

Tackling issues (Pursuing the goals)

To this point, practically everything you have read in this book has been about establishing and cascading a coherent set of goals through the organisation by:

- identifying the organisational objectives from the business context
- clarifying those objectives with unambiguous targets
- cascading them into the logical elements of the organisation
- enabling people to make local commitments which support them
- maintaining their currency by means of measuring progress against them
- regularly reviewing and reinforcing them by means of focused meetings
- reviewing and reconciling them against your personal goals
- establishing an appropriate management role in meeting the objectives
- resolving and removing alternative goals and agendas.

Implementing all these ideas, takes us to a point where everyone should be totally clear on what they are tasked with achieving, at least at the management level. This alone is likely to deliver performance benefits, purely by the level of focus and clarity that is achieved. It is not uncommon to see performance improve by tens of percent simply because people are more continuously aware of the importance of the goals and the active interest of management in them.

But the intention of clarifying the goals was not simply about increasing the pressure, it was about clarifying where change needs to occur, and about providing guidance in effecting that change.

We never seem to have enough time to do things properly, but we can always find time to do them twice!

Source unknown

Chapter 22

When, at last, people had regrouped, Richard felt he needed to know where they stood before proceeding with the rest of the meeting. When he rose to his feet, silence descended almost immediately.

“Daniel raised some important questions before coffee. His recent behaviour, while regrettable, does not diminish their validity, and I feel it is important that we don’t simply gloss over them. Daniel’s questions are pertinent to the whole issue of time management, and before we proceed any further I would like to hear others’ views on the track we are taking.” Richard remained standing, and looked around the room.

As he expected, Deborah was the first to speak. “I still hold to the views I expressed earlier. What we have done over the past few months has really opened my eyes on what management really is. I therefore think this discussion, of how we focus more time in this area, is crucial, and that we should continue it, with or without Daniel.”

Richard noticed clear nods of agreement from John, Susan and Andrew. Peter and Abs appeared more subdued, their eyes cast downwards. Richard waited in silence for one or other of them to speak.

Peter was the first to do so. In a very measured, voice he delivered his typically well-considered reply.

“What we are trying to do here seems to make a lot of theoretical sense, and I find it difficult to fault the logical arguments put forward as to why we should do this. But...” Here Peter paused, marshalling the sequence of what was to follow in his mind. “I have three major reservations about what we are attempting here. The first, is that what we are attempting is unproven, and I feel that we are taking an unreasonable level of risk in being in the vanguard of applying these techniques. The second, is that the implementation of these techniques is creating conflict and pain within the management team, and I am concerned that continuing to force things forward could cause us to lose some very valued colleagues. The third, is that I, for one, am not sure that I really have the ability or inclination at my age, to adopt an approach that is this different from what I normally do.” Here Abs was nodding in agreement, and Richard also noted that Andrew and Susan were nodding as well.

The engine for change is a clear gap between the newly adopted goals, and the current performance. But the process of being objective and analytical should not stop at this point and give way to prejudice and fancy.

Imagine a discrete activity (manual, machine, or computer), which has a new goal of 500 outputs a day over current performance of 380. The reasons for the new goal can be logically determined from our top-level strategy and our QFDs. (Possibly through a top-level QFD linking to a process QFD, and then in turn to a sub-process QFD.) We now need confidence that the solution will be analytically evaluated against what is needed, and will be objectively selected as the best option. Unfortunately, in practice, the danger is that the team on the ground will simply go with the first idea that seems to work, and implement it without much further thought.

It is possible that the team has hit upon the perfect solution, and thus it has achieved the objective quickly and efficiently. But experience demonstrates that in practice this is very unlikely to be the case. For every lucky break cited by the fire-fighter, seven disasters can be cited by those involved.

- The project became embroiled in politics because different power bases saw the problem differently.
- Only the symptoms were tackled; the real issue continued to cause new and more complex problems.
- The solution was clearly a pet-idea, and far from being the best option, and real opportunities were missed.
- The ultimate cost and time of the solution outweighed the benefits, and left people suffering far too long.



All progress is based upon a universal innate desire on the part of every organism to live beyond its income.

Samuel Butler
English novelist

“Thank you for your candour, and your clearly thoughtful contribution, Peter,” said Richard sympathetically.

Even though Richard had been a touch patronising in the delivery of his response, others nodded in agreement. It seemed that the whole group accepted the validity of what had been said.

Richard continued “To be frank, I am not sure that I can answer your reservations, but I would like to make the following points. The first is that, while the combination of tools we are using may be unique, the individual tools are well proven. All the tools do is present us with information and understanding. What we do with that information and understanding, is down to us. We are not ceding control to some inanimate system; we simply take what the system tells us into account, as we make our decisions in the normal way. Is it really a risk, to see things more clearly?”

He paused to allow the group to assimilate what they had heard, and then continued. “The second, is that I very much regret the conflict and pain that is arising from this work. But I believe that QFD is incidental to that. I believe that any major change of approach, in us as a management team, would create such conflict and pain, just because we are who we are. The truth is, we have fundamentally different views of how to do things, and whenever we have a choice, we have an argument. Look back before QFD and you will see it is true!”

Peopled nodded, so Richard continued: “Any major change creates conflict and pain in us. But major change, whether QFD or something else, is clearly necessary. Our performance shows clearly that we cannot continue the same as we were. Our choice is not whether we change, but whether we change ourselves, or have someone else do it for us.”

He paused again as he formulated his third point. “Finally, I am aware that the new approach may not suit everybody, but I make this pledge to you now. If you will cooperate with me, unstintingly, to make this work, I will provide you all the support I can, including my time. And if, at the end, you feel the new role does not suit you, we will work together to find a new role better suited to you, without any loss of status or pay.”

Richard looked around the room, and finally he looked at Peter, who said: “I don’t think you can say any fairer than that Richard. I am on the bus.” And then Richard glanced at Abs, who simply nodded his assent.

- The implementation was poorly managed and people were not really sure what they were doing.
- People were oblivious to the fact that the problem was continuing even after the project had finished.
- Things drifted back to the way they were some time after the project was completed.

The above issues are all too common in the core of companies. And the problem is that the approach people often take to make change in practice, takes little account of preventing these things from happening.

The situation is changing, however, and many companies have introduced clear processes and disciplines for solving problems efficiently and permanently. These work by:

- clarifying, by means of data and objective analysis, the component whose performance is responsible for that deficit, and what performance is required
- seeking and exploring a wide range of options to meet that performance (including best practice both inside and outside the company)
- selecting the preferred solution objectively based on experimentation and analysis of its performance
- carefully project managing its implementation, to clear quality, time and cost targets
- re-evaluating performance to ensure that the problem is fully resolved
- ensuring the performance is managed and maintained by integrating it into the relevant operating practices.

From the above, it is clear that good problem-solving processes work by ensuring that the objectives remain clear even in the detail of the analyses and decisions.



How good are your people at the following.

Developing an agreed and quantified statement of the problem/opportunity?

Poor Excellent

Diagnosing, with data, the root cause?

Poor Excellent

Seeking to identify the most appropriate solution?

Poor Excellent

Planning and managing the implementation?

Poor Excellent

Ensuring people are trained and bought in to the solution?

Poor Excellent

Measuring that the solution has been fully effective?

Poor Excellent

Integrating the solution into current practice?

Poor Excellent

Providing evidence that all the above is happening as it should?

Poor Excellent

Richard felt a cheer go up in his head, and could barely contain his fist punching the air.

Lucy stood up as Richard sat down, taking this as her cue to continue. “It looks like we won’t get time now, to tackle all three of the issues on our Car Park this afternoon, but I propose we use the remaining time to bottom out, as far as we can, this issue of time. Is that okay?” The group was clearly in agreement, and so she continued: “So how do we state the problem?”

“How about ‘Too many operative issues place demands on our time?’” suggested Deborah.

“I think I see where you are coming from,” said Abs, “but ‘Operative issues’ - what on earth are they when they are at home?”

“Well, you know,” said Deborah, “doing the detailed work itself, and sorting out problems that have arisen”.

“How about calling them ‘Operating routines and problems’ then?” suggested John.

Lucy felt the phrasing was still a bit oblique, but people seemed to be in agreement, and so she wrote on the flipchart: ‘Too many operating routines and problems place demands on our time’, and then asked: “Right, who can quantify this?”

The group went quiet, and looked puzzled, and then Susan suggested: “Well, how much extra time do we need freed off? Deborah, you are further down this road than the rest of us, how much time do you feel we need to spend on this new approach?”

Deborah thought for a moment. “Well, it is not so easy to answer that question, because it depends on where you draw the line between what we call the new approach, and what we should have been doing anyway. The new approach does not really change what we should do, more how we do it. For instance, we should all have been spending time setting our objectives, refining our strategies, developing our people, improving our processes, measuring our progress and learning from problems, and I’m sure that we all have been doing these things, however inadequately.” She paused to check that everyone was with her so far, and then continued: “But to do all of these things properly, will require that I devote at least half my week to them.” There was an audible intake

There are a lot of good problem-solving processes about, and if you already have one that effectively achieves all of the above established in your organisation, you would be well advised to reinforce it as an essential element of your work to establish systematic approaches.

If, however, you do not currently have such a process, it is vitally important to the sustainability of your improvements that you develop one, and that you equip your staff to use it. The following is offered as a possible approach that you could adopt or adapt as necessary.

PROBLEM

PROBLEM is a simple seven-step methodology for ensuring that problems are solved systematically. It is based on an easy to remember acronym, so that it can be used readily as the need arises (e.g. in discussions) but it is also supported by sophisticated checklists where a more rigorous application is required.

- PROFILE the exact problem to be tackled.
- Analyse the ROOT CAUSES of the problem.
- Identify and evaluate your OPTIONS for tackling the root causes.
- Develop a solution package to BALANCE short-term and long-term costs and benefits.
- LAUNCH the project to implement the solution(s) and manage its fulfilment.
- EVALUATE the outcomes to ensure that the problem is fully addressed.
- MAINTAIN the result by ensuring that all policies and practices are updated to reflect it.

A range of materials to support this model are available on the associated web-site (see Appendix 7). What follows is a basic



of breath. “For my particular area, management requires at least 20 hours per week.”

The group were quiet, assimilating this information, and Richard was glad that Daniel was not around to react to this.

Lucy picked up the initiative. “Okay, so in terms of hard numbers, the demands on our time are 20 hours a week too much?” Some of the group nodded, others still appeared subdued, so Lucy checked: “Does everybody agree with this?”

John looked up. “I guess I do. I just hadn’t realised the full extent of what we were talking about. I guess we are just coming to grips with the extent to which we haven’t been doing our jobs. I can’t argue with what Deborah says. I know I should be doing all those things. I know they will lead to success. And I know that to do them properly would take me at least half my time. Yes, I guess I’m 20 hours a week short!”

Lucy looked around at the others, and Peter chipped in: “My process is somewhat smaller than most of yours, so I’m not sure that 20 hours isn’t an overestimate for me. But if you find me 20 hours, I’m sure I can use the remainder profitably.”

“What are the sort of things that intrude on those 20 hours?” asked Lucy. “What do they get taken up with? Let’s try and make a list of all the things that we will need to reduce or avoid, if we are to get those 20 hours back. Then we can get a more practical look at what we are talking about.” She flipped to a new sheet of flipchart paper and stood poised with her pen.

Abs said: “Well, I know the biggest time taker for me, is when something goes wrong that has implications for our delivery promises. You know the sort of thing: supplier failures; machine breakdown; forecast inaccuracy; paperwork mistakes; design errors.” He cast a dark look at Deborah.

Peter chipped in: “A lot of my time is taken up in meetings and video conferencing. There are a lot of corporate forums where I’m expected to be present.”

And so the list grew: sorting out conflict between departments; completing reports and other paperwork; meetings to sort out issues; customer reviews; special project committees looking at the corporate initiatives; meeting suppliers; IT system crashes; management meetings; cascade

outline of each step within the PROBLEM model.

Profile

The goal of this step is to arrive at a clear definition of a workable and owned problem, which everyone involved understands and is based on hard facts rather than assumptions and opinions.

The three main elements in achieving this are as follows.

- Firstly, to identify the detail of the problem area. What process and groups of people are involved; what is the current output of the process and what should it be; and who is going to own both the problem and its solution.
- Secondly, to understand exactly what is happening at present, by flowcharting the current activities and practices.
- Thirdly, to establish - at the outset - what measures are going to be taken to verify whether or not any improvement has been made.

Root causes

The next step in the PROBLEM model, is to establish the most probable root cause of the whole problem. Achieving this is done in two distinct parts:

- Firstly, a comprehensive range of potential root causes is identified, using a variety of 'opening up' techniques such as brainstorming and fishbone diagrams.¹
- Secondly, these potential causes are analysed and verified with data to separate the causes from the symptoms, and to establish the cause or causes which have the biggest impact on the problem.

¹ A basic guide to the tools employed in problem-solving is provided on the associated web-site (see Appendix 7).



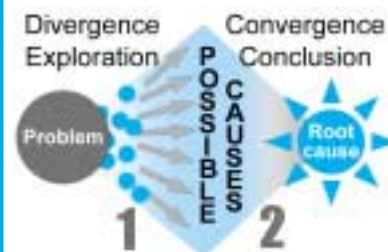
It isn't that they can't see the solution, it is that they can't see the problem.

G. K. Chesterton



The question is one of fighting the causes and not just being satisfied with getting rid of the effects.

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara
Bolivian Radical



briefings; recruiting staff; design reviews; disciplinary issues; reading junk mail; responding to e-mails; staff personal problems; checking on subordinates ...

As the stream of suggestions dried up, Lucy concluded: "So, it is out of this list that we need to save ourselves 20 hours a week. Step two, what are the main causes of these activities imposing on our time?" She turned to a fresh sheet of paper.

Peter was first out of the blocks. "Well, in my case, it is because I don't have anybody else to do them," he said.

"Mine too," said Abs, "I'm the only one who can make the decisions on making late shipments. No-one else has a full enough picture." Lucy had written up on the flipchart 'Resource limitations' and 'Lack of people with complete overview'.

And gradually, this list grew too: Process failures; lack of competence in subordinates; corporate policy; customer expectations; lack of investment in prevention; carelessness; system errors; poor communication; lack of awareness of implications; poor decision making; lack of empowerment; poor checking; bureaucracy; inefficient systems; inefficient meetings; poor completion of actions; people not doing things when they say they will; lack of preparation; corporate demands; politics; people saving time by dumping the problem on others; poor e-mail behaviours; poor staff selection and development; poorly designed systems ...

Eventually the suggestions began to slow, and Lucy took the opportunity to bring it to a close. She was fairly confident that the list had the most relevant issues on it.

"It's a sort of Catch 22," said Deborah. "This list of problems causes us to lose the time that we need to prevent these problems from happening in the first place."

"I'm not sure that's quite true," argued Andrew. "I'm not sure that we can do anything about Corporate Policy."

"Even if that were true," retorted Deborah, "and I'm not sure that it is, look at the rest of the list. Systematic improvement of our processes and our people addresses a large number of those issues. Doesn't it?"

Options

Having determined the root cause(s) we now need to identify a range of possible solutions which would eliminate the chosen root cause or causes, and which reflect an understanding of best practice.

This 'Options' step is a real opportunity to ensure that the organisation is developing creatively through the adoption of innovative ideas and techniques for opening up our thinking.

There are a number of possibilities to ensure that this happens. These include brainstorming sessions, the use of creative design tools, undertaking a literature survey on the subject, visiting companies with similar processes and seeing what they do, and canvassing the opinions of others.

Balance

The range of possible options are evaluated, and those selected are pulled into a balanced solution. 'Balanced' here implies that, in pulling together a solution package, benefits need to be balanced against cost, opportunities need to be balanced against risks, long-term effects need to be balanced against short-term ones, etc.

As with identifying the most probable root cause, this is a process of gathering and using data to weigh up which solution to implement. There are a variety of tools that help the team to think this through, including QFD itself.

When the solution has been identified, the means of its implementation is agreed. This is then pulled into a complete forward plan with appropriate milestones to enable its effective management. Successful implementation depends on accurate planning. This includes providing



If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it.

Heraclitus
Greek philosopher



No matter how complicated a problem, it can usually be reduced to a simple comprehensible form which is often the best solution.

Dr. An Wang
Founder and CEO, Wang Laboratories

There was a general assent to this, but then Peter reminded the group: “But the essential feature of a ‘Catch 22’ is that there is no way out of it!”

“Well let’s call it a Catch 21 and three-quarters then,” retorted Deborah, irritation beginning to show in her voice.

“Peter’s got a point though,” sympathised John. “The link may be there, but breaking it is not going to be easy. It is almost like we’ll have to borrow time on account.”

“It strikes me that we have two options,” suggested Susan. “We can cut ourselves a bit of slack and invest it into that list to generate even more slack, and simply keep the cycle going. Or we can simply stop doing what is on that list, and put up with the consequences until we have our new management system running properly.”

“Sort of like cutting ourselves a lot of slack, and investing it?” countered Andrew.

“I suppose so,” agreed Susan. “The risk of cutting ourselves a lot of slack might be that we can’t survive the consequences. The risk of just cutting a little slack might be that it takes too long.”

“If we are going to make this work,” said Richard, “time is something we just don’t have. We deliver improvement starting next month, or this process stops dead in its tracks!”

Lucy, concerned that the discussion was beginning to lose its way, stepped in to bring the process back on track. “It seems we are moving onto thinking through our options, but before we do that, can I just confirm with the group that this list really does represent the causes of the stated problem?”

The group looked back at the list and muttered their general agreement, so Lucy continued. “So, we now need to tackle the third step: generating options. But before we get too deeply into discussion, let’s try and identify all of the possible options. I’ve already heard Susan suggest: ‘Stop doing the operational bits and accept the consequences’, and also ‘Slowly address the issues on the list’. Are there other suggestions?” She flipped to a clean sheet and wrote them up.

The list grew gradually: pretend we’re on holiday two days a week; hire in some management cover; appoint a stand-in from among our subor-

for all the resources likely to be required when the 'new' way of working is in place.

Launch

During the 'Launch' step, the problem team maintains a watchful eye on progress against their original plan. Any deviations to the plan are considered from three perspectives.

- Can the deviation be corrected?
- Does the deviation have any knock-on effects on other parts of the plan?
- Does the deviation imply further similar problems in the future?

The team not only addresses the deviations as they become aware of them, but also uses them as new data to help them in predicting and preventing future problems in the plan.

Evaluate

Once the implementation of the solution is complete we now need to 'Evaluate' its effectiveness, to ensure that it has not been compromised by unresolved issues and variable application.

In this, the penultimate step, the measures that were identified in the 'Profile' stage are used to check that the performance gap is fully addressed, and that no unfortunate side effects have been generated.

The 'Evaluate' step is also the point at which the team reconsiders its effectiveness, and clarifies the 'learning' that is available to it in improving its own performance (both collectively and individually) and also the performance of future problem-solving teams.



It does not matter how small you are if you have faith and a plan of action.

Fidel Castro
Cuban leader



What gets measured gets done.

Anonymous

dinates; subcontract the work to some consultants; address the issues permanently - don't just fix them; create consequences for not doing this; don't respond to cc e-mails; take each of these issues as an opportunity to develop our people ...

Lucy fought hard to avoid debate, and encourage new contributions, until she felt they had listed all they were going to. She then asked the group to individually stick a red sticky dot against their two favourite suggestions. When the group had sat down again Lucy reflected on the picture that had emerged. There were two winning suggestions each with four dots - these were 'Stop doing the operational bits and accept the consequences' and 'Pretend we're on holiday two days a week'.

"Wow, we are Gung Ho!" exclaimed Lucy. "Looks like we're up for drastic action!"

"Well, Richard pointed out that we don't have time for anything else," said Susan.

"Aren't those two things really the same?" enquired Peter. "One is just one way of doing the other." People agreed that he was right.

"The next most favoured suggestions," continued Lucy, "were 'Hire in some management cover' and 'Appoint a stand-in from among our subordinates' with two dots. And finally we have 'Address issues permanently' and 'Use issues to develop our people' with one dot each. It seems to me that what we have here are separate aspects of a complete solution" she proposed.

The others looked at the flipchart some more, and finally Susan responded: "I think you're right. But is it feasible? Can we actually do this?"

John retorted: "Can we afford not to?"

Abs asked: "Would you support hiring-in management cover, Richard?" and everybody waited for the answer.

"Yes, I would," he replied. "But you'd better make sure that you're not just creating more work for yourself by taking on outsiders."

"I was actually thinking that it would allow me to get Stephen to deputise for me, and then the management cover could be for him. It's what we usually do when I go on holiday," submitted Abs. Richard nodded approval.

Maintain

The purpose of this last step, is to ensure that the implemented solution becomes the new way of working and that the problem, as defined, remains permanently fixed.

Achieving this normally requires that any existing procedures are modified and that new sets of standards and guidelines and measurements are established. It also usually requires training and education for all those involved in the change.

Linear and non-linear thinking

There is a danger, particularly in light of the current vogue for 'non-linear' thinking, that the problem-solving approach of identifying specific root causes may be seen as too 'linear'!

But before you conclude that, you might like to consider the following points.

1. A solution should efficiently meet the problem as defined. To move outside of this remit is to solicit and encourage effort in areas that have not been guided and prioritised by your planning.
2. If you want a non-linear solution, you should set a non-linear goal that is focused on the strategic needs of the business. This will ensure that the failing 'components' are broadly defined and that the options are innovative and radical.
3. The QFD provides all the scope you need to be non-linear, but within an objective and disciplined framework. It helps to ensure that your non-linear efforts (which can be resource draining and risky in the initial stages) are focused in the areas where you will get greatest benefit.

“There is a flaw in our thinking though,” challenged Deborah. “If we dump our work on those who work for us, how then do we free them up to get them involved in this process?” The group went silent. It was almost as though she had poured water on the glowing embers that were just about to burst into flame.

Richard pondered for a short while. “Actually, at this stage, I am less concerned about that. They have been involved in the decisions to date, and I don’t think they’d be too bothered if you shouldered the burden of the next steps. You can always consult them where appropriate. And if you need them any more involved, at least you will have the time to think through how you do it. I am willing to fund an extra twenty contract heads over the next four weeks, if you need them.” Richard concluded. “But, if I’m to get away with it, I need you to focus your new management approach on our real current performance issues.” The group nodded assent.

“Can I just check what we’re actually going to do with these two days a week?” queried Abs.

Richard nodded. “The way I see it, you are going to ensure your implementation plans are fulfilled. You are going to work, one-to-one or in groups, with the people who will deliver progress and performance, and you are going to ensure that it happens.”

Lucy was not sure that was quite the way she saw things, but it was close enough, and it seemed to have the backing of the group.

“Tomorrow afternoon I will be going through a few tools and approaches with Deborah,” Lucy announced. “But anyone else is welcome to join us. I am sure you will find they will help in what you are about to do!”

“What sort of tools?” asked John.

“Mainly tools that help in solving problems and in delegating tasks,” answered Lucy.

“Sounds great,” responded Abs. “What time?”

“Two o’clock,” Lucy replied. “But if anyone can’t make it, I’d be happy to run additional sessions.”

There was a general murmur of assent, and a few diaries and organisers were flicked open and consulted.

4. Even solutions defined by non-linear thinking can (and should) be refined and improved in linear ways.
5. Sometimes we espouse concepts like 'non-linearity' not because they are right (even though they may well be) but because it seems to absolve us of the need to be disciplined and objective in executing our responsibilities. Be 'non-linear', but first examine your real motives, and second do it within a responsible framework.

“Before we get too far into the detail though,” Lucy continued, “can I just check that everyone is in agreement with our conclusions on the first Car Park item?” People were, so Lucy moved on.

“Before we launch into the second, then, I believe that Richard wants to say something about it.”

Richard stood up, and started talking as he walked round to the front of the room. “Yes. This was the issue of poor communication between processes, and tripping over each other’s initiatives, or not getting necessary support from each other. Could everybody make a session on Thursday afternoon at 4.30pm? It will only take about an hour, and I promise you will find it worthwhile.”

There was some debate, and eventually it was pulled forward to 4pm. Then Lucy proposed a way to take the third item forward, and then closed the meeting.