



Soapbox

David Bovis argues that 'best practice' tools consistently fail to consider the people within the process

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"The map is not the territory" is a famous quote from a paper written by Alfred Korzybski, which encapsulates his view that an idea derived from something, or in reaction to it, is not the thing itself. Korzybski held that many people confuse maps with territories; the models of reality with the reality itself.

Over the last 40 years, we've used models to consider business but failed to address the complexities and realities of organisational change. We've considered every detail of policy, process and procedure but ignored the people behind the process. We've used the map to exercise control *over* people but ignored the impact of control *on* people.

However, to perform well in respect to quality, cost and delivery, people need to be considered. Above all, they must be committed, engaged and motivated and not made to comply under duress.

Best practice methods and tools are just tools, which, by their very design and purpose (to control), become a judgement mechanism that systematically undermines performance at a psychological and neurological level. The majority of leading implementation projects fail to function at this deeper level.

In looking only at the map, we look at only half of the complexities that exist in a socio-technical system, and instead focus on the technical – the logical, mathematical and deterministic. The map cannot look at the neuro-psychological and cultural impact it has on the people using it, yet we have made this 'logical' map the be-all and end-all of business best practice.

In order to consider the other 50% of complexities – the 'people' half of organisational performance – we need to take a step back and look at the map, the territory and the people and the relationships between them.

Deming detailed statistical process control (SPC) and systems in his System of Profound Knowledge. He also added two additional and very important headlines: Psychology and Theory of Knowledge (ToK). Following advances in technology, we might now consider ToK as neuroscience.

Deming got as far as including 'drive out fear' in his 14 points to reflect an awareness of psychology. Unfortunately, he left us with

no further details about this or neuroscience. Had today's technology been available to him, he may, I suspect, have made the connection between fear and control and learned about helplessness and stressor hormones and the negative impact they have on the neurogenesis process when reducing brain-derived neurotropic factors.

Deming may have seen how there is conflict in any organisation between the process of controlling variation and improving quality, cost and delivery via control systems and psychology and neuroscience.

Conflict between these issues can be understood and resolved when we pay attention to the detail, just as Deming did with SPC in respect to controlling variation. But Deming is no longer with us and science provides us with the detail he could only allude to with point eight: 'drive out fear'. It's time that we use the knowledge we have available to us and look to the future. It's time to stand on the shoulders of giants like Deming, Ackoff and Beer and continuously improve on what they did.

Sir Clive Woodward showed an awareness of the human element when he took England to victory in the Rugby World Cup in 2003. The fastest, highest performing teams are those that pay attention to every minute detail, both logical and psychological. Sir Clive trained his rugby players to increase their peripheral vision in order to improve fractional percentage 'catch' ratios. He reinforced positive thinking and challenged the Rugby Football Union, changing its policies and procedures and the leadership mindset that led to their creation in the first place. At every level he tackled the detail of mindset. In doing so, he managed, upwards and downwards, to remove the barriers that undermined his team's performance. He led by example.

In Formula One and any other high performance environment, the same principles apply. Whether it's rugby, F1 or business, it is the synergy, the relationship between people and process, that gets results.

The devil is indeed, in the detail. So is it ironic or just plain ridiculous that we've introduced so-called 'best practice' tools over recent decades that have consistently failed to consider mindset in their design and implementation? 

