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Continuous Improvement

Placing Wheels on Servant Leadership

We are never satisfied with where we are and always improve our business by putting forth our best ideas and efforts.

—Jeffrey Liker and Michael Hoseus, 2008

Visit any bookstore, wander off to the leadership/management books and look for the John Maxwell titles. You will probably find a dozen different titles. My understanding of the essence of Maxwell's teaching is included in his four "do nots" and three "dos." Much of the wisdom in all of his writing provides great advice for leaders on how to avoid the four "do nots" and how to make the three "dos" an integral part of their daily lives.

In the age of education accountability, it is very important for leaders to internalize these four "do nots" and three "dos." The strategies *not to use* are

1. Force
2. Intimidation

3. Exchange (incentives)
4. Manipulation

The three strategies *to use* are

1. Persuasion
2. Energizing Others
3. Honoring and Serving Others (Maxwell, 2002)

PLACING THE WHEELS ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP

I am convinced that most school leaders desire to honor and serve others but have become frustrated with the results. These administrators started their administrative assignments convinced that persuasion, energizing others and honoring and serving others was all that was needed. I, the leader, will do all I can to help staff members with what they need or want. The “leadership” in servant leadership went missing; only the servant survived. Everybody seemed happy; that is until the test scores were printed in the newspaper.

Our former **bottom-up** servant became a **top-down** bully. Day to day pacing guides were inspected, test preparation became a school subject, and best practice programs were purchased and implemented with forced fidelity. Everybody was unhappy (including the top-down, former servant). Top-down may have moved the school from “struggling to survive,” to “getting along” in the short term, but the pain inflicted upon students and staff was far too high a price to pay.

Continuous strategic improvement is a leadership strategy that helps leaders with that rare, delicate balance of top-down and bottom-up together. The leaders have their responsibilities and so do the staff members. Administrators can follow their heart to be a **servant leader** and, at the same time, meet accountability requirements. “Finland had achieved rigor without ruin,” (Ripley, 2013, p. 158) and the United States can also.

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THE DO NOTS

The dilemma for education leaders is that accountability legislation is based on the “Do Not” list. Force is front and center in this legislation; raise test scores or we will fire you. Along the journey to your firing, we

will intimidate you by ranking your schools. We will reserve the most severe intimidation for the bottom 5 percent of the schools with the most poverty. **Exchange** is another name for “incentives.” The legislation states that if you do what we wrote in the laws we’ll exchange your cooperation for a bucket of cash. If you don’t do what we say, we’ll remove some of the money you already have.

Manipulation is not in the legislation, but fearful educators do resort to manipulation. Of course, it is not labeled *manipulation*; it is labeled *test preparation*. Learning is second place to becoming an expert at taking tests. The issue is how to manipulate the test taking process so students can create the impression they have learned more than they actually have learned.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP VERSUS FEAR

Maxwell’s four “do nots” and three “dos” can be organized under two headings: management by fear and servant leadership. Deming’s (1986) well-known 14 points for leaders lists Point 8 as simply, “Drive out fear.” My only time to hear Deming was in 1992. At that four-day conference, he added a clever insight stating, “Fear is the darkroom where negatives develop.” When leaders want to replace fear with care, what are they to do? Bosses can admonish their staffs and they can model caring, serving leadership. However, it is a leadership strategy of continuous strategic improvement that cements care into the fabric of organizations.

Optimize Your School is written as a how-to book. It answers the questions, “How do I treat my students, teachers, and other employees the way I want to be treated AND, at the very same time, meet the accountability requirements that society deserves? Can I actually focus on persuasion, energizing others, and honoring and serving my students and staff PLUS meet accountability expectations?” The answer is yes. Improvement “comes to the steady people who keep working at getting better. If you have a quick fix mindset, then you need to shift to continuous improvement” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30). As the chapters unfold in this book, it will become apparent that *Optimize Your School* puts the wheels on servant leadership.

The remainder of this chapter contrasts the “do nots” with the “dos,” as they are implemented in school systems. This is accomplished by writing about continuous and improvement as separate topics. Chapter 2 inserts strategic into continuous improvement. *Continuous strategic improvement*, the combined term, will be used for the remainder of the book.

CONTINUOUS

Education in the United States is a yo-yo. We go back and forth, up and down, over and under with a few incredibly awe-inspiring tricks from place to place. Some of these incredible advances deserved to be deployed nationwide, but most of these “stars have turned out be comets” (Bogle, 2009, p. 144). The pressure on education is for short-term gains now! Continuous is not even a consideration.

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CONTINUOUS EXPLAINED

It would seem unnecessary to explain continuous; it simply means on and on and on, not over and over. Continuous can be on and on from hour to hour, day to day, week to week, month to month, and year to year. For education, what matters is a mindset of on and on versus a final report with an accomplished stamp across the top. We are never done.

Figure 1.1 shows the scoreboard visible at almost all sporting venues. There is no debate regarding what numbers go on the left and the right sides of the scoreboard. The scoreboard is a cultural icon deeply rooted into the norms of our society. Traditional education also has two places for numbers with recent accountability legislation adding a third scoreboard for schools: ranking. Figure 1.2 displays the current scoreboard for education.

Figure 1.1 Athletic Scoreboard



Figure 1.2 Typical Education Scoreboard



accountable to outperform their prior best, instead of meeting a quota or outperforming their neighbors.

BUSINESS WORST PRACTICE

The business stories about “meeting the numbers” abound. Essentially, the business leaders set in motion activities to meet quarterly goals at the expense of the long-term health of the corporation. These leaders are not thinking continuous; they are thinking quarter by quarter by quarter. Bogle (2009) wrote, “Once you decide whether you expect to be in business for a short time or a long time, most of the right decisions are easy” (p. 172). In other words, do you want to be continuously in business or are you massaging the numbers to obtain a promotion? Bogle also wrote, “When corporations fail to meet their numeric targets the hard way—over the long term, by raising productivity; by improving old products and creating new ones; by providing services on a more friendly, more timely, and more efficient basis; and by challenging the people of the organization to work more effectively together (and those are the ways that our best corporations achieve success)—they are compelled to do it in other ways: that often subtract value from you, from me, and from society” (p. 110).

The essence of continuous requires stubborn persistence.

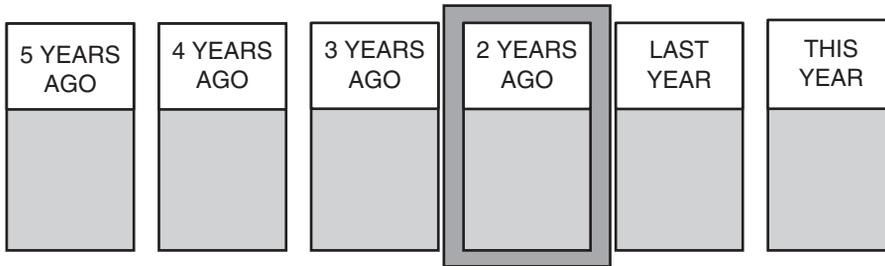
CONTINUOUS DEMANDS PERSISTENCE

The essence of continuous requires stubborn persistence. Calvin Coolidge stated, “Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent” (Bogle, 2009, p. 173).

In addition to persistence, continuous requires stability of leadership, not a continual search for the next superstar. “Our ongoing research into what it takes to prevail in turbulent environments shows a distinct negative correlation between building great companies and going outside for a CEO” (Collins, 2009, p. 95).

How long is continuous? The best answer I’ve found is from Jim Collins (2009): “Most ‘overnight success’ stories are about twenty years in the making” (p. 94). Management by fear does not create anything that is continuous. Force, intimidation, exchange, and manipulation are all used by bullies to gain short-term goals. Continuous is not even considered.

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Figure 1.5 All-Time-Best Two Years Ago

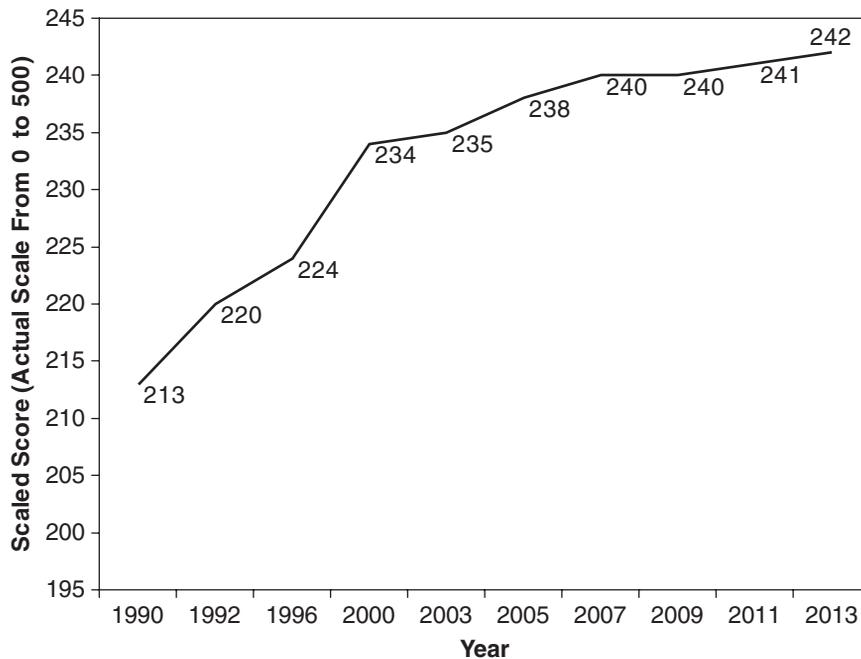
NUMERIC GOALS (QUOTAS)

A new numeric goal of only one better seems so weak. People scoff, “Is that all you expect of your people . . . what a miserable leader you are!” I was a beginning teacher in the 1960s and still remember the administrators bringing the teachers together to write *5 percent* improvement goals because “measureable objectives” was the current management buzzword. Does anybody think that education has improved 5 percent every year for the past fifty years? People should be honored for success, not for “macho” establishing of high goals. Liker and Franz (2011) wrote that “it is more useful to define excellence as a pursuit rather than an absolute value. If we improve, we’re closer to excellence than we were before” (p. 6). We teachers were not admonished to improve; we were directed to write 5 percent, absolute value, goals. In fifty years of education reform, most attempts to improve have failed. Exceptions are mathematics education, girls’ athletics, and probably a couple of other areas.

The statistics of trends is really different than the statistics of “Did you reach your goal?” Figure 1.6 displays the results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) for 4th-grade mathematics. The data are presented for every assessment since its inception in 1978.

Fourth graders posted the highest scores ever on the NAEP exam in 2013. The average mathematics score for the fourth graders in 2013 was higher than the scores in any previous assessment year. Students scored 1 point higher in 2013 than in 2008 and 29 points higher than in 1978.

Other national results show higher or tied for highest scores in 2013 than for any prior year for White, Black, Native American, Asian, and Hispanic students. Further, both male and female students scored their best

Figure 1.6 National Assessment of Educational Progress Grade 4 Mathematics

ever. It is very heartening that NAEP gives its headline to improvement data, but disheartening that this leadership is not being disseminated throughout all the US Department of Education and beyond. Maybe the reason for the lack of continuous improvement thinking in the US Department of Education is the lack of continuous improvement in industry. Liker and Franz (2011) wrote, “Would it surprise you to hear that in our collective visits to literally hundreds of companies the last 10 years, we have never seen honest-to-goodness continuous improvement outside of Toyota” (p. 1).

Reflection

What data is available where you work that is long term, such as the math NAEP example? What data is available only for this year and last year?

FORMAL STATISTICS

Since the definition of *improvement* is “getting better,” it would seem that formal statistics are not needed. In many instances, this is correct. One does not need formal statistics to recognize that the fourth graders in the

United States had an all-time-best or to know if your school did better than ever before. The only real problem is that in far too many locales, the only numbers you can find are for this year and last year.

At other times, however, this question does need to be answered: “Could the positive trend we see be the result of luck (smarter students moved in) or did the school actually improve because of its initiatives?” Chapter 18 provides an introduction to the more formal aspects of continuous improvement statistics and use of data.

LEADING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Leading continuous improvement will never be easy. As will be obvious to readers of this book, set-up time for continuous improvement is necessary. Leaders cannot dictate that we are a continuous improvement school system and then be too important for their own improvement. Deming (1992) stated, “You are never too old to learn or too important to learn.” Liker (2004) wrote that continuous improvement “causes some short-term pain and cost . . . It takes discipline to maintain, which is beyond the capacity of many . . . because they don’t understand the challenges and pain of continuous improvement. In the long run, the challenges and pain and short-term costs almost always produce dramatically better results” (p. 101).

If the leader of the school system believes that it is the job of the employees to improve without any leadership, then continuous improvement efforts will fail. Liker and Franz (2011) wrote that “the only hope of seriously marching toward the ideal of continuous improvement is to have passionate executives leading the charge. They are simply not there in very many organizations” (p. 3). Donald Wheeler and David Chambers (1992) wrote, “It is only when management supports, in both word and deed, the goal of continual improvement, that it will begin to see the increases in both quality and productivity” (p. 12).

Leading continuous improvement involves a number of mindsets for leaders that are reflected upon in an ABC format in Chapter 17. Throughout the reflections is the concept of improvement versus meeting specifications; there is always a better way. Joyce Orsini (2013) writes, “It is necessary in this world to outdo specifications, to move continually toward better and better performance of the finished product” (p. 22). In education, the similar notion is trying to meet **AYP (adequate yearly progress)** instead of having a record of continuous improvement. Larry Webber and Michael Wallace (2007) wrote, “As long as the conformance to specifications is

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regarded as the main objective for any operation, it will be impossible to sustain any real process improvements” (p. 143). A second mindset, which will occur throughout this book, is that of problem solving. “Problem solving is different from the connotation of **firefighting**. In firefighting, we are running around putting our finger in the dike and hoping that the dam will not collapse. In true problem solving, we are deeply trying to understand the root cause of the problem so that we can ultimately prevent the problem from occurring again” (Liker & Franz, 2011, p. 12). “The most important thing is how your own people develop their ability to lead continuous improvement . . . In many organizations that we work with, something happens that derails the process. That something always involves the lack of commitment by senior management” (Liker & Franz, 2011, p. 15).

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AS A CULTURE

Continuous improvement reinforces the intrinsic motivation everybody is born with.

Finally, continuous improvement is a culture. This culture sustains improvements through “a combination of top leadership commitment and a culture of continuous improvement” (Liker & Convis, 2012, p. 4). At the center of this contin-

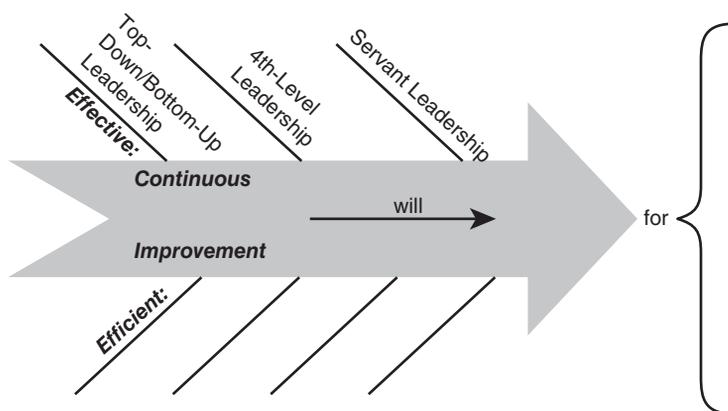
uous improvement culture is that deep understanding that continuous improvement requires continuous learning.

Continuous improvement reinforces the intrinsic motivation everybody is born with. If a student has 20 percent correct, then 31 percent, then 39 percent, then 47 percent, and then 58 percent, but is rewarded with F, F, F, F, and E, intrinsic motivation is blown asunder. Likewise, suppose an inner-city school is given a federal mandate of 60 percent of the students meeting state standards because only 20 percent are meeting the standards now. The school improves to 31 percent, 39 percent, then 47 percent, and last year 58 percent. The school is rewarded with the “needs improvement” label, then “really needs improvement” followed by “failure school” to “at risk of being closed or turned into a charter” and finally the principal and half of the staff are fired. Do you think any teachers still have intrinsic motivation for their profession? If there is any motivation left, it is spent on applying for a teaching job where there are rich kids.

What should these teachers hear from their local, state, and federal leaders? They need to hear, “Wow, you improved from 20 percent to 58 percent meeting standards. Very impressive! What can we do to support you even more?” Intrinsic motivation can be greatly strengthened by education’s leaders.

Figure 1.7 is the first example of the Optimization Fishbone with inserted topics; the additions were introduced in this chapter.

Figure 1.7 Optimization Fishbone



LOOKING AHEAD

The combination of continuous, strategic thinking and improvement is what leaders with a servant mentality must have to carry out their dreams. Servant leaders have the responsibility to solve the root causes of problems. Solving the problem superficially, only to have the same problem tomorrow, is called *firefighting*. Chapter 2 inserts strategic between continuous and improvement, which will guide readers toward **root cause analysis** of problems. *Optimize Your School* is written for school leaders who deeply desire to be a servant leader. If a bully administrator was a bully teacher, I have no illusions about this book being of help. However, for the vast majority of administrators who have a deep desire to be a servant leader, this is their book. They can lead with persuasion, energizing parents, students and staffs, and serving and honoring everybody. This all occurs while meeting accountability requirements.

Servant leaders have the responsibility to solve the root causes of problems.

Reflection

If an administrator who is 100 percent servant is not acceptable and an administrator who is 100 percent leader is not acceptable, what is the proper balance for a servant leader?