

**This 1993 article is an example of the understanding I brought with me 8 years ago when I began to try to figure out why MCPS was being unusually successful... and its why today I see its potential as a model of what's systemically possible for the rest of education.**

## KNOWING . . . WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO

How could we know . . . ?

*"We are not living in an 'age of enlightenment',  
but an age of not knowing what to do."*

Walker Percy

Thanatos Syndrome

*"How could they know . . . ?"*

This question, in the deep voice of W. Edwards Deming, echoes through the room each time he conducts his public and private seminars. At first I took it as criticism of particular people who are resistant to change-- the "they's" we blame when confronted with discrepancies between what we *say* we are about as educators and what we *do* in our schools. I was sure he shared most American's frustration--and not just with schools-- but anger increasingly aimed at those who don't seem to know how to deal with the complexity and connectedness of current social, economic and political conditions. Leaders are supposed to know!

I no longer hear Deming's question as "blaming." More recently, I've become aware of another dimension. The emphasis really is on the word "could." How could we expect anyone to know how to deal with the scope and complexity of problems our organizations must respond to today?

My new awareness was fed by an insight I took away from a week spent reviewing *New American Schools* proposals. Most proposals were not "break-the-mold"-- not because of what the proposers did not know about creating and maintaining effective schools. Rather, it was *what they did not know that they did not know* about schools. The "molds" they seemed to unquestionably accept, and not even try to break, were largely invisible assumptions about organizational management--who does what to whom, and for what reasons.

What does Deming's question have to do with this? He is suggesting that until people question those assumptions, and look at conditions from a different perspective [the customer's], how could they see the actual possibilities for action?

Moreover he knows that this different frame of reference--allowing us to ask different questions--is enough of a starting point for action. As purposeful, problem-solving beings we are "programmed" for discovery learning. We are intrinsically motivated to learn how to do what we don't know how to do as we go through the experience of trying to do it. This is how we learned to walk, talk, and function as human beings. We grow in capacity through continuous, short term experience in long term directions. What we have lacked until now has been a way to employ that same capability-development process as part of our *organizational* behavior.

Management as Discovery Learning

*"As a manager, I could take on any project  
without having to know the answer ahead.  
All I had to know was the process for finding it."  
Xerox Manager*

As with Strategic Planning, the energy that drives management for quality results comes from two sources: (1) the tension created as those involved become aware of discrepancies between what they believe and what they do; and (2) the opportunity to be involved in shaping their organization's work processes in order to bridge the gap.

There are also differences, however. In conventional strategic planning, the gap assessed is between the present state of an organization and a future state. This "ideal" derives from the organization's beliefs and values, and serves to shape the general goals, purposes and objectives for what one plans to do. At a once a year activity, a representative group creatively determines new strategies to bridge the gaps. Unfortunately, most staff may be uninvolved in this activity, and those that are usually return to a daily work management process that has roles, structural relationships and procedures aligned to older objectives and less-clearly defined organizational purposes.

What has been missing is a work management process that uses the power of data about that belief/action discrepancy to drive daily decisions; and which involves the entire staff. The processes, that today are being called "quality management," can provide that missing bridge between what we believe and how we act on the beliefs each day.

Thus quality management is a daily management process with a simultaneous focus on both the present and the future, allowing for short-term results, in long-term directions. It provides support for everyone's daily work to be part of a continuous process of discovery and then learning. It provides, in effect, a missing strategic management process that supports acting each day *as if* you had no choice but to act consistent with what you believe . . . until you get it right. Thus, it's not what some say is "doing it right the first time," but rather doing your best *each* time, and a little bit better next.

The good news, then, is that "quality management" offers a systemic, goal-seeking, belief-driven, daily management process. Both the organization, and the individuals in it, join in a *self-correcting, discovery learning process* based upon planning, acting, learning from the consequences, and then acting again as part of the ordinary flow of the school system's work.

The bad news is that, as with many explorations, it requires we work in the area of the relatively unknown area beyond our assumptions where *we do not know that we do not know*.

One such area of the current organizational unknown is how one can act on her or his basic beliefs in a complex organizational system. For example, while we believe that *each* child is a unique combination of knowledge, experience and skills, we often have to compromise that principle in order to manage within allowed time and resources. And the consequences show up in the nature of many of the learning and teaching "problems" we then try to solve.

Thus, as individuals we may try to live lives consistent with our beliefs, but seldom does this seem possible in our organizational roles which confront us with so many factors seemingly out of our control -- too many people or issues to respond to, in too little time, with too few resources.

And with little experience to suggest that *whole* organizations can change, *we do not know* it is realistically possible.

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