



Always Argue With Success, If You Want To Improve

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In my last article, I shared some lessons learned from a local road closure and the recurring damage caused by drivers who, because they were unable to turn round in the space allowed, found themselves backing into bollards and knocking them from the ground (Allen 2007).

What I described struck a chord with many readers. I am grateful to all of you who got back to me with your own stories. I particularly enjoyed the note from Paul in Australia about the council that used 150 bollards in a development when 50 would have done. Why? Because they had enough money in the budget to do so, of course. Now, don't tell me you didn't know that was coming.

Yet, in amongst all the positive feedback I received, there was someone who was slightly less than enamoured with what I said. Actually, he's a friend of mine. Turns out, he was directly involved in the design of the road closure. Oops!

Put in my place by success

His professional pride was no doubt a little wounded, understandably, but he also had something extremely important to say to me. The road closure, he explained, had achieved its purpose. It had demonstrably reduced the amount of through-traffic in the street. Furthermore, it had done it dramatically. Exactly what residents, councillors and the designers had wanted. It was a success!

I was suitably chastened. After all, as my friend knows, indeed everybody knows, you can't argue with success.

But hold on. I didn't invent all the failings of the road closure and the recurring problems and expense caused by its flawed design. (Nor did I imagine the resident who came out to bend my ear with her complaints when she caught me taking photos and presumed I was from the council.) If this was success, you might ask, what on earth would failure look like?

It struck me that for all the lessons I had learned, here was an important one I had missed. It's about the relationship between purpose, our perception and measures of success, organisational learning and continuous improvement. See what you think.

Doing things on purpose

It is important to have clarity of purpose. This is a commonplace of management texts, straight out of Project Planning 101. No matter what the endeavour, everyone involved needs to understand and agree on the purpose; what it is that we are trying to achieve together. It guides everything that follows. And it's central, not only to how well we go on to succeed, but also to knowing whether we have succeeded at all.

This probably isn't news to you. But what struck me, as I exchanged emails with my friend, was just how much his understanding of the purpose in this instance, namely 'reduce through traffic', and his belief that this had been successfully achieved, had impacted his ability to consider how well the solution employed was working. And, crucially, whether there might be a better way to address similar problems in the future.

You might think my friend was mainly being defensive in the face of what he perceived as criticism. Perhaps. But I believe he had also fallen into a trap we are all at risk from in our lives and work. Namely, when we are thinking that we have succeeded, we are not thinking about all the ways in which we have failed. And recognising failure is the most straightforward way to start thinking about how to do better.

Becoming consciously incompetent

It's like the 'conscious competence learning model' (2007) teaches us. As individuals, we must first become 'consciously incompetent', recognising our weaknesses, whatever form they may take, before we can learn ways to address them. Prior to this, we truly believe that we are competent. For competent, read also successful.

It applies in organisations too, of course. So long as they believe they are successfully meeting their purpose, the ability of work groups and teams to learn from what they are doing and subsequently improve will be severely constrained.

So, in the same way that Jim Collins tells us 'good is the enemy of great' (Collins 2001), success is the enemy of improvement. In most organisations, there will be no continuous improvement (no, not even if managers bandy the term around an awful lot) until managers and employees start to question and, if you like, argue with their own success, looking everywhere for evidence of failure.

This is why the continuous improvement mindset is sometimes seen as something of a curse. Companies like Toyota, widely acknowledged masters of the art of continuous improvement, or kaizen, and phenomenally successful against a great many measures, recognise that they find it extremely difficult to celebrate their successes. They acknowledge that it's an important thing to do, but usually they are too busy already looking for and reflecting on new ways in which they are failing, precisely in order that they might improve again.

Use failure measures

In order to argue with success, it helps to recognise how the ways we currently measure how well we are doing against our purpose are usually insufficient to help us understand what is truly happening with performance and why.

A personal favourite in this respect is measuring customer satisfaction. This rarely illuminates the reality of performance. For example, I had a client using a plethora of customer satisfaction surveys, all of which recorded levels of satisfaction, across a range of criteria, on and around the 90% plus mark. A powerful story of success you might think. Well, no. Simply looking at the answers given by customers in the 'any other comments' box revealed that over half of those surveyed, many of whom said they were 'very satisfied', had experienced levels of service and problems that were unacceptable in their eyes. In other words, there was far more room for improvement than the salient measures of success indicated.

So, if we want to avoid being blinded by our own success, we should think carefully about the measures we employ and ensure that some of them might better be characterised as 'failure measures'.

Thus, if we are concerned about customer service at reception points, let's ensure that we know what proportion of customer enquiries we are unable to deal with to the satisfaction of our customers and, crucially, why that's the case. If we are delivering a responsive service, let's see that we know what percentage of customer calls are because we have failed to respond, or responded badly in their eyes. And if, in the end, our customers feel the need to complain, let's not settle for knowing how many complaints we received and how quickly we dealt with them, but also what they were about and exactly why they happened.

Asking these kinds of questions can help us to learn and improve. But on their own, they are not enough to escape the delusion of success.

Welcome problems

The invaluable journey to 'conscious incompetence' is not just one of exposure to facts and data, we must also want to know where and how we are failing. This will require that everyone in the organisation feels safe to expose weaknesses and problems and that they are capable of addressing them constructively and cooperatively. It is a vital management task to seek to develop a problem-solving culture where this can happen.

When it comes to arguing with success, managers must shoulder the greatest burden. In their words and deeds, they must invite their employees to point out problems and work alongside them to find solutions, no matter how uncomfortable it makes them at times. Be assured, any manager who does not actively welcome problems and work on them this way, will find that they don't go away, they just stop hearing about them until it's too late. As Taiichi Ohno (2007), father of the Toyota Production System, put it best, "Having no problems is the biggest problem of all."

Celebrate and move on quickly

So celebrate success, by all means. But then push back hard against it. Argue with it, full on. Do not believe that things are working as well as they could? Seek out evidence of failure, obsessively. Listen to your customers. Go and see for yourself. You will learn that not everything is working as well as it could be. There are always ways to get better. Today's success is just a level of failure as yet unrealised. Myself, I kind of like the sense of possibility that accompanies that realisation. Maybe you do too...

References:

- (1) Allen, David (2007) '*A Bigger Block of Concrete*' <http://tinyurl.com/32pb5b>
- (2) 'Conscious competence' (2007), for a short description of the Four Stages of Competence visit Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscious_competence
- (3) Collins, Jim (2001), '*Good To Great*', Random House
- (4) Ohno, Taiichi (2007) as quoted on Toyota Motor Corporation's website http://www.toyota.co.jp/en/vision/traditions/mar_apr_06.html

Illustration: 'Tears of happiness' by Jude Allen

I hope you enjoyed this article. In my work, I seek to help my clients hear their customers and then do something positive about it. Working together, we frequently address challenges like the ones described here.

To learn more about my work, visit www.davidallenconsultancy.co.uk.