



Ten Minutes of Your Time. Lasting Business Impact.

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"It's so much easier to suggest solutions when you don't know too much about the problem."

- **Malcolm Forbes**, Publisher (1919 - 1990)

What's On My Mind This Week

Storming the Problem

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Along with failing to identify problems, and not allocating the appropriate resources to correct them, over-reliance on brainstorming is a major barrier to improvement. Why is the most commonly used tool an obstacle to problem solving? The improper use of brainstorming creates change based on opinion rather than fact. And opinion-based changes - even when they create a net benefit - introduce costs, complexity, and performance losses in organizations.

Unlike process maps or multivariate analysis, brainstorming is as old as the first conscious being. People spend a good part of their waking hours thinking about problems, which seems to result in even more unsolved issues. Nonetheless, placing several people in a room to think about a particular concern has become a popular method of problem solving.

What's wrong with generating lots of ideas in the hope of finding a solution? Nothing— if it's part of a larger problem-solving process that includes upstream knowledge gathering and downstream testing of ideas. But when creating ideas *becomes* the problem-solving process, you've got big trouble. Studies have shown, and my experience supports, that only one-quarter of the ideas generated in these sessions improve performance. Another one-quarter reduce performance. And the rest - half of the suggestions submitted - have absolutely no impact on the problem.

Eye of the Hurricane

The fault lies in the brainstorming process itself, which ignores the quality of ideas proposed to maximize the number of suggestions. By demanding equal participation of all team members, and creating an atmosphere where any idea is a good idea, many wrong ideas are inherently produced in the pursuit of some right ones.

But there is more. Failure to distinguish causes from effects results in suggestions to

correct *symptoms* of the problem. Ideas that worked in the past - without regard to why they worked, or how the current problem may be different from the previous one - are repeatedly recycled from session to session. In cultures where finger-pointing is the norm, people suggest changes in areas outside their own. Likewise, in organizations uncomfortable with cross-functional accountability, people suggest workarounds in their own area instead of changes in other areas that would eliminate root causes. When left unchecked, the lack of structure in the brainstorming session amplifies cultural biases and knowledge gaps.

As a result, if the ideas were posted on a process map, the resulting pattern would look less like a few arrows accurately fired into the guilty sub-process steps and more like a long-range shotgun blast hoping to hit a root cause.

From this output, a list of final recommendations is negotiated. It generally includes some changes everyone feels will help, some changes the powerful people in the group want included, and some things we'd all just like to see changed.

The Resulting Operational Tsunami

At that point, the operating groups are instructed to carry out the plan. To better understand the impact on operations, assume 12 actions are taken and together they create a net increase in performance.

Based on our benchmarks, three of these changes improve performance. This sounds good, but improved performance does not mean the root cause was completely eliminated or the process was improved in an optimal way. Remember: workarounds improve performance, but they also increase costs, complexity and hassle in the organization.

Three changes make the problem worse. Clearly, reduced performance is a bad outcome, but there is another issue. The original problem is more difficult to solve if new causes are introduced through the problem-solving process. These factors can be difficult to identify as root causes, since they are associated with past performance improvements.

Finally, we implement six changes with no effect on performance. While these changes don't impact this problem or make it more difficult to solve in the future, they come with their own costs. Performance can be affected in other areas and the solution of other problems may be more difficult as a result. Even if this doesn't occur, they inflict unnecessary change on the organization. With so much planned and unplanned change today, companies can't afford to induce more change through the problem-solving process. It eventually wears down the organization, reducing its ability to compete, react and innovate.

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Forecasting Problem Elimination

To optimally perform, organizations need a method of problem-solving that identifies root causes and implements only changes that eliminate them. This starts with a structured method of information gathering to feed a more structured idea-generation process. When people work with a shared understanding of the issue and its effects, the result is a richer, deeper discussion and a more targeted list of recommendations.

But this list still includes untested theories. A rigorous method of idea-checking must screen opinions from facts prior to implementation. This can include sequential piloting of individual ideas, or the collection and analysis of data to screen a list of ideas at once. Whatever the method, proofing of ideas is required before change is initiated.

This shift in the problem-solving approach requires a change in corporate culture - the "do something quick" mentality must be replaced with an "eliminate the problem forever" mindset. It recognizes that many smart people working together still have gaps in their knowledge, and that opinions present themselves as facts quite effectively unless they are constantly challenged. It demands a willingness to experiment and identify the root cause of problems, rather than implement change and hope for improved performance.

When only proven changes are allowed, fewer changes are made. This improves buy-in, shortens implementation time, creates larger performance gains, and reduces operational complexity and fatigue. Isn't that a sunnier forecast for everyone?

Take Ten Minutes

Consider your current problem-solving process and answer the following questions:

- Does your company use brainstorming? In what way?
- How does your organization decide which changes to implement?
- How does it assess whether those changes had the intended impact?
- How does the problem-solving process both reflect and reinforce the organization's culture?
- How might changes in the approach to problem-solving create benefits to your company?

Take The Next Step...

Your company can become certain about quality. Come to PCA's "Creating the Reliable Organization" Management College to find out how.

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The next open-enrollment colleges take place **June 15-17 and September 14-16 in Orlando, Florida**. Alternatively, PCA can conduct a dedicated college for your organization, either at your facility or at a designated location near you.

For additional information, please call 800-722-1464 or [email us](#).

About Take Ten Minutes

Take Ten Minutes is a weekly publication of [Philip Crosby Associates](#) and [The Capability Group](#).

The premise behind *Take Ten Minutes* is simple: take ten minutes out of every week to refocus and recommit to business improvement. *Take Ten Minutes* features quotes and interviews to inspire you. We also pull articles from today's headlines as examples of the power of the preventive culture (or the deep problems caused by not having one).

As the name suggests, *Take Ten Minutes* is relentless with the editing razor and keeps each issue tight - each issue should take you no more than ten minutes to read, start to finish. You'll reap even bigger rewards if you kick in an extra ten minutes to discuss the ideas with a colleague or to take an idea found here and plan to roll it out in your organization. We hope *Take Ten Minutes* becomes the business improvement equivalent of your running partner, providing the inspiration you need to lace up and "just do it" on those weeks when the couch seems oh-so preferable.

We hope you enjoy *Take Ten Minutes*. As Philip Crosby said, improving your business "is a journey that never ends." So let the journey...*continue!*

Please send story ideas or comments to our [editor](#).

About Our Companies

In today's marketplace, only capable companies will survive and thrive. The overarching goal of [Philip Crosby Associates](#) (PCA) and [The Capability Group](#) (TCG) is to give companies the culture, tools, methodology and results-focused support to become 'Capable Organizations' - useful, reliable, adaptable, and ever-focused on achieving customer success.

PCA and TCG deliver on this goal by first working with clients to assess where they are on the maturity spectrum and where they want to go. For companies early in the process, we work hand-in-hand with management to install a culture of prevention - the culture that has been championed by the PCA side of our business since quality management guru and PCA founder Philip Crosby published *Quality is Free* in 1979. Over the past two decades, Crosby's techniques have been implemented by many of the Fortune 500, as well as small and mid-sized companies seeking excellence.

Once the foundation of the Capable Organization is present, TCG steps in to help clients take

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their efforts to the next level by further reducing costs, enhancing quality and promoting growth. TCG was founded by Kevin Weiss, who was a Quality Leader and Master Black Belt for General Electric when that company first implemented Six Sigma - a program CEO Jack Welch has attributed with "changing the DNA of GE". With a proprietary Cost-Quality-Growth™ Model created based on the knowledge that GE's success was due to much more than a typical Six Sigma deployment, TCG has helped shape Cost-Quality-Growth™ Programs for companies such as Shimano, American Express and Sony.

Along the journey to the Capable Organization, PCA and TCG provide a comprehensive set of training programs and materials as well as consulting and assessment services to accelerate progress. Products and services range from courses and CDs geared towards the education of hourly workers to intensive seminars for managers and executive teams.

For more information, email Chris Johansen of Philip Crosby Associates and The Capability Group chris.johansen@capabilitygroup.com, or call 617-716-0214.

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