INTRODUCTION:

THE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY

by Ray Wilson & Sara Laughlin

In the late 1970's U.S. industry, especially the auto industry, awoke to find that it could not compete with the Japanese auto manufacturers. In the ensuing decades the auto industry and other U.S. industries cycled through learning, and unfortunately sometimes forgetting, how to satisfy their customers by concentrating on methods and philosophy espoused by W. Edwards Deming.

Over time, Deming's influence began to reach outside the manufacturing sector. His thinking influenced a generation of systemic thinkers including Peter Senge, Russell Ackoff, Bryan Joiner, William Scherkenbach, Donald Wheeler, Thomas Nolan, Stephen Covey, and Shoji Shiba. Today, his ideas underpin the Six Sigma program, lean manufacturing, and the Baldrige Awards for business, health care, and education.

In 2000, we noticed that libraries were being pushed from various directions to re-consider their role in society and re-examine the efficiency and effectiveness with which they operated. To understand these trends and the opportunities and challenges they presented for libraries, we invited a few libraries in Indiana to attend an eight-day series on continuous improvement, over eight months, to see whether—and how—the Deming philosophy could be applied to libraries. Initially four libraries took us up on our offer. Together with them, we developed a continuous improvement framework that made sense, at least in public libraries. Since that first series, we have held four others in Indiana, including teams from approximately 27 libraries and other organizations. We have also worked with several individual libraries in Indiana and elsewhere.

From 2003 through early 2007, we had the opportunity to work in New York on a project called Continuous Assessment/Continuous Improvement (CACI), funded by an LSTA grant to the South Central Library Resources Council. Over this time, we trained and coached teams from 72 New York libraries, among them 38 college/university libraries, 12 community college libraries, 13 public libraries, and 9 other consortia and special libraries. At this point we can say with assurance that Deming's methods and philosophy, as we have interpreted them, work very well in libraries.

It still is not easy. Our training sessions always start with reference to what we have called the "five block diagram," a graphic representation of the system of activities that focus an organization on continuous improvement (Figure 1). Our experience (and Deming's writing) suggests that all five are important. We base our training on what has to happen in each of these areas, and the articles in this journal are grouped to generally correspond to them.

SEEING THE LIBRARY AS A SYSTEM

In the center block, we concentrate on seeing the library as a system. Every system has suppliers and inputs, and it transforms those inputs through its processes into outputs desired by customers. As unbelievable as it seems, what many organizations forget is that they are in business to surprise and delight their customers. In the first section, we include several articles describing how libraries gathered feedback and used it to make improvements. Judy Hamilton describes the community survey conducted by the LaPorte County (IN) Public Library. Steve Backs, Monroe County (IN) Public Library, conducted a "secret shopper" unobtrusive observation, in partnership with the Indiana Small Business Development Center. Liz Chabot engaged students at Ithaca College (NY) in identifying and prioritizing ideas for improving the library facility. A Force Field Analysis with students helped Lori Vandeventer and other teachers improve the career project in the senior English class at Eastern Greene Schools (IN). Finally, Donna Davidoff and Lisa Forrest describe how they used a Check Sheet and Pareto Chart to organize results of focus groups with students and faculty at Buffalo State College (NY).

DEVELOPING CONSTANCY OF PURPOSE

The top-left block is called Constancy of Purpose. Organizations and everyone associated with them must know why they are in business (Mission), where they are going (Vision), how they will make decisions and

Constancy of Purpose: The Aim
Mission, Vision, Values, Measures

Leadership, Information,
Communication, and Governance
With Customer Focus

Suppliers   Customer Research   Customers

Design/Redesign   Distribution

Production of Products & Services

Supporting Processes

Strategic Planning
Key Success Factors/Key Processes
Charters
Attractive Quality Creation

Continuous Improvement
Process Mastering
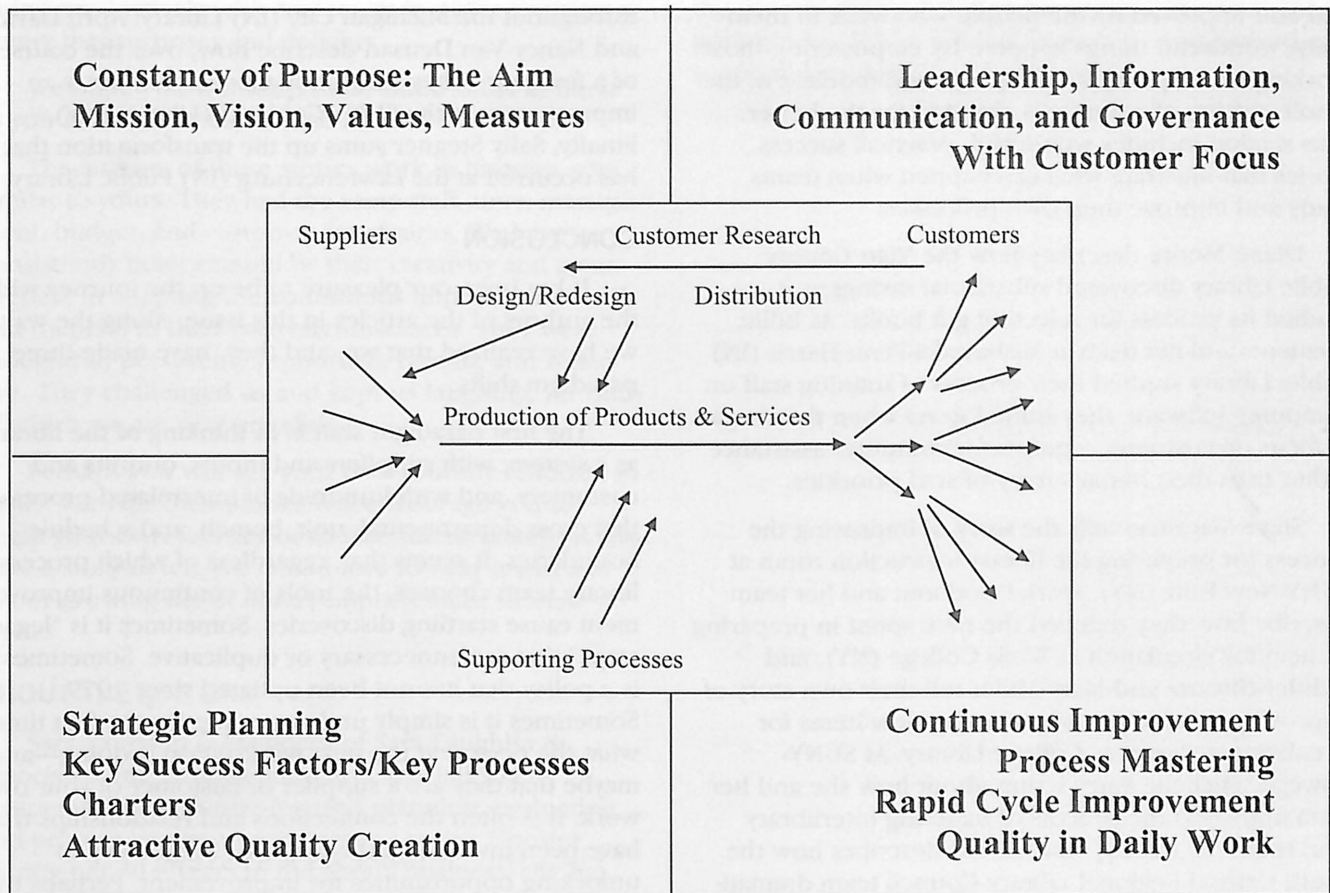**Rapid Cycle Improvement**
Quality in Daily Work

FIGURE 1 - Five Block Diagram

how they will treat each other (Values or Guiding Principles), and whether they are making any progress (Measures). We have had the pleasure of seeing libraries literally transformed by clarifying their Constancy of Purpose.

You will enjoy reading about some of these experiences in the three articles in this section. Jenny Draper describes how her library planning team developed an exciting Mission and Vision that helped rally support for the Wells County (IN) Public Library's building project. Mary Hall writes about the Values exercise that helped her unite the Bedford-North Lawrence County (IN) Public Library staff in preparation for a merger of two circulation departments. Bill Bolte, Jeffersonville Township (IN) Public Library, shares the ways he used the Library's Constancy of Purpose throughout a three-year building project.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

After a library has its Vision for its future, it must figure out how to get there. This is the time to visit the lower-left strategic planning block. A vital, thriving library has a strategic plan that focuses on a few Key Success Factors (or Goals), a handful of high-level areas of emphasis that must be accomplished if progress is to be made toward reaching the Vision. This block also

connects the Key Success Factors to the daily work in the library, by aligning Key Success Factors with the library's processes, to identify the important processes and assess their condition. This is a step usually not included in strategic planning. Without it, plans are often not connected to the daily work in the library Without the connection, chances are slim that the plans will be accomplished.

David Keeber, Sedona (AZ) Public Library, writes about how his library aligned its strategic initiatives with key processes. Several other articles in the journal also give good examples of approaches to strategic planning and what can be accomplished using the continuous improvement approach.

STANDARDIZING AND IMPROVING PROCESSES

Almost always, strategic planning (especially when it aligns Key Success Factors with Key Processes) leads to the need to standardize, improve, and even invent processes, so that is the next step, shown in the lower right of the five block diagram. Here is the second place where the continuous improvement model differs from the traditional "long range planning" approach to creating the future. When the processes that are limiting success (i.e., those that are important and currently not in very good condition) are identi-

fied and improved by the people who work in them daily, wonderful things happen. By empowering those working in the process to improve and monitor it, the whole culture of a library is changed for the better. This section includes wonderful, practical success stories that illustrate what can happen when teams study and improve their own processes.

Diane Moore describes how the Vigo County Public Library discovered substantial savings as it studied its process for selecting gift books. As Billie Clements and her team at Mishawaka-Penn-Harris (IN) Public Library studied their process of training staff on computer software, they shifted gears when they began to focus on customer requests for computer assistance rather than their initial survey of staff priorities.

Steve Macaluso tells the story of improving the process for preparing the library instruction room at SUNY-New Paltz (NY). Muriel Godbout and her team describe how they reduced the time spent in preparing an item for circulation at Wells College (NY), and Judith Schwartz and Mary Miller tell their own story of improving the process of preparing new items for circulation at Trocaire College Library. At SUNY-Oswego, Michelle Parry writes about how she and her team improved the process of handling interlibrary loan requests. Finally, Nora Hardy describes how the South Central Regional Library Council team dramatically improved the process of holding a continuing education workshop

SUSTAINING LIBRARY IMPROVEMENT: LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION

As mentioned above in relation to the auto industry, this positive improvement spiral does not continue unabated without the constant nurturing guidance of wise leaders. There are numerous examples of failures where leaders kicked off the improvement effort with great fanfare and watched it fizzle as they walked away. This kind of improvement is a journey, not an event. Leaders must practice what they preach, they must be relentless in their expectations, and they must figure out how to institutionalize the methodology and philosophy. This journal has several articles that illustrate some aspects of the leadership and communication block.

It would be wrong to assume that all 120 libraries with which we have worked over the last seven years have been transformed. But a fair number have. When you walk into a transformed library, it is apparent. We know you will get a sense of the change that is possible from reading the wonderful articles written by some of the people who have experienced it first hand.

In this issue, Mary Kempfer describes how she and other team members who participated in training coached others and spread process improvement

throughout the Michigan City (IN) Library. April Davies and Nancy Van Deusan describe how, over the course of a few years, they institutionalized continuous improvement at the SUNY Cobleskill Library (NY). Finally, Sally Stegner sums up the transformation that has occurred at the Lawrenceburg (IN) Public Library.

CONCLUSION

It has been our pleasure to be on the journey with the authors of the articles in this issue. Along the way, we have realized that we, and they, have made three paradigm shifts.

The first paradigm shift is in thinking of the library as a system, with suppliers and inputs, outputs and customers, and with hundreds of interrelated processes that cross departmental, unit, branch, and schedule boundaries. It seems that, regardless of which process a library team chooses, the tools of continuous improvement cause startling discoveries. Sometimes it is "legacy steps" that are unnecessary or duplicative. Sometimes it is a policy that has not been updated since 1979. Sometimes it is simply understanding for the first time what the person at the next workstation is doing—and maybe that they are a supplier or customer of your own work. It is often the connections and relationships that have been invisible in the past that are the key to unlocking opportunities for improvement. Perhaps the most powerful of these is the discovery of customers—who they are, what they value, how they can help with improvements.

The second paradigm shift is in the library team's belief that improvement is possible. When library teams begin to gather data and plot points on a chart, or to get feedback from customers, they see many ways to improve their own processes. Finally, they have tools and ideas for handling complaints they have heard for years, or eliminating delays, reducing errors, or increasing customer satisfaction. They can hardly wait to begin. They are impatient with the disciplined data-gathering that continuous improvement demands. Once they see the power of the data, though, they begin to understand that they can improve quickly and continue to improve. They find ways to share data with their suppliers, to move improvements upstream.

The third shift is in staff development. Libraries are sometimes hesitant to send a team of three or four staff members to four days of learning. They see it as a "cost" and equate it to the many other conferences and workshops they have attended over the years which had little value for or impact on the library. This learning is a different kind of staff development, designed to focus on real library work and teach teams real tools. It aims to build capacity in the library—capacity for working productively in a team, for standardizing and improving processes, and for communi-

cating productively with customers in order to create a library that surprises and delights.

We hope you will keep these three shifts in mind as you read the articles which follow.

The authors of these stories work in libraries very similar to yours. They had the same staff, time, management, budget, and customer constraints. We have consistently been amazed by their creativity and inventiveness in adapting the continuous improvement tools and theories to their own circumstances. They were thoughtful, persistent, supportive, careful, and reflective. They challenged us and kept us laughing, for both of which we are very grateful.

Perhaps you will see your own journey reflected in theirs. Perhaps their stories will encourage you to begin your own journey or to take the next step. If you have a story to tell, we would love to hear it and add it to our growing file of library improvement success stories.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Sara Laughlin is President of Sara Laughlin & Associates, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in customer-driven, future-focused planning, evaluation, and process improvement. Sara is a native Hoosier. During her 30+ years in the library business, she has worked as a reference librarian, researcher, library school staff and faculty member, and trustee. For the past seven years, she has been pursuing continuous improvement in her teaching, consulting, facilitating, presenting, and every other chance she gets. In the midst of editing this issue, Sara accepted a one-year appointment as interim director of the Monroe County Public Library. She is presently engaged in updating the Constancy of Purpose, making a list of library processes, and characterizing teams to work on a few that need immediate attention.

Ray Wilson is President of Ray Wilson & Associates, a firm specializing in organizational development and operational improvement. Ray has worked in industry for 28 years in areas of engineering, laboratory management, distribution – warehousing, trucking, and pipelines – equipment service and supply, and risk management – safety, environment, transportation, and insurance. He has been a consultant in the field of continuous improvement to numerous business and service organizations for ten years. He is a registered professional engineer and co-author of three books – *Process Mastering: How to Establish and Document the Best Known Way to Do a Job* (with Paul Harsin), *The Library's Continuous Improvement Field Book: 29 Ready to Use Tools* (co-authored with Sara Laughlin and Denise Sisco Shockley), and *The Quality Library: A Guide to Staff-Driven Improvement, Better Efficiency, and Happier Customers* (with Sara Laughlin) (forthcom-

ing in early 2008). Ray gets his greatest joy when the people who do the work everyday are empowered and successful at improving their processes.