

# “Life is like a Ten-Speed Bicycle”

For our organizations to remain viable and competitive in the 1990s and beyond will require more from each of us. More time, however, is not the answer. More effort is not the answer. As quality expert W. Edwards Deming says, everyone is working hard now, so working harder is not the answer. What is the secret to becoming more efficient and effective?

Sometimes the most complex problems can be solved with a simplistic look at the situation. Cartoonist Charles Schulz examines life from many angles with his "Peanuts" comic strip.

Often dismissed as simple-minded children's entertainment, "Peanuts" cartoons can help us resolve adult problems in the adult world. In a famous strip, Linus speaks with Snoopy about life. In the strip, Linus offers Snoopy "something to think about." Linus alleges that "life is like a 10-speed bicycle" and that "most of us have gears that we never use."

Let's examine the bicycle aspect first. Many people are riding bicycles (again) these days for many reasons---exercise, recreation, saving the old knees, etc. Today's bicycles are modern, efficient, 22-pound, 18-speed wonders that few people take anywhere near the limit. Why? Generally because they don't know how to ride a bike. I didn't say that they were not able to stay upright, but is that the only criteria for deciding if someone can ride a bike?

It certainly isn't getting the most from the vehicle. Many people have multispeed bikes and rarely use more than four of the 10 to 21 speeds available. Why? They simply don't know why it works, how it will benefit them and how to utilize the potential. As Linus says, "Most of us have gears that we never use." Nobody has ever shown them how, why and what for.

In addition to having limited training ("Here, son, watch dad and you'll see how it is done."), a novice or casual rider often finds the bicycle itself difficult to figure out. The bicycle industry is constantly trying to improve that aspect of riding – making the gears "user friendly." For working with the current system, training is a key element to help people maximize any machine or system.

What does this have to do with employees in organizations? Probably nothing, it is only a cartoon. But what if everyone in the organization were able to work smarter? What if we invested the time and effort into teaching people how to use all 10 gears? Would they be able to work more effectively and efficiently? **If people don't know how, why and what for, they will never be able to get the maximum out of themselves, others or the system.** In other words, without an investment in time and effort to develop our people and ourselves, we will only be working harder, never working smarter.

As leaders in organizations, do we expect people will be able to use all 10 gears without ever having been shown how, when and where? As leaders in an organization, do we look for ways to make the system easier to use? With the most challenging years of the 1990s ahead, organizations need to take a hard look at how efficiently their people are using their gears, as well as ways to make those gears easier to use. Only through training, development and continuous improvement of the process can organizations remain competitive and viable in the 1990s. Only with training, development and process improvement will our people be able to use all of their gears efficiently and effectively. Let's start riding.

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