

Walking a mile in my shoes? Try a day in my head



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IN 1982 EJ Deming published a book with the snappy title 'Quality, Productivity and Competitive Position' which eventually had a new title 'Out of the Crisis'.

At first sight many of his ideas seemed a long way from the world of education. Total quality management approaches were certainly prevalent in industry but not in schools. As a young headteacher in the 1990s I became particularly interested in the 'Deming Philosophy', eventually joining the Board of the British Deming Association. Two elements of the Deming approach particularly struck a chord with me.

'Listen to the voice of the customer' and 'listen to the voice of the process'. Deming had a positive view of human nature, emphasising people's fundamental desire to learn and challenge themselves.

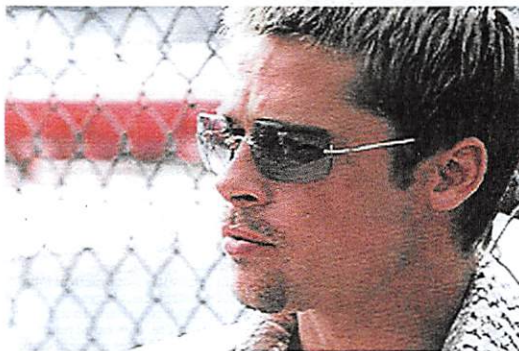
Recently I saw a series of photographs of children living in a mountainous village in China having to cross a valley hundreds of metres deep on a rickety homemade cable car.

They also climbed wooden ladders, crossed rope bridges, rode on horses and walked along narrow ledges to get to school. They did this because of the love they had of learning at school, not because of punishment or external reward. The village elders viewed their role as removing the barriers to school by providing the ladders and bridges.

Whilst we may not have such physical barriers in the UK we still have barriers, often as a result of the systems we design. How many of us find shopping in a new supermarket very hard because the goods are organised in a very different way to our local shop? Imagine how the systems within secondary schools will seem to an 11-year-old entering for the first time.

At the BDA Annual Conference in Birmingham in 1993, Dr Myron Tribus, one of the most powerful advocates of the Deming approach, argued that any extrinsic motivation strategies we use - rewards, prizes, exam certificates - have a limited impact. If we assume children, by their very nature, love learning then it is our job to remove the barriers in the system which reduce access to learning.

He then told a story about a group of boys who smashed the windows



➤ Brad Pitt - not enough of an enticement to go to school, it turns out

of an old man on the corner of a street. Each week the windows were broken. Each week the old man repaired the windows.

Eventually the old man went out to confront the boys. Instead of telling the boys off he said that he was quite lonely and he quite enjoyed the excitement of the windows being broken. He offered the boys £1 a week if they would continue breaking his windows. They agreed. After a couple of months he told the boys he was a little short of cash and would they accept 50p. They reluctantly agreed. Two months later, he said he could no longer pay them. They announced they would refuse to break his windows. His external rewards were not enough.

As a new and 'trendy' head in the 90s I was heavily into using any means possible to motivate my students. I was being constantly told that leadership is about motivating people.

In the foyer of the school were giant posters of Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts telling students that if they improved their attendance they would get free tickets to the cinema.

One morning I met Elsie Spotham in the corridor. She was one of my top persistent absentees. The delights of free cinema tickets seemed to have no effect on her.

I remembered one of Deming's key points is "if the system is obstructive

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then any form of encouragement or even threat will not make any difference."

Elsie described the obstructions in the system.

She was essentially the lead carer for her younger brothers and sisters. She took them to our neighbouring primary in the morning, but because the primary school didn't open its doors until 8.45am she was unable to get to our school by 9am. If she arrived late she was placed in detention which meant that she would be unable to collect her family after school. So Elsie simply stayed off. It was the system that my primary colleagues and I had designed that obstructed her opportunity to attend.

Shortly afterwards the primary school agreed to open earlier and Elsie was able to get to my school in the morning.

I had listened to the voice of the customer and listened to the voice of the system.

A few weeks later I noticed that Elsie was still continuing to be absent.

When I enquired why she answered "the lessons are crap." I had forgotten about that part of the system.

The concern I have with regard to our modern education system is that we may be too focused on extrinsic rewards - passing exams, passing Ofsted. If we are really serious about improving education in UK PLCs then we must not ignore the role of all of us - teachers, parents, employers - which is to remove the barriers to our love of learning and our love of teaching.

Also, crucially, listen to the voice of the child. Don't just walk a mile in their shoes. Try a day thinking in their heads. They may teach us something.

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