

# CAREER COACH

## QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

# To Change Is to Change Twice

*To create lasting improvement, change your perception and change your reality* by Ray Harkins

**As a teenager in the 1980s, I was an avid reader of *Omni*, a now defunct magazine dedicated to the future**—a far-off world filled with super humans, artificial biospheres and frequent encounters with extraterrestrial beings. *Omni* catered to armchair futurists like me with science and science fiction stories by A-level writers like Bernard Dixon and William Burroughs.

Future-oriented mass media such as *Omni* and “Star Wars” gives its consumers a plausible vision of everyday life for future generations. What these sources don’t typically deliver, though, is the path of change to get there.

### Changing reality

For management and engineering professionals, the future state of our departments and organizations likely doesn’t include UFOs. But we can learn something from our sci-fi friends: Changing our vision about how things can be is essential to creating a sustainable transformation.

Each year, I purposefully commit some energy toward learning new things—topics and skills I believe will advance my

life personally and professionally. This year, my studies included reading a relatively unsung book on the inner workings of creativity and innovation by Luc de Brabandere titled *The Forgotten Half of Change*.<sup>1</sup> This book opened my eyes to the philosophy of change, and illuminated certain key concepts for implementing the sustainable improvements we want in our organizations.

As the book title implies, there are two separate yet equally important aspects to creating sustainable change—changes in reality and changes in perception (Table 1)—though one is better understood than the other. Consider the example of a man who is chronically late. He’s late to work, meetings, dinner and so on. He is one of those guys who would be “late to his own funeral,” as my father would say.

So, through the pressure of his colleagues and family, this man decides to make a few changes to aid his promptness. He buys a new watch, starts setting his alarm clock earlier each morning and downloads the latest calendar app to his smartphone. He is making tangible changes—changes to his reality. In fact, these changes may facilitate his punctuality.

A few years ago, while working as a quality manager, I discovered a serious deficiency in my organization’s new product launch process. It simply wasn’t robust enough to catch all our dimensional defects. In one case, we missed a shipment because we didn’t discover our parts were out of specification until the evening before they were scheduled to ship.

In another case, we didn’t discover the dimensional defect at all. Our customer notified us of the problem and requested to return the entire lot of material.



Because of these two issues, I launched a root cause analysis and discovered a few glitches in our system. With the help of a cross-functional team, we updated our new product launch procedures, beefed up our gages and added a few approval requirements in the product routing to ensure this would never happen again.

Like the chronically late gentleman, we, too, were making necessary changes to our reality. As de Brabandere explains, however, a change in reality alone is not enough to create a lasting improvement. We also must change our perception.

TABLE 1

## Two halves of change

Changes in reality	Changes in perception
<b>Require action</b>	<b>Require thought</b>
<b>Happen gradually</b>	<b>Happen suddenly</b>
<b>Performed by a team</b>	<b>Performed by an individual</b>
<b>Improve the system</b>	<b>Envision a new system</b>
<b>Called innovation</b>	<b>Called creativity</b>

### Changing perception

Consider again our unpunctual friend who's loading up on the latest time management gear. If he makes changes only to his reality, he will never become a punctual person. He also must change his perception. To become a punctual person, he must realize that being on time is a good thing and provides desirable benefits.

When he wakes up earlier, he has time for a cup of coffee and a chat with his kids. When he's on time to meetings, he avoids those embarrassing glares from his boss. When he comes home on time, the stress in his family is reduced. These are all good things.

When this man can perceive that being on time is good, the changes to his reality—the new watch, the calendar app—naturally will become a way to achieve his goal of

becoming a punctual person. Without that change to his perception, any changes to his reality will feel like an unfruitful burden.

Think about your organization. Does it have procedures that seem pointless or process steps that are meaninglessly rubber-stamped? It may be that these changes in reality were made without a preceding change in perception.

With my organization's problem with failed new product launches, would the added gaging and approval steps alone have transformed us into a zero-defect supplier? Not a chance. We also needed a change in perception about the value of delivering defect-free parts. When our product quality is superior, our organization is more profitable and our customers perceive us as a better supplier.

Bottom line: Superior delivered quality is good for everyone, and when the entire organization perceives that, the nuts and bolts of a quality system will be more readily received as a way of obtaining it.

## Dynamics of change

Simply recognizing there are two halves to change isn't enough. Changes in reality occur differently than changes in perception, and understanding the dynamics of these different types of change is one key in successfully implementing them in your business.

Changes in reality require action, and those actions occur gradually over a span of time. For the chronically late man, these actions included the uncomfortable conversations with his boss and family, and buying a new watch. With my organization's problem with new product launches, new gages and procedures comprised the changes in reality. These types of changes usually are performed by a team, and deliver something new to the system. A change in reality is called innovation.

Changes in perception are different. They require no action, only thought. They do not occur over time, but in an instant. This type of change is called creativity. Creativity is not a team event, but occurs in the mind of an individual.

## My change in perception resulted in new changes to reality.

some of his responsibilities.

In response to his lagging performance, I began making changes to his reality. First, I confronted him by means of informal conversations. With no improvement in his performance, I tried other means to motivate him, including formal disciplinary actions and poor performance appraisals.

I soon noticed that I had gradually started to manage my department around this gentleman by giving him only simple and less time-sensitive projects. That's when it occurred to me: I hired the wrong person.

My attempts to change the reality of this person's performance yielded little improvement for my department because my perception was wrong. The moment my perception of this person's place in our organization changed, I began taking the right actions to remove him from his position. My change in perception resulted in new changes to reality.

De Brabandere summarizes this dual nature of change by explaining, "If you want to be a successful manager, you need to change twice."<sup>2</sup>

## Shifting focus

As quality professionals, we continuously influence our customers' perceptions of our organizations. In the worst case, a poorly performing quality system will result in a sudden shift in a customer's perception from "This is a good supplier" to "This is a bad supplier." Of course, the changes to reality will soon follow.

More often, though, suboptimal quality results in negative cost variances, customer annoyances and administrative hassles. As we work to shift our organizations' perceptions to see that a high-achieving quality system benefits everyone, the changes in reality to make that system happen follow much more naturally. **QP**

## REFERENCES

1. Luc de Brabandere, *The Forgotten Half of Change: Achieving Greater Creativity Through Changes in Perception*, Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2005.
2. Ibid.

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