

# Business, Science, Art and the Mindset for Excellence

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**ABSTRACT** *In addressing the growing need for performance improvement in all spheres, effort is being focused on the development and refinement of continuous improvement tools, the use of which meet with mixed results. This effort is I believe misdirected as it ignores in large part that their value is derived from the interaction of the tools and their users. What is required are not new tools, new things to see, but a change in the mindset of the user, new ways of seeing. This paper outlines this change in mindset, from change journeys as daytrips to journeys of exploration, and illustrates this new way of seeing.*

**KEY WORDS:** Mindset, paradigm, exploration, daytrip, continuous improvement

## Introduction

There is a growing recognition among all types of organization of the need for change. Customer requirements, technological advance, globalization of markets and political change are but some of the reasons for this pressure.

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man. (Heraclitus, 560–480 BC, Greek philosopher)

To succeed, even to survive, organizations must address this flow of continuous change by continuous improvement. A number of tools have been developed to assist organizational continuous improvement, such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and the European Excellence Model; however, the results from the use of these approaches have been mixed. Effort has been focused on the refinement of these tools to enhance their performance but I believe that this effort is misplaced. It is based on a mindset that sees these tools as discrete initiatives that provide solutions. This is a mindset that fails to understand that rather than something to do, continuous improvement is something an organization becomes. Instead of a new tool to use within the existing mindset, successful continuous improvement both requires and creates a change of mindset.

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In this paper I will develop a simple picture of the mindsets with which we approach change and show how the prevailing change mindset locks an organization into solution thinking and, in doing so, disables the power of continuous improvement. In contrast, where these tools cultivate continuous improvement thinking, organization and tool can combine to create dramatic advance. The paper concludes by illustrating how a continuous improvement mindset sees and uses the European Excellence Model.

### Change as a Journey

We may watch a sculptor at work as he or she manipulates their tools, the hammer and chisel, to create a work of art from a block of marble. It may appear that it is the blows upon the mallet and the cutting edge of the chisel that does the work. Indeed without these the work could not be done, but it is the knowledge of the sculptor, their understanding of the tools and of the marble that give the chisel's cutting edge its power.

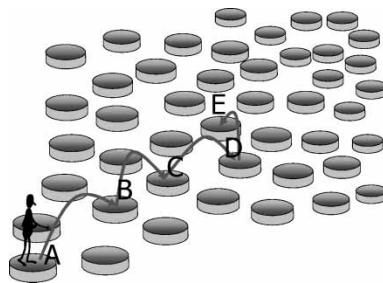
When we consider the use of continuous improvement tools, it is easy to be drawn into seeing the power in the tools, to see success the result of a good tool, and as failure the spur for refinement of the tool. We may see the relentless tweaking of continuous improvement tools, or the creation of new versions, and often this is justified as evidence of continuous improvement taking place.

There is, of course, a place for the refinement of tools, but often this provides a distraction from looking more deeply into the union between the tool and its user. Whilst a sharp chisel may be preferable to a blunt one, no chisel however sharp will turn me into a sculptor; to do that we must concentrate not on the tool but on the mindset of the user.

In this paper my aim can be little more than to begin the process of questioning the mindset with which most people approach the use of continuous improvement tools. I hope and believe that this may begin a process that will unlock the all too often untapped potential of these tools.

The first challenge in talking about mindsets is that we all have our own, which frames the way we see things, including this paper. To help create some shared understanding it is useful to first develop some simple illustrations by which we can compare and contrast mindsets and their characteristics.

Change is often referred to as being a journey and we can usefully imagine this journey taking place over a field of stepping stones, as illustrated in Figure 1. With this picture in place we can then use different travellers to represent the mindset.



**Figure 1.** A journey takes place over a field of stepping stones

When we think of a change journey, or listen to an organization describe a successful journey, we might picture it as shown. The description outlines the key steps taken and can appear to describe a neat linear sequence. Indeed conference audiences tend to love this part of a presentation, visibly shifting in their seats as they prepare to take notes.

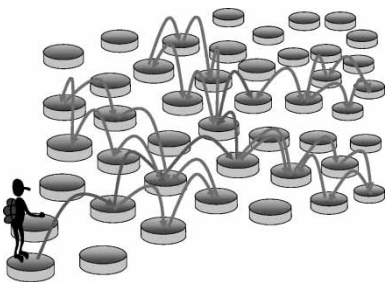
At step A we were poor; we moved to step B, C, D and at E we are much better. The note taking reaches fever pitch in capturing these steps. The audience members are looking at a picture of success and seeking the ingredients, the answers that they can take and transfer into their organizations to create the same result. This picture of change is understandably a popular one, and describes much of the focus on identifying and sharing best practice. However, the description of change presented denies the reality of the real journey made in two important respects.

The picture is seen to describe the steps that led to success, and the audience members, of course, take notes because that is exactly the journey they wish to make. However, no change journey ever follows a neat ordered path into the future. My experience is that real change is the consequence of a whole range of interactions, some planned, and many unplanned, the net result of a host of causes that combine to produce outcomes. Rather than a neat sequence of pre-planned steps, change is more reminiscent of the action of making popcorn than a pre-defined march.

The popcorn machine creates an environment for popcorn making, however within this environment a host of interactions will determine which corn will pop and when and determine the actual change to take place. In a similar way, for example, gaining the support of a key individual may lead to a cascade of change that would otherwise not have taken place. Equally, whilst a single event may defer for months change that was just about to happen, good fortune may create the opportunity for change that would otherwise have remained out of our grasp.

Thus, although the demands for brevity and organizational amnesia may conspire against presentations detailing it as such, the reality of the journey is much more likely to be represented by Figure 2. Here we see a series of excursions and apparent distractions take place as the next step was influenced by opportunities and setbacks. The quotation from Richard Feynman, of whom we will hear more later, perfectly describes how this pruning of reality takes place.

We have a habit in writing articles published in scientific journals to make the work as finished as possible, to cover up all the tracks, to not worry about the blind alleys



**Figure 2.** Each step is influenced by opportunities and setbacks

or describe how you had the wrong idea first, and so on. So there isn't any place to publish, in a dignified manner, what you actually did in order to get to do the work. (Richard Phillips Feynman, 1918–1988)

Thus, we may conclude that change journeys are more complex than audiences would like them to be, but this picture carries a more important message. When we look at this picture, we see the change journey stretching out ahead of the successful organization; the things that were done to achieve success. As we've said, this is how we want to see the picture, as we search for what to do to bring our success. But of course this journey never existed in the future for the successful organization, nor can it for you. It can only exist in the past, as the footprints that record the steps that were taken; the actual sequence in which change happened from the infinite ways that it could have happened. But that route taken didn't exist before it was taken; it was created by being taken.

### Change Travellers

With this picture of a journey in mind, we can now identify travellers to represent different mindsets.

I refer to those who see the journey as a sequence of neat ordered steps as *day-trippers*. Where they accept the need for change, they see their journey as one with clearly defined parameters, clear steps to take and things to do. Day-trippers embark on change for example only when the steps are known, the costs understood and the timescales agreed.

Organizations whose mindset recognizes change as this complex developing journey I call *explorers*. They embark on change with a clear vision of the outcome to be achieved but with no fixed path by which it will be reached.

When a day-tripper sees the journey of an explorer they see the excursions as mistakes and seek to 'learn' how to avoid them and adopt only the steps forwards. They fail to see that it is only through these excursions that the explorer organization learned how to move forwards. The day-trippers' talk of learning actually defines their inability to learn. Their mindset is closed to learning; for the day-tripper the future is defined.

Our simple stepping stone picture of the journey can help illustrate this exploration. If you imagine standing on any stepping stone you are clearly faced with choices of which stone to stand on next. These choices depend not just upon the characteristics of the stepping stones, but also upon your characteristics. For example if you are tall or heavy you will have different options to someone who is short or light. It is the same with organizations. The choices an organization faces depend upon the organization, its history, capabilities, perceptions, fears, culture and any number of other factors. The result is that there is no one correct path through the stepping stones that is right for everyone or right at all times. Each improvement path will be unique for each organization and time.

Equally, each time a step is taken the whole world is transformed. At each step a new position is reached and a whole new set of options appear. Information that was gained and used in making the previous step cannot be assumed valid for subsequent steps; just as Heraclitus said in the earlier quotation, the world and the organization is now different. The organization has to learn anew its position and the possible next steps it may take. The need constantly to refresh the organization's picture of the world and its position in it, is a key feature of exploration.

## **Mindset**

Our illustrations of the two journeys show the explorer's recognition of the uncertainty of the future and the need to explore. For the explorer, the future does not exist, but waits to be created. In contrast, the day-tripper looks for the future to be defined. The path ahead that they seek is a prescription of future actions to be followed. The day-tripper seeks to live in a world of certainty. By preference they choose to avoid change, but where it is forced, often by direct pressure such as legislation or customer mandate, they create the illusion that there is a 'correct way' and that the challenge of change is to find and implement this way. Having implemented the required change they seek to stop at a new steady-state fixed position until the pressure for change builds again and the next change solution is sought and implemented.

In contrast, the explorer recognizes that there are no right answers, there are only the best answers at a moment in time. Best answers will change with changing circumstances and they recognize that every answer begins to decay from the moment it is arrived at, as changes take place in the world on which the answer was based.

Day-trippers are driven by the need for solutions and see every challenge in the 'black and white' of right or wrong. However complex the issue, they seek the magic potion, the initiative that will provide the solution. Their tunnel vision drives them to see progress in terms of solutions and when forced to change they seek an initiative to achieve it. They see the world through initiatives, steps to be taken, and will see continuous improvement tools in just the same way.

Explorers recognize the frailty and transient nature of answers and the need to constantly refresh them. They live in a world of 'shades of grey' where there is no absolute right or wrong only the best judgement of the moment. They know that today's best option may be less than the best tomorrow and vice versa. Explorers are therefore not driven to seek answers but questions. They realize that whatever answer leads them to the next stepping stone they will be faced with a new situation and the need to question and refresh their understanding of the world in order to make their next step.

In short it is often possible to recognize day-trippers and explorers by the questions they ask. Day-trippers ask 'what?' They seek solutions and to learn or be told what to do. They seek information by asking others what they did. Explorers ask 'how?' They seek to learn how they can better determine their future answers. Instead of wanting your answer, what you did, explorers seek to learn from you how you arrived at what you did so that they can better produce their own better answers.

Depending on your current mindset as you read this, this may appear a subtle or even irrelevant difference, the difference between changing and an ability to change, but it is the tip of an iceberg that separates these mindsets and their ability to understand and create continuous improvement and is wonderfully illustrated by the quotation from Marilyn Ferguson.

It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear . . . It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to. (Marilyn Ferguson)

For the day-tripper, continuous improvement is impossible. Their mindset sees change as discrete packages, things to do, standards to be met, templates to be adopted, which define a

new state. This is improvement, but however often and however earnestly it is repeated it cannot be continuous. For the explorer, change is not something to do, but something to become, an attribute of the organization, a part of how it behaves, how it thinks and how it sees the world. For the explorer continuous improvement becomes possible.

### **A Perspective from Science**

We have outlined two mindsets. On the one hand the day-tripper sees the future defined and stretching out ahead as a sequence of signposts to be followed. This has its attractions, it allows the time between trapeze, that Marilyn Fergusson spoke of, to be minimized; the period of uncertainty and thinking. For the day-tripper, thinking becomes a process of selection, which once made allows the work to begin, but all too often leads to busyness rather than effective business. Change is implemented as discrete initiatives, often replaced at regular intervals with a few measures of effectiveness.

The world of the explorer is more challenging. The comfort blanket of a defined path to follow is removed, and in its place is the challenge of exploring and learning. Rather than change what the organization does, the focus is on changing what the organization is, its ability to change, and through this its performance. The result is true continuous improvement, an inherent ability to deal with whatever change demands of the organization.

Viewed from my mindset, the option to explore is by far the most attractive, but this is a minority perspective, but perhaps not as small a minority as you may imagine. If you hold the majority day-tripper view, and statistically this is likely to be the case, you may feel that in the real world change is achieved by following a path created by others that defines the future. It might feel that a prime example of this is the progress of science. Here the dramatic advances that have been achieved have taken place by building on the known, where the future is mapped out by certain knowledge, creating signposts to be followed. Well it certainly feels that way; but I looked a little more closely at the work of Richard Feynman.

Richard Feynman was a world-leading physicist who did pioneering work, particularly in the field of quantum physics. He was one of the team that developed nuclear weapons during the Second World War and also worked on identifying the cause of the Challenger Shuttle disaster. He had extraordinary skills in his field and was recognized with the Nobel Prize, but what made him exceptional was his ability to communicate incredibly difficult concepts in simple language. It is interesting to note his excellent description of the reality of science.

The scientist has a lot of experience with ignorance and doubt and uncertainty, and this experience is of very great importance, I think. When a scientist doesn't know the answer to a problem, he is ignorant. When he has a hunch as to what the result is, he is uncertain. And when he is pretty darned sure of what the result is going to be, he is in some doubt. We have found it of paramount importance that in order to progress we must recognize the ignorance and leave room for doubt. Scientific knowledge is a body of statements of varying degrees of certainty – some most unsure, some nearly sure, none absolutely certain.

Now, we scientists are used to this, and we take it for granted that it is perfectly consistent to be unsure – that it is possible to live and not know. But I don't know whether everyone realizes that this is true. Our freedom to doubt was born of a

struggle against authority in the early days of science. It was a very deep and strong struggle. Permit us to question – to doubt, that’s all – and not to be sure. . . .

It is our responsibility as scientists, knowing the great progress and great value of a satisfactory philosophy of ignorance, the great progress that is the fruit of freedom of thought, to proclaim the value of this freedom, to teach how doubt is not to be feared but welcomed and discussed, and to demand this freedom as our duty to all coming generations. (Richard Feynman)

What Feynman elegantly describes is continuously standing on stepping stones and facing the unknown future; the critical importance of not knowing.

Whilst the day-tripper mindset craves certainty, this process of not knowing and exploring, is at the root of scientific advance. It is interesting to speculate on where day-tripping might have led.

Drill for oil? You mean drill into the ground to try and find oil? You’re crazy. (Drillers who Edwin L. Drake tried to enlist to his project to drill for oil in 1859)

The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular? (David Sarnoff’s associates in response to his urgings for investment in the radio in the 1920s)

## **Exploration and Continuous Improvement**

Before looking at the Excellence Model, I would like to briefly look at the heart of all continuous improvement tools, what is called the Deming Cycle, or more literally Plan, Do, Check, Act. This continuous improvement process, developed over 50 years ago appears so straightforward that it barely warrants the space to describe how it works, were it not for the fact that how it works is governed by our mindset.

The principle of the process can be straightforwardly outlined with an example. Consider reducing the time taken to travel to your workplace. Your ‘plan’ may identify new routes, modes of transport, start times etc. In the ‘do step’ these new options are tried, and the results collected in the ‘check step’. The ‘act step’ is where the results are analysed, conclusions drawn and new plans made that take advantage of the learning. We can readily see that by applying this process a new improved route may be found.

If we look at this example from the mindset of the day-tripper we might observe that actually we are quite content with our current journey to work, unless spurred into action by a problem such as road works. If the problem is large enough we may look for a new route, but our priority is getting to work so we want to solve this problem as soon as possible. We may try a few alternatives, or better still adopt someone else’s best practice. We try out new routes to find one that works, and once the problem is solved use this same new route every day until a new problem occurs.

This seems a fairly reasonable approach, we might call it pragmatic as it gets the problem fixed and allows us to return quickly to the task in hand.

We might recognize that the process is not continuous, it is triggered by problems, but more fundamentally the continuous improvement process is not being allowed to question

and identify new opportunities. Rather than explore what might be, the process is used to vet and check that a solution is what it's claimed to be. At best PDCA is used to validate a solution already arrived at.

For the explorer, implicit in PDCA is the not knowing. The process is designed to provide feedback and learning, not simple confirmation of what was expected. It invites an organization not simply to explore opportunities, but also to grow its ability to make sense of the results that are produced. Real exploration is about learning and discovery, going into the unknown, rather than the beaten path.

If you want to succeed you should strike out on new paths rather than travel the worn paths of accepted success. (John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937), American business leader)

If we look at the excellence model through the eyes of the explorer, we will see, perhaps not what we've seen previously, a tool for exploration.

The model has at its heart PDCA, an invitation to try new things with the means to understand how they perform and refine your ability to learn. It is comprised solely of questions, there can be no fixed answers to describe the path ahead, we must discover our own. The questions are divided into enablers and results that invite you to learn what connects the things you do to the things you achieve. The questions don't ask 'what you do'; they ask 'how you improve'. They don't prescribe, they invite you to address. There is no standard, just the means to stretch beyond where you are. There are no weaknesses, there are opportunities for improvement.

However, if we have the mindset of an explorer we will see the model as its opposite.

Your paradigm is so intrinsic to your mental process that you are hardly aware of its existence, until you try to communicate with someone with a different paradigm. (Donella Meadows, *The Global Citizen*)

Our mindsets or paradigms create an almost impenetrable bubble, which contains our world and the way we see it. Donella Meadows' quotation captures just how strong this bubble may be. This short paper can do little more than create a small voice, which might whisper in your ear to consider that things could be different. I will conclude with some thoughts on how it feels to move from the day-tripper to explorer mindset, and how this might be reflected in the way we see the Excellence Model.

### **Seeing the Excellence Model**

For the day-tripper, the world is one of black and white, where things are correct or incorrect. It is a world in which continuous improvement tools are sought to provide a direct bridge between current performance, and improved future performance, by detailing what is required for success. In this world, we may visualize continuous improvement tools as a contract that specifies things to be done and rewards to be gained. This contract ties down and creates one defined path through which one can move, the correct way forward. It cuts off all other avenues and branches, leaving only this defined route.

In contrast, the explorer doesn't see black and white or even just shades of grey. They see splashes of blue, dashes of red and streaks of yellow. They don't see the choice

between absolutely right and absolutely wrong, since these can't exist, rather they see the colours of opportunity. Instead of the contract that limits their perspective and defines their actions, when they look at the Excellence Model, they see a painting, a work of art, a stimulus to thinking. It doesn't set out to define, rather it evokes, it stirs them into having a view, a perspective and opinion. Not the binary opinion of the day-tripper who seeks to judge whether the painting is good or bad, right or wrong, but a view of what the painting evokes in them. It makes no sense to ask whether the Mona Lisa is right or wrong and therefore no answer volunteered can make any sense.

The day-tripper is drawn towards detail and answers, and seeks to find them within their interpretation of the model. The contract contains the definition. It has the collected intelligence and knowledge captured and constrained within its margins, which define the known world. The contract attempts to contain the sum of knowledge and understanding, and in doing so inhibits effort to challenge, debate or further understand. As the repository of knowledge, effort is consumed to ensure that the contract deals with every circumstance and every eventuality. It must define the response, specify the action and provide instruction, and great effort is focused on debating and discussing the minutiae of the words, the meaning of a phrase, the placement of a comma, in an attempt to provide precision. It contains, de facto, the definitions, the answers and with every new situation or shortcoming discovered and accommodated, its complexity grows. The focus is directed inwardly on the maintenance of the artefact, and effort expended on questioning and understanding is considered a waste, a distraction from applying the knowledge. This compliments the day-tripper's craving for standards that constrain options. The contract is about making everyone the same, everyone compliant. At best it defines something that is better than the current level, but this is a very meagre form of improvement, a hesitant move from one trapeze to another.

Since much reliance will be placed on the contract, it must be right at all costs, even though in a changing world it can never be right. The result is constant refinement to reflect change, and this is mistakenly and wrongly justified and excused as the very evidence of continuous improvement. It is in fact the exact opposite, an absence of the creation of true continuous improvement, and in its place the frequent shoring up of a prescription, the often desperate maintenance of a sandcastle constantly eroded by change.

For the explorer, the painting is about making everyone the same, but different. They all are inspired to be excellent, but will achieve it in different ways.

When seen as a painting, we look into the model expecting no answers. Its role is not to inform but to energize, to question and challenge, not in a miserly way to pick fault or claim adherence, but in a way that lifts us, that allows us to grow and fly. Whilst the contract provides the boundaries to the definition of the model, the painting provides the launch pad to discovery. For the day-tripper all understanding is within the contract, for the explorer all understanding is outside the painting. Thus, whilst the contract disables thinking, the painting demands it. Its purpose is not to provide answers, but to stimulate their creation. We no longer seek to cling on to the trapeze, but barely touch them as we leap from one to the next, so fast is our movement that we truly do fly.

The secret of the model's power is not in the words, but in the effect those words have. There is therefore no need for constant revisions when the model is seen as a painting. Its power is not reliant upon a particular phrase, or capturing the mood of a particular

moment. It works at a deeper level, provoking the viewer to think, and it is this thinking that shapes the painting to meet the needs of its user's circumstance, and the needs of its time. Instead of constant and misguided tinkering in the name of continuous improvement of the model, the continuous improvement instead takes place in the user of the model.

A work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them; and its essential meaning is in the tension between the contradictory answers. (Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990), Music Composer)

Seen as a painting, the breadth of the model, covering every aspect and consequence of an organization, is not for the purpose of pinning it down, of tying down details, of providing measures to be calculated and compared. The breadth serves the purpose of extending the canvas so that every inch can be explored to provide new insights, to stir emotions and stimulate thinking. We are no longer driven in the pursuit of precision, precision in the wording of the model, or precision in the content of our responses to prove compliance, precision that defines and constrains thinking, instead the painting presents freedom to think.

## Conclusion

My aim has been to illuminate how the mindset with which we approach continuous improvement and its tools determines the effectiveness and value that we will gain from their use. Whilst improvement may otherwise be achieved, only the openness to questioning and learning of exploration creates the opportunity for continuous improvement.

A work of art must make a man react, feel strongly, start creating too, if only in their imagination. He must be seized by the throat and shaken up; he has to be made aware of the worlds he is living in and for that he must first be jolted out of it. (Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), Spanish artist)

Whilst much of the focus of the continuous improvement community is on the tools, when working with organizations, my aim is first to create the mindset, once achieved the tools of continuous improvement will shape perfectly to the hand of the user.

We may see that these tools are shaped by our thinking, and in turn our thinking is shaped by use of the tools. This is not so different from the sculptor who uses his or her understanding to position and manipulate the chisel and whose understanding is updated by the experience of the chisel's use. This is simply the sculptor's continuous improvement process, how the sculptor learns.

This paper captures some of the ideas from a forthcoming book on the Mindset for Excellence, for details please visit [www.accesstoexcellence.co.uk](http://www.accesstoexcellence.co.uk).

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