

# The Habit of Excellence

*"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit." Aristotle*



Modern Quality processes and Excellence systems have been around for many years, beginning with such thought leaders as W. Edwards Deming. Back then Deming and others advocated for a new approach to improve productivity by using quality methods and to have a new leadership focus that engages the people who did the work to achieve sustainable results. Traditional leadership style at that time, in the 1950's- 1960's did not include quality as a strategic organizational issue let alone spending time to gain organizational alignment through employee engagement.

At that time, organizational leadership for the most part was a top-down focus with a command-and-control environment. Therefore, introducing modern quality methods meant coming to grips with how to lead organizational change and a different style of leadership.

Today there is much evidence on the positive organizational results that come from a continued focus on Excellence systems and authentic leaders who build trust through employee engagement. However, there is also another reality today, in that we live in a rapidly changing world, where leaders face tremendous pressure to optimize capacity of the organization to deliver results.

There is ample evidence of what happens in organizations that have a hurry up and deliver mantra from leaders looking for quick solutions to problems- you get organizational fatigue. The result is a never-ending series of new programs that cause an attitude in employees like an attention deficit disorder taking place at an organizational level, as one program replaces another in the quest for productivity.

A few years ago, I decided to take some time and reflect on what I had experienced in my career and looked for innovative thinking about organizational change and leadership. In my reflective period, I went back to an earlier time, when I first became involved in quality and learned about W. Edwards Deming. Deming in his time talked about organizational transformation and called for a new style of leadership by focusing on quality management as a system. Deming took what was then a very radical and different approach to implementing a system of quality by focusing on the role of leaders and to view organizations as a human system. Since his time, there have been many changes in what was known as Total Quality Management. New techniques have been developed such as LEAN, Six Sigma, Customer Engagement, and various forms of organizational accreditation, such as to ISO standards and national Excellence Frameworks.

My first contact with quality- then known as TQM- was in the early 1980's when I was working in a manufacturing plant that had many problems; from technology that did not work, to environmental issues, to very poor labour relations and safety. I got involved in quality by chance. I was in Houston at the corporate office for a human resource meeting and met a couple of people who were working in what was called the Quality and Productivity office. I got excited by what they were doing. We discussed the many problems that we were having in the manufacturing plant and the very negative impact on people and on company results.

The group in Houston discussed the work of W. Edwards Deming <sup>1</sup>with me and how they were using his principles to focus on improvements to processes and productivity. One of them asked me a simple question that changed my life. He asked if we had involved employees in seeking answers to the problems. The answer was no we had not as the issues were considered beyond them- needing top technical help, expert consultants and strong top-down leadership.

Truth was even though the manufacturing plant management – which I was part of- believed we were good at communicating, we had not really communicated. We were too busy telling, not asking and looking for quick solutions rather than taking the time to explain why and how improvements in the plant would make life better for everyone. Most of the managers had developed their values from their education and training that did not see how operations employees could add any value to the problem solving required to turn around the plant productivity. After much discussion within the management group, we invited the corporate quality and productivity people to come and work through their process. I can tell you that not all managers were on board with this however they went along anticipating that the whole approach would not work.

What happened was the group held a series of meetings that involved a high percentage of employees from all over the organization, they asked many questions of employees and managers, had reams of paper drawn processes around the meeting room. They spent a week at the plant and produced a report which by previous agreement, plant management shared with employees. From this came a strategy to work on key issues that had first been identified by operational employees. With that the workplace climate began to change as we started to build trust where there was not much before. Fact is, there was a bigger change needed from managers than there was from operational employees. Over a period of months, we moved to other technical and design issues so that we began to see real change- in plant productivity and safety.

I am relating this story as there are two quotes from Deming that I believe are at the heart of the matter for how an organization can achieve Excellence, such that ordinary people achieve extraordinary results. These same two quotes, also apply to the basic principles of Appreciative Inquiry.

“It is important that an aim never be defined in terms of activities or methods. It must always relate to how life is better for everyone. The aim of the system must be clear to everyone in the system. The aim must include plans for the future.” He further states: “If you do not know how to ask the right question, you discover nothing”

Here is another quote from Deming that is right on the mark “We need to learn to work in a system by which, I mean that everybody, every division; every component is there not for individual competitive profit or recognition but for contribution to the system as a whole on a win-win basis.” His words then make sense today as what I see in many organizations is a lack of alignment where resources are not focused, such that people work hard on activities but without a clear line of sight as to the larger purpose and achieving results.

What I learned from that early experience as a manager at a manufacturing plant, travelled with me throughout my career. My first introduction to quality or TQM became a core part of my values. That

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<sup>1</sup> Information on Deming’s work can be found at The W. Edwards Deming Institute at the following website coordinate: <http://deming.org/>

core belief stayed with me in the private sector where I had responsibility for Human Resources and Quality at a corporate level with 12 manufacturing sites across North America.

That core belief followed me as I moved to the public sector as the President of a post-secondary college in Ontario- St. Lawrence College. Working with faculty, staff and academic leaders in the College we focused on quality in education. St. Lawrence became the first post-secondary college in North America to achieve ISO registration. This had “brand” recognition for recruiting students; for a higher profile in the community and real impact on funding that was tied to achieving quality goals as set out by the province.

Following my time with the College, I was honoured to lead the National Quality Institute of Canada., now known as Excellence Canada. Here in Canada the NQI Canada Awards for Excellence and criteria elements are a tested and proven route to a better future. The results that come from taking a strategic approach to Excellence are well documented such as higher productivity, higher customer and client satisfaction, better more reliable work processes, higher retention and levels of talent attraction.

Quality in North America was finally starting to have impact. What made the difference was the personal commitment from well-regarded leaders in that what Deming and others were advocating made sense as new ways where needed to succeed in what was then becoming a very competitive world. The focus on quality systems led to the development of the many national Excellence Frameworks such as Baldrige<sup>2</sup> in the USA, NQI<sup>3</sup> in Canada.

I want to focus now on what the next level of Excellence looks like. New systems such as the Organizational Excellence Framework<sup>4</sup> (OEF) criteria have been developed that integrate various quality & improvement processes to optimize organizational capacity. This Framework was developed through a collaboration with professionals all of whom have a deep understanding of how to work with leaders to advance Excellence. What is different about the OEF is that it provides a way for leaders to integrate a myriad of productivity improvement processes, customer relationships processes, employee engagement processes and societal responsibility processes under one umbrella. This optimizes organizational resources and aligns organizational capacity to deliver sustainable results. At the same time if an organization chooses to seek accreditation, the OEF Framework provides the platform, so there is no need to start a completely new process.

One area that will have an increasing focus is how leaders optimize capacity and strengths in their organization. Organizations have become very proficient at finding what is wrong and in developing very sophisticated problem-solving techniques and tools. A strengths-based focus to improvement is 180 degrees different from traditional problem solving and requires leaders who understand how to gain organizational alignment and to unlocking the capacity of employees who want to see their organization succeed. Optimizing the inherent strengths from within the organization means leaders have a clear

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<sup>2</sup> The Malcolm Baldrige National quality Improvement Act was passed by the US congress in 1987. Here is the website <http://www.baldrige.nist.gov/History.htm>

<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Excellence Framework and the Canada Awards for Excellence was developed by the National Quality Institute in 1992, with assistance from the Government of Canada. Here is the website: <https://www.excellence.ca/>

<sup>4</sup> The Organizational Excellence Framework is unique in that it “integrates” various models and processes while providing implementation guidelines used by seasoned consultants and excellence professionals. Here is the website contact: <https://organizationalexcellencespecialists.ca>

focus and process to understand what is working well right now and to leverage those strengths to move to the next level of excellence. This requires leaders who understand what it means to lead positive change and to align organizational human capacity to have line of sight to strategy and future direction.

To achieve organizational Excellence -leadership matters- it always has and always will be. What is different for the next level of excellence are leaders who know that their positive core- their North Star- is built around trust. Trust is a two-way street, the glue that holds the organization together. Trust takes a long time to be realized and yet can be lost in a flash. Leaders who focus on trust speak a language of “we” – not “me”. Very simply when people in the organization see that the senior leaders are in it for “me” trust is low, when they see that senior leaders are in it for “we” trust is high.

Here is another truth- Trust can be a leader’s touchstone or their kryptonite. Trust is at the core of how people view the authenticity of leader’s words and actions. When trust is high- people are willing to go through organizational change as trust-based leaders work on open communication to develop line of sight to the larger strategic goals. Their actions and behaviours are consistent with their words. When trust is low such engagement does not happen- as low trust is kryptonite for any leader. Simple as that.

Trust in leadership is the same as what Aristotle said about excellence “it is not an act but a habit.” Leaders who make a habit of building trust create organizations where excellence is also a habit. To achieve success with the next level of excellence requires leaders to follow their North Star – their positive core of values -as the quote from Aristotle about excellence is not an act but a habit, is as relevant today as it was in ancient times.

## Author



Dan Corbett has extensive experience in organizational change and human capital strategies that enable organizations to align resource capacity to achieve excellence. He has served as President & CEO in the public and non-profit sectors and senior executive roles in the private sector.

Dan’s specific areas of expertise include: implementing strengths based organizational change; coaching leadership teams to align the organization for success; developing teams to grow organizational capacity; designing leadership development and succession plans for human capital strategies; developing strategies for integration of business acquisitions; conducting organizational assessments for implementing quality, business excellence and healthy workplace systems. Email: [djcorbett6@icloud.com](mailto:djcorbett6@icloud.com)