CLASSROOM LESSONS EARNED

by Maurice Ghysels

School district offers ideas for continuous improvement

PUBLIC EDUCATION OFTEN tries to emulate the successful methods of industry. However, the experience of a school district in California offers several lessons about achieving continuous improvement (CI) in the corporate world. The lessons for companies—and other schools—include listening to customers and involving those who have the greatest stake in the outcomes in the solution.

In 2005, I arrived in Mountain View, CA, in the heart of Silicon Valley, as the new superintendent of schools for the Mountain View Whisman School District (MVWSD). A background in business made me determined to use quality tools that would result in a CI culture to help students succeed.

In 50 Words Or Less

- While implementing a process of continuous improvement, a California school district learned lessons that are applicable to industry.
- Getting the right people on board, doing the right things, encouraging risk, tapping the power of teams and delivering on promises were essential.
- The primary focus of improvement should be on the customers.

Academic performance index (API)
score / FIGURE 1

Mountain View Whisman School District
2005-2006 Base API & 2007 API Growth
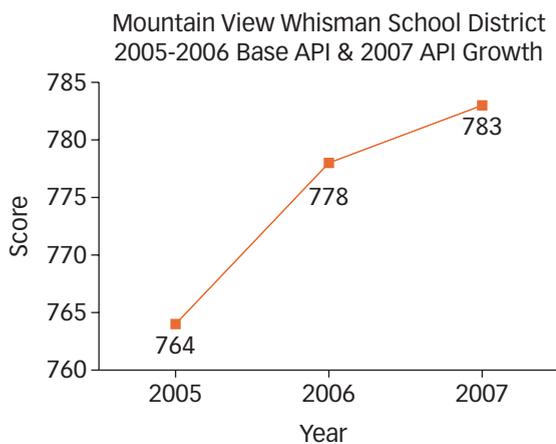
While the process to achieve a culture of CI is too new to MVWSD to significantly impact test scores, the district's state scores are steadily increasing, as shown in Figure 1, which depicts modest gains in MVWSD's academic performance index (API).

Castro School, MVWSD's only No Child Left Behind (NCLB) program improvement school, has been removed from a growing list of schools the federal government is threatening to cut funds from because of poor student test scores. Castro School had an amazing 69% increase in its API and surpassed all NCLB annual yearly progress requirements.

MVWSD's student enrollment and attendance are on the rise for the first time in four years, as 54% more parents have transferred their children into MVWSD than out. Moreover, an important measure of improvement is that teachers and principals are actively seeking employment with the school system.

The lessons from MVWSD might seem surprisingly obvious and practical, and perhaps they are simply reminders of what works in any organization.

Leadership

According to Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*, "If we get the right people on the bus, the right people in the right seats, and the wrong people off the bus, then we'll figure out how to take it someplace great."[1]

Whether it's demonstrating empathy after learning about a customer's experience or using a quality tool to measure personal results, top leadership within an organization must model behavior—not just talk about it. This requires leaders who truly believe in quality.

No program, process or system can replace talent. From principals and directors to teachers and assistant superintendents, throughout the first two years of creating a CI culture, we first had to get the right people on the bus and then figure out where to drive it. The right people wouldn't need to be tightly managed or fired up; they would be more self-motivated to produce the best results, be part of creating something great and be connected to a strong team.

At the center of working toward CI are leaders who genuinely want to know what it takes to satisfy customers and aim to harness and optimize individuals' natural talents. They do this by managing the innovation process within a clearly defined quality improvement framework that, in time, will lead to the culture making CI the heartbeat of the entire organization.[2]

To this end, like frontline team members in any corporation, teachers must be considered equally important leaders and at the center of efforts toward CI. Selecting teachers to train as early adopters was paramount for our improvement effort to gain traction. At MVWSD, we had to identify volunteers who were known for modeling a positive and productive learning environment centered on students (customers).

As in the private sector, a positive change effort must be both bottom-up and top-down. The district provides the structure under which teachers are the experts and leaders—the CI process's greatest resource—while district's leadership sets the vision and promotes a culture of learning and collaboration.

The district's leadership also realized from the onset that it could not succeed without the support of its board of education (see the sidebar "Comparing School and Corporate Boards" at www.qualityprogress.com).

The district is dedicated to developing its CI effort beyond the confines of its schools. The superintendent, management, teachers, staff and trustees place a premium on building a strong community. To this end, the district promotes quality improvement not only in the classroom, but at the district office and in transportation, food services and IT. Spreading into the community, CI is used

during back-to-school nights, educational foundation meetings, parent meetings and extracurricular activities.

Alignment

Doing the right things is just as important as doing things right. In the beginning (fall 2005), I observed glazed-over eyes during my PowerPoint presentation on our new management by objectives. To me, it was a straightforward discourse on organizational alignment and an eloquent and expository cascade of the usual verbiage of vision to mission, mission to goals, goals to action and action to results.

But then came the courageously raised hand in the back of the room and the honest reaction: "By the way, what is our goal? What are you trying to say? Why are we here?"

In realizing that we needed to start setting goals not only from the top, but from the bottom, we knew we had to select the right trainer. A year-long search led to Jay Marino, a quality improvement expert who had been a teacher and understood the challenges in classrooms.

Besides finding the right trainer, identifying the suitable course content was important. We discovered materials from ASQ that fit our business—the classroom—and our cultural expectations.

Identifying the initial 22 teacher leaders to target in our pilot training session was a do-or-die proposition for the whole program. Without the first string of teachers motivated to learn and deploy quality improvement processes leading to CI, the approach would have stalled or simply disappeared.

The trainer actually used quality tools such as student data folders, classroom dashboards and the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle to teach the course.
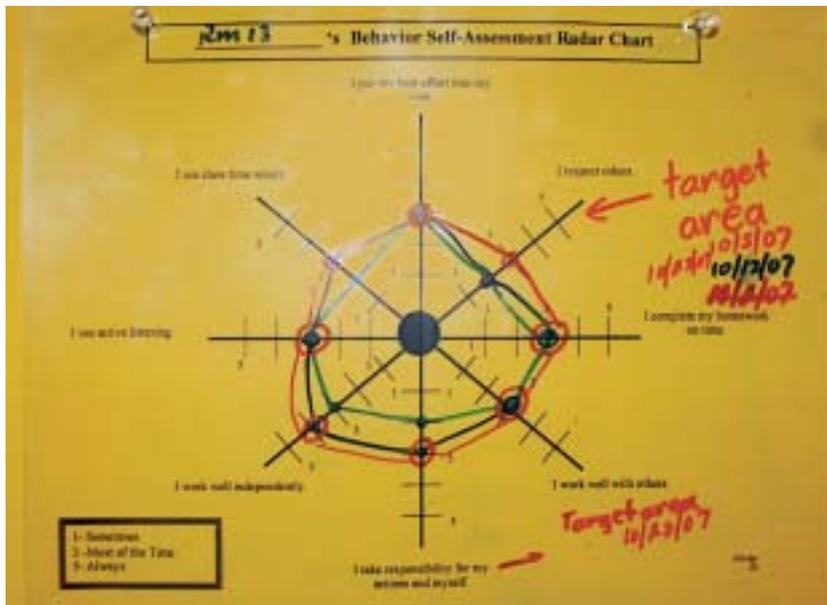
QUALITY TOOLS IN USE: A teacher used a radar diagram to demonstrate behavior assessment to students.

Moreover, by teaching how to align teachers' goals to students' goals, the teachers were more apt to pay attention to organizational goals.

One teacher admitted, "Most teachers have used or attempted many of the elements of quality improvement before they were introduced but failed to put the pieces together to really be effective. So a CI culture provides the framework to connect these elements to a common goal."

Quality experts from industry also coached me and other key leaders. For example, I received coaching in overall strategy and change management, and the management team learned about project and program (portfolio) management training from Synopsis Inc. This training was a key to organizing improvement efforts, completing tasks and reaching milestones,

ABOUT THE DISTRICT

Located between the headquarters of Google and Apple near the southern tip of San Francisco Bay, the Mountain View Whisman School District (MVWSD) has 4,300 students from highly diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

It serves a community of about 70,000 residents in the northern part of Santa Clara County, California's most populous county. This is an area where orchards have given way to industrial parks and crops of tech firms have replaced the fruit.

The district has six elementary schools (K-5) and two middle schools (6-8). Graduates of MVWSD attend schools in the Mountain View-Los Altos Union High School District.

particularly for districtwide operations and leadership.

Additionally, the district's top management attended several ASQ conferences where attendees learned not only the right solutions, but also the right questions, from experienced educational leaders and subject matter experts. An ASQ network provided the opportunity to share ideas and strategies about what works, as well as traps and snares to avoid.

Because our struggle for alignment was not linear and sequential, leadership remained calm about attracting talent, developing frontline leadership and education, and doing things right versus doing the right things.

Encourage risk taking

While our resources were finite, we were limitless in enthusiasm for the early adopters' first experimentation with quality improvement in their classrooms. We established a director level position in organizational

effectiveness and shifted copious amounts of training dollars to quality improvement efforts. We simultaneously and earnestly sought genuine feedback from the early adopters during and after the training and began to experience sustainability in our organization.

Leadership treated positive and negative feedback with equal attention and respect, and in the spirit of a healthy learning organization, the teachers taught administrators what worked and what needed more consideration, time or attention.

Collaboration was key to building learning communities. As one elementary teacher put it after the improvement process was instituted, "You walk into staff rooms, and you hear other teachers talking about successes and struggles, and you hear teachers publicly collaborating on how to deal with their struggles."

We regularly visited classes and observed teachers' interactions with students on an ongoing basis. (See the sidebar "What Students Think" at www.qualityprogress.com). The district's management team conducted monthly meetings at different schools to reflect on what was taking shape in classrooms. This put a spotlight on the early adopters' work and allowed all to share best practices. Quality improvement's reputation grew and became contagious.

By trusting the teachers who were brave enough to try it, we learned to solve problems and make better decisions together. This was crucial during quality improvement's early do-or-die stages.

The leadership team encouraged healthy debate and productive conflict about quality improvement's use with students. We demonstrated to our teachers (also our customers) that we took and used their authentic feedback and placed no restraints on the teams or punishment for negative feedback.

We even invited those who were initially opposed to the quality improvement effort to visit classrooms and then ask tough questions at the all-staff meeting.

The power of teamwork

In an organization with no monetary bonuses, an individual's connection to a team and its purpose cannot be overemphasized. Our data centers began to produce measurements against clear goals that had resulted from the efforts of individual improvement teams. These teams—whether a classroom of students, a group of fifth grade teachers or the district's business department—began to receive recognition and praise.

Data center or dashboard / FIGURE 2
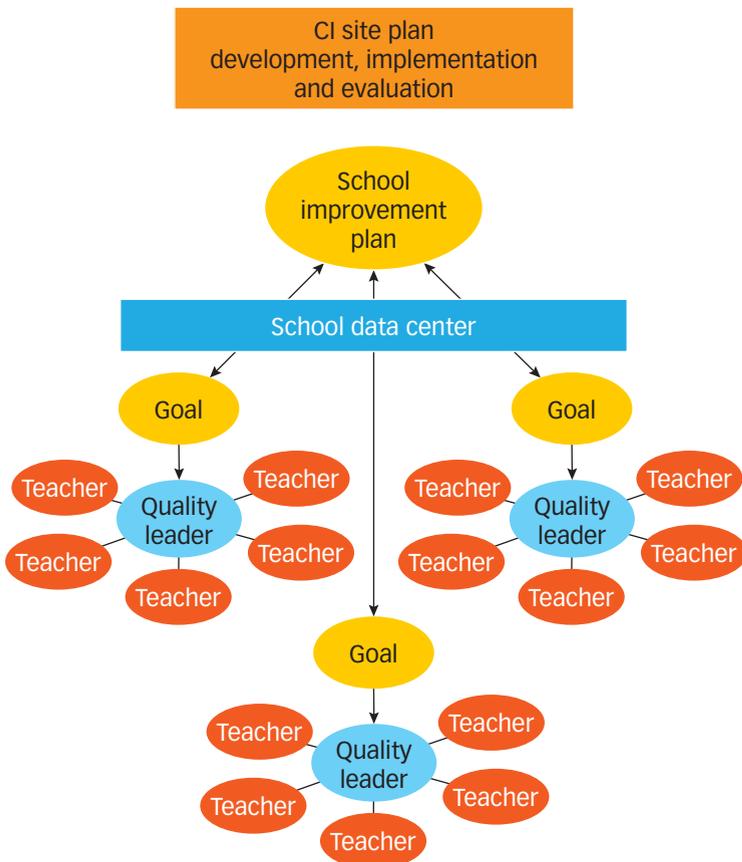
Our credo is that if a team meets its goal, that's not the end of improvement. And if it doesn't reach its goal, we don't blame individuals; we work the process using CI. Because there aren't monetary bonuses, the connection to the team through concrete metrics has to be as exciting as the connection of an enthusiastic Texas high school player to his football team, which also plays for no monetary gain.

The power of a functional team cannot be overstated in the journey to a culture of CI. Author Patrick Lencioni says, "Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare."[3]

By demonstrating a commitment to seeing teachers and students successfully use quality improvement methods, leadership gradually convinced stakeholders that we were being held accountable for the success of our students and thus were serious about our attention to students' success. We modeled the same behavior with our teachers that we expected them to model to their students.

One teacher remarked, "Quality improvement fills a huge need for teachers. The age-old question of how do we get our students motivated to learn has been answered by empowering children to take responsibility for their own learning by setting goals, tracking their progress and celebrating their successes."

Besides an informal teamwork structure based on these values, we also created a formal governance structure—a districtwide CI leadership team—to blur the lines between administrators and teachers and empower teachers to lead even more.

Measuring execution excellence

To add to the governance structure, we agreed on the eight components of a CI classroom that all teachers are expected to learn and deploy in their classrooms and schools by year-end 2008:

1. Student created ground rules.
2. Mission statements.
3. Statistical methodology analysis reporting technique (SMART) goals.

QUALITY CLASSROOM: Frances Medalen, a student teacher in the Edith Landels School's fourth grade classroom of Patricia Galazzo, works with enthusiastic students.

4. Classroom data centers.
5. Student data folders.
6. Quality tools, including the (PDSA) cycle.
7. Student led conferences.
8. Classroom meetings.

Besides developing the leadership skills to guide the process of CI at each school, the CI leadership team determines what the outcomes will look like and to what depth quality improvement practices are implemented. This will be gauged by a quality level matrix, with level four being the deepest level of deployment. Table 1 (p. 56) is an example of level three quality.

In any organization, there must be excellence in converting strategy into action with meaasurable results. At the center of the MVWSD organization map is the data center, or dashboard, to measure the most critical metrics related to each goal (see Figure 2).

Whether in business or in school districts, how much frustration and teamwork breakdown has occurred due to half-finished projects and the lack of follow through? We constantly remind each other of our agreements and commitments to manage expectations, build trust, avoid burnout and failure and hold each other accountable.

WEB EXCLUSIVE
Read about how school and corporate boards compare at www.qualityprogress.com.

Focus on the customer
As quality moves beyond manufacturing into service, healthcare, education and

SOARING: Judy Levy, a resource specialist at Edith Landels School, stands in front of a bulletin board that shows one of the ways students reach their goals.

government, we shouldn't base our improvement journey on tools or skills. Instead, the quality journey in education is a conscious shift in how we think about our service to students, parents and teachers—all our customers.

In some cases, school districts, government agencies and even businesses can lose sight of their primary purpose—to serve.

Rather than rush into using quality improvement tools and discussions about the obscure statistical detail of customer dissatisfaction occurrences per million customer contacts, we should focus

Level three quality / TABLE 1

Complete all outcomes of quality levels one and two.
Implement student data folders in the classroom.
Facilitate the process of having students set individual goals that align to classroom SMART goals performance monitoring model (kept in individual student data folders).
Facilitate the process of having students create their own mission statements that align with the classroom mission statement (kept in individual student data folders).
Implement regular classroom meetings. Students lead the meeting and facilitate the discussion around the progress toward class goals, measures and mission. Student feedback is used to drive the class meetings.
Use at least six quality tools (brainstorming, affinity diagram, nominal group technique, run chart, flowchart, cause and effect diagram, force field analysis, Pareto diagram or relations diagram) with students.

our attention on the emotional and practical experiences of those we serve.

One teacher said, "Students love being a part of something they have a voice in." In fact, the most important aspect of CI is listening to our customers. Even though we were initially cautious about calling students or parents "external customers" or teachers "internal customers," we did not shy away from asking the basic questions:

• Who are the customers?
• What does it take to satisfy them?
• What measures do we use to know customers are satisfied?

Who are the customers? The answers quickly became apparent and, in some cases, were surprising: Not only were some team members unable to identify their customers, but some also refuted the idea that they should even have customers. Some believed they were their own customers and were accountable to no one except for policy, regulations and rules (similar to a compliance driven organization).

Who are the customers?

Some members became overwhelmed by the thought of having too many types of customers: students, parents and trustees. In other cases, the whole notion of customers was confusing. Were the customers always right? Who cares if they come or go? This is school, it's free, and it's mandatory.

What does it take to satisfy them? To break down paradigms about customers, we started quality improvement not simply with tools or skills, but by modeling our attitudes and beliefs around customers and their experiences. Simply setting up structures to routinely listen to teachers went a long way, even when they knew we couldn't be all things to everyone.

This effort was mostly in the form of listening, empathizing and trying to understand what it was like to be in the customers' shoes. For some examples of high level administrators modeling customer service, go to the sidebar "Modeling Customer Service" at www.qualityprogress.com.

Demonstrating empathy was the easy part. What was difficult was breaking down the hierarchy and power structure of the district. People who receive negative feedback often become defensive or hurt.

As in the **private sector,** a **positive change effort** must be both bottom-up and top-down.

They insist on learning who complained and then retaliate or respond directly.

As in so many organizations, we had to address the mentality about service. We started at the emotional level of recognizing that the customer is more important than a position of power—in short, nobody is going around anybody when he or she is trying to make customers happy.

Even though satisfying the customer includes providing what is needed when it's needed, it is not until we listened to our customers that we really understood their needs. This customer service practice was modeled to identify the perceived need of the customer and the need behind the need, which in most cases is emotional.

As in so many businesses, the schooling of children involves an array of issues related to fear, anxiety and worry. Students, parents and teachers are under inordinate amounts of stress, and there are so many things that can go wrong in a single school day. Consistently and genuinely demonstrating exceptional customer service—such as listening, empathizing and being accessible to customers—is at the center of a quality organization.

What measures do we use to know customers are satisfied? Saying we have exceptional customer service and asking students, parents and employees about how we're doing can be two different things. Having a tradition of asking our customers about their satisfaction continues, as we take our customer surveys and results seriously.

In the spring of 2007, more than half of the parents of students in the district—2,222—responded to an MVWSD survey. The survey points to a growing satisfaction with the district's schools and programs, with 90% or more parents saying they agreed or strongly agreed with 18 statements related to satisfaction with teaching, school safety and climate, teacher-student relationships and operational effectiveness of schools.

Overcoming obstacles

Ultimately, the measure of our worth will be determined by standardized test scores, and there are many obstacles often related to manpower, money, time constraints and federal measures on student achievement that are fraught with issues. Because we are not a for-profit organization, our challenge is to find the metrics that make the most sense to describe student success.

As usual, we are using feedback to overcome obstacles and work through barriers. Knowing that we have a wait list of teachers and staff wanting quality training, hearing greater demands for coaching and support and fielding comments that we must go faster sure beats the alternative views of "This too shall pass," "It won't work in schools" and "This is too corporate."

Listening and learning about your customers' needs and not assuming that any solution—in this case the journey to a culture of CI—is the right solution lies at the core of achieving excellence.

REFERENCES

1. Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, HarperCollins, 2001.
2. Jon Bumstead and Andy Bruce, "Rediscovering Continual Improvement," Accenture, www.accenture.com/Global/Research_and_Insights/Outlook/By_Alphabet/RediscoveringImprovement.htm (case sensitive).
3. Patrick Lencioni, *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Jossey-Bass, 2002.

MAURICE GHYSELS, before becoming superintendent of schools in California's Mountain View Whisman School District, had experience as a quality consultant in corporations and high-tech start-ups. He earned a doctorate in education, organizational development and training from the University of San Francisco. Ghysels is a member of ASQ.

MORE CONTENT ONLINE
Find other articles about using quality methods to improve education at www.qualityprogress.com.