

What is a System?

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In talking to educators about improvements that are necessary in order for more students to be productive and to take responsibility for their education, the major reason given for a lack of change is, "The System!" In all of the writings that William Glasser has produced, from *Schools Without Failure* (1969) to *The Quality School Teacher* (1993), he has called for a complete change in the way school systems operate. Although many of us use the word "system", a look at Deming's explanation of a system helps to clarify its usage.

We must remember that we are the managers of our own classrooms, schools and districts (Glasser, 1990). While the "system" problems may seem insurmountable, we manage and are responsible for parts of the series of functions and activities that make up the system. While I agree that existing barriers may increase the difficulty of creating the schools and classrooms that we want, we must first determine if we even have a real system.

For example, one current political focus is to improve our "Health Care System", yet there is no system right now. There is no interdependence. Our health care is provided by every individual hospital, insurance company, etc. doing its own thing. This is not a system! Let us examine the elements of a system according to Deming.

1. "A system is a series of functions or activities ... within an organization that work together for the aim of the organization. The mechanical and electrical parts that work to make an automobile or a vacuum form a system. The schools of a city, including private schools, parochial schools, trade schools and universities provide an example of components that ought to work together as a system for education.
2. There is in almost any system interdependence between the components thereof. The greater the interdependence between components, the greater the need for communication and cooperation between them.
3. The components need not all be clearly defined and documented: people may merely do what needs to be done. All the people that work within a system can contribute to improvement, and thus enhance their joy in work. Management of a system therefore requires the knowledge of the inter-relationships between all of the components within the system and of the people that work in it.

4. The aim of a system must be clear to everyone in the system. Without an aim, there is no system. "The aim is a value-judgment." (Deming, 1991).

The examination of Dr. Deming's explanation of a system leaves some questions about the functionality of our "educational system". The most important is that, "The aim of a system must be clear to everyone in the system" (Deming, 1991). "If constancy of purpose is essential for a company to stay in business, its absence means devastation. A company without a constancy of purpose does not think beyond quarterly profits and has no long-range plan to survive" (Crawford, Bodine and Hoglund, 1993).

What school or district can demonstrate that everyone, including students and parents, knows and follows the aim or purpose of the school? Constancy of purpose is crucial! As Yogi Berra once said, "If you don't know where you're going, you might end up someplace else."

Zig Ziglar, in his tape series Goals, tells a story that ends with the "World's Greatest Archer." The archer had been blindfolded and twirled around until dizziness set in. When asked how the archer was supposed to hit a target that couldn't be seen, Ziglar answered "and how can you hit a target you don't even have"?

If we haven't decided on our purpose or mission and made it operational, is it any wonder that we continue to struggle with putting out brush fires rather than evaluating and finding specific problems in the system that can be worked on?

Some questions to ask ourselves:

- Do we really know why some of the problems we have exist?
- Do we take the time to find out?
- Do we blame others or look for problems in our processes or procedures?
- Did they happen because of a lack of system?
- Did they happen because of inadequate training and education?
- Did they happen because there was no applicable rule?
- Did they happen because nobody followed the applicable rule?

"Let there be no mistake: quality is management's responsibility, and poor quality is the result of poor management" (Imai, 1986)

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