

Elaboration on the 14 Obligations: Points 10 and 11

Point 10: Eliminate the use of goals, targets and slogans to encourage performance.

Point 11: Closely examine the impact of teaching standards and the system of grading student performance.

This is the seventh in a series of blogs that present a restatement of Dr. W. Edwards Deming's 14 Points for Management as "Obligations of the School Board and Administration." Earlier we introduced the obligations as a model of a healthy environment for work, learning and continuous improvement in a K-12 education setting. Here we will expand and elaborate on the 10th and 11th of the following 14 Obligations. Because they are so closely related, we will address them together instead of taking them on just one at a time.

Obligations of the School Board and Administration

1. Create constancy of purpose toward improvement of the entire school system and its services.
2. Adopt the new philosophy. We are in a new economic age.
3. Cease dependence on tests and grades to measure quality.
4. Cease dependence on price alone when selecting the curriculum, texts, equipment and supplies for the system.
5. Improve constantly and forever every process for planning, teaching, learning and service.
6. Institute more thorough, better job-related training.
7. Institute leadership (i.e., management of people).
8. Drive out fear.
9. Break down barriers between groups in the school system.
10. Eliminate the use of goals, targets and slogans to encourage performance.
11. Closely examine the impact of teaching standards and the system of grading student performance.
12. Remove barriers that rob staff and administrators of pride of workmanship and that rob students of the joy of learning. This means, *inter alia*, abolish staff ranking and the system of grading student performance.
13. Institute a vigorous program of education and self-improvement for everyone in the system.
14. Plan and take action to accomplish the transformation.

Point 10. Eliminate the use of goals, targets and slogans to encourage performance.

Point 11. Closely examine the impact of teaching standards and the system of grading student performance.

Absent appreciation for a system and some knowledge of the theory of variation (the first two components of Deming's "system of profound knowledge"¹), some of the 14 Obligations really seem quite strange at first glance. These points call for the elimination of numerical goals, targets and standards. But how does one manage an organization without numerical goals (budgets, schedules, forecasts, etc.)?

Consider the position of a school district's local business partners. Do those companies ever expect to receive customer orders that read, "Ship it whenever you're ready"? Or do those companies expect their customers to impose ever more stringent and demanding requirements and *goals* for delivery performance?

Will a school district ever find itself living in a world where the state legislature, department of education and the local community politely request, "Please keep us posted"? Or will the district exist in a world in which those various publics impose ever more stringent and demanding *standards* for school and student performance? Clearly, our schools can expect to have to deal with the latter. Therefore, how can one simply eliminate goals and standards that are imposed by the marketplace (in a business setting) and by society at large (in a school setting)?

Indeed, taken only at face value, Points 10 and 11 seem radical; divorced from the reality of customers' demands. When viewed in the context of systems thinking and some knowledge of the theory of variation, however, these points – so goofy on their surface – are not at all radical.

In the context of theory of variation, the intermediate statistical concepts and methods teach us that processes will define their own capabilities, as measured by the average plus and minus three standard deviation measures ($\bar{X} +$ and $- 3\sigma$). In other words, processes are stupid! They do not know and do not care what might be our hopes, wishes, standards, targets or goals. They will deliver whatever they're capable of delivering – take it or leave it!

Dr. Deming was merely calling for leaders to work on improvement of processes instead of setting numerical goals and standards. Improving processes alone will improve their capabilities and levels of performance. "A numerical goal accomplishes nothing. Only the method is important. By what method?"²

School Reform: Recent Failures

For the year 2000, both the first Bush administration and the Clinton administration set some demanding goals for America's education system. One called for American students to be number one in the world in math and science and another called for high school graduation rates to increase to 90 percent. The Clinton administration was so impressed with President Bush's America 2000 education goals that they copied many of them practically word-for-word for President Clinton's Education 2000 policies.

How did we do in achieving the presidents' goals? Poorly. In 2012, Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance reported some disturbing statistics. In international testing among 34 nations, American students ranked 25th in math and 17th in science – levels far below the Bush and Clinton goals.³ Students in Shanghai took the tests for the first time and outscored every other school system in the world.

How about our graduation rate? Did we reach 90 percent by 2000? Unfortunately, no; not even close. In fact, the Alliance for Excellent Education reports that by 2011 barely 69 percent of American students graduated from high school. Among minority students, only 56 percent of Hispanic, 54 percent of African American, and 51 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students in the U.S. graduated with a regular diploma, compared to 77 percent of white students and 81 percent of Asian Americans.⁴

The 10th of the 14 Obligations also points out the futility of slogans to encourage school performance. The second Bush administration implemented the late Senator Edward Kennedy's "No Child Left Behind" legislation. "No child left behind" became the slogan and label for an explosion in the use of standardized tests (see Point 3) to measure student performance. High-performing schools and districts received rewards to encourage additional gains. Administrators were awarded cash bonuses. Low-scoring schools and districts received negative publicity and ridicule and even face having to sacrifice local control of schools to the state.

And the hits just keep on coming. President Obama announced goals "to make high-quality pre-school available for every child in America"⁵ and for every American to have completed at least one year of college education or training by the year 2020.⁶ Dr. Deming and others might ask the president, "By what method?"

With a more than \$16 trillion national debt, how does the president intend to fund such a massive expansion in preschool education? I wonder if the president's goal for completion of at least one year of college includes the more than 7,000 students who drop out of high school every day. I also wonder about the homeless who are living on the street, eating out of dumpsters in our nation's capital. Will they have completed a year of college education by 2020? One must raise Deming's question, "By what method?"

I find it interesting that politicians always seem set goals for several years after they're due to leave office. Then they can't be held responsible for the failure of their policies. From Washington, we don't need any more goals and targets and pithy little "no child left behind" slogans for school reform; we need leadership for transformation; and the 14 Obligations provide a model of the healthy environment that will exist after the successful transformation.

Some Goals Cause Confusion

Many managers claim that numerical goals lend clarity and inform people about the organization's objectives and priorities. William Scherkenbach, however, noted how goals can often tend to confuse people's understanding of exactly what their job is. He provided a clear example of such confusion that can result from obsession with meeting numerical goals and standards as opposed to meeting customers' needs:

"One such state of confusion existed in an office full of people charged with settling customers' claims. They were also evaluated with the number of calls they processed in a day and, in fact, had a work standard of ten calls per hour. What was their job? You know exactly what it was. When a call approached six minutes in duration, they politely excused themselves and hung up, even though they hadn't met their customer's needs."⁷

What is a teacher's job? Is it to achieve high standardized test scores, or is it to identify and meet their students' learning and development needs? In any district driven by "no child left behind" and goals for high test scores, what is a teacher's job? As Scherkenbach observed, "You know exactly what it is."

Pushing for Balance

Some people look at some of the 14 Obligations and conclude that Deming must have been naïve; but he was not naïve. More than most, he understood how many goals and targets imposed by higher levels of the bureaucracy are not only destructive, but also beyond the control of those on whom the goals are imposed! More than exhibiting naïveté, in the statement of Points 10, 11 and other of the obligations Deming was merely pushing for balance.

In many of our management systems, we've gotten out of balance. More energy is put into strategic planning to come up with goals for higher performance than in providing the necessary means and methods to accomplish the improvement. The American management system also seems to have lost sight of how numerical goals and standards, though intended to encourage higher levels of performance, often end up acting as *barriers* to improved performance.

What is a person's natural behavioral tendency when he or she achieves a goal? Most often we relax and exclaim, "We did it! Where's my reward?" Too often, numerical goals and standards

have the unintended effect of defining “good enough” in people’s minds and their subsequent behavior. Future suggestions for further improvement encounter resistance: “If it ain’t broke,

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don’t fix it.... We’re no worse than anyplace else.... We’re currently meeting standard; what’s the cost-benefit ratio of getting a few percent better?” Hence, such goals foster mediocrity. They were never intended to foster mediocrity; they just do.

Every state in the country has established minimum teacher certification standards. They were always intended to be just that – the minimum. In my seminars with educators, I often ask, “What has been the effect of these minimum standards?” The most common reply: “They’ve become the maximum, or at least the norm.”

Those minimum teacher certification standards were never intended to serve as a norm for good teaching. Minimum teacher certification standards were never intended to foster mediocrity in the schools of education, producing graduates who barely meet the minimum standards; they just do – and will continue to do so in the absence of appreciation for a system, some knowledge of the theory of variation and *leadership* for continuous improvement.

Therefore, one way to view Points 10 and 11 – and the 14 Obligations as a whole – is as a model for management balance. As it relates to numerical goals and standards, the American education system and the American management system as a whole have gotten out of balance. Attention to Points 10 and 11 will help leaders question these practices and put more emphasis into providing means and methods to accomplish improvement – as opposed to Bush I’s America 2000 and Clinton’s Education 2000 and Bush II’s “No Child Left Behind” and Obama’s goal to have every American complete “at least one year of college education or training by the year 2020” and other (stupid) slogans and goals that help no one.

Once such inhibitors to improvement are removed from the current work and learning environment, the transformation can occur. Once the transformation occurs, those inhibitors to improvement will no longer exist. And our children will be the beneficiaries.

Conclusion

In this blog, we did not specifically address Point 11’s call to closely examine the impact of the student grading system. That issue was initially addressed in the March 21, 2013 blog on www.jimleonardpi.com titled, “Elaboration on the 14 Obligations: Points 3 and 4.” It will be addressed in even more detail in the next blog in this series when we tackle perhaps the most controversial of the 14 Obligations, Point 12, which reads in part, “abolish staff ranking and the system of grading student performance.”

Notes

Much of the material published in this series of blogs is excerpt from J.F. Leonard, *The New Philosophy for K-12 Education: A Deming Framework for Transforming America's Schools*, ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI (1996).

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¹For an introduction to the system of profound knowledge, see the blog titled, "Dr. Deming's System of Profound Knowledge," www.jimleonardpi.com (Oct 29, 2012).

²W.E. Deming, *The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education*, MIT Center for Advanced Educational Services, Cambridge, MA (1993), p. 33.

³"U.S. Students Still Lag Behind Foreign Peers, Schools Make Little Progress in Improving Achievement," *HuffPost Education*, January 14, 2013, TheHuffingtonPost.com, Washington, DC.

⁴Alliance for Excellent Education, "About the Crisis: Graduation Rates," all4ed.org, Washington, DC.

⁵M. Rich, "Few States Look to Extend Preschool to All 4-Year-Olds," *The New York Times*, Feb 13, 2013.

⁶L. Trujillo, "President Obama's New Education Goal," *Technorati*, June 6, 2012, technorati.com.

⁷W. Scherkenbach, *The Deming Route to Quality and Productivity*, Mercury Press, Rockville, MA (1988), p. 86.

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