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Systems Thinking

System Problem or People Problem?

by **Lee Jenkins**

Most followers of systems thinking literature are probably aware of W. Edwards Deming's estimate that 94 to 97 percent of our problems stem from the system with the remaining problems caused by human error or poor judgment.

Sometimes when leaders of an organization hear this percentage they misunderstand Deming. Mistakenly, they assume the problems are either in the legislative or the societal systems. They further rationalize that since they have little effect on either society or legislation, they can do nothing to really improve the situation.

This is the attitude of a victim and couldn't be further from Deming's teachings. Leaders are responsible for working on their system. Yes, there are systemic problems with society and legislation — problems with a huge impact upon public education. However, education owns its own set of problems that cannot be solved by either society or legislation. Only leaders can fix the education problems that education owns.

Rating Scale

Cecilia McCain, writing in the September 2006 issue of *Quality Progress* magazine, provided an "Occurrence Rating Table" that can be of significant help to leaders in determining whether something is a system problem or a people problem. People problems would be rated at the top of the scale and system problems at the bottom.

Further, the table can help leaders determine which system problems to address first. McCain's scale ranges from 1 to 10 with 1 meaning the problem has a chance of occurring once in 30,000 attempts and a 10 meaning the problem has a 1 in 3 chance of recurring.

For example, you could use this scale to examine the use of illegal drugs by school bus drivers as measured in random urine samples. Suppose the district has 25 bus drivers driving 180 days a year and another five drivers who work 240 days a year for a total of 5,700 bus days per school year. If a bus driver was found with illegal substances in his or her system once every six years, on the average, this is a problem rated at level 1 or almost never. It does not mean that random drug testing should halt, but when the one incident does occur, it does not suddenly push this issue to the top of the superintendent's priority list.

On the other hand, when an administrator stops by a classroom for an observation, there is a 1 in 3 chance the teacher will be re-teaching something students should have learned in a prior grade level. This is not a people problem (parent, student or teacher). It is a system problem that is owned by education.

Case Applications

I can use three of the education system problems described in my book *Permission to Forget: And Nine Other Root Causes of*

America's Frustration with Education to demonstrate how McCain's rating scale can assist leaders in separating people problems from system problems. In each instance, I rate the severity of the problem based on questionnaires provided to me by seminar participants.

System Problem No. 1: Beginning with 1st-grade spelling, students soon learn they have permission to forget almost everything that is taught. They transfer the cram-forget cycle from spelling to chapter tests. On the average, teachers tell me they spend a third of the year teaching content students should know prior to entering their classroom. The students "learned the content," wrote it down for an exam or quiz, and promptly did a brain dump. (Rating: 10)

System Problem No. 2: Data typically are used to rank students, classes, grade levels/departments or schools, not to inform them whether they are improving. Examples of ranking include stickers on walls, forced bell-curves and other student-to-student comparisons.

Students rarely see data constructed so that a classroom is considered a team working together to have as many as possible meet standards. Simple addition is the solution: How many words can our classroom read in a minute? How many ions can the chemistry class identify? If a classroom has 25 students and papers are scored on a 1-4 scale, how close to 100 points can we all earn in writing? Certainly at least 1 of 5 teachers and 1 of 5 schools use data in ways that discourage rather than encourage students. (Rating: 9)

System Problem No. 3: Students are losing their enthusiasm for school at an alarming rate. This problem needs a new level of scoring — an 11. There is a two-thirds chance a student by the end of grade 8 will have lost his or her enthusiasm for school.

Teachers do not wake up in the morning and ask, "Who can I discourage today?" It is a system problem I first reported in 1996 in *Improving Student Learning*. In their respective books, *Continuous Improvement in the History/Social Science Classroom* and *Continuous Improvement in the Science Classroom*, Shelly Carson and Jeff Burgard describe how to stop this loss of enthusiasm. Their advice was an important aspect of the Palatine, Ill., school district earning the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2003.

Of course leaders of organizations must deal with people problems. However, people often attempt to solve a system problem as if it were a people problem. When teachers spend a third of their time in review of prior grades, when data is used to rank and demoralize rather than to energize teams and when students have their intrinsic motivation removed, system problems are dominating.

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