework. Anyone familiar with our schools and the great deal of remediation going on will agree with these figures. If we can analyze educational processes and refine them so that we get things right the first time, we will be able to graduate more students with wings strong enough for an increasingly-turbulent world.

It’s time that education reformers challenged the antiquated management thinking resident in our schools, boards, teacher federations and ministries. When these old-line thinkers get into a defensive “you’re just teacher-bashing” mode, let’s educate them about new, non-threatening ways of analyzing and continuously improving processes for everyone’s benefit.