



PERSONAL QUALITY

Create a Better Life With Quality Tools

by **Bernard F. Sergesketter**

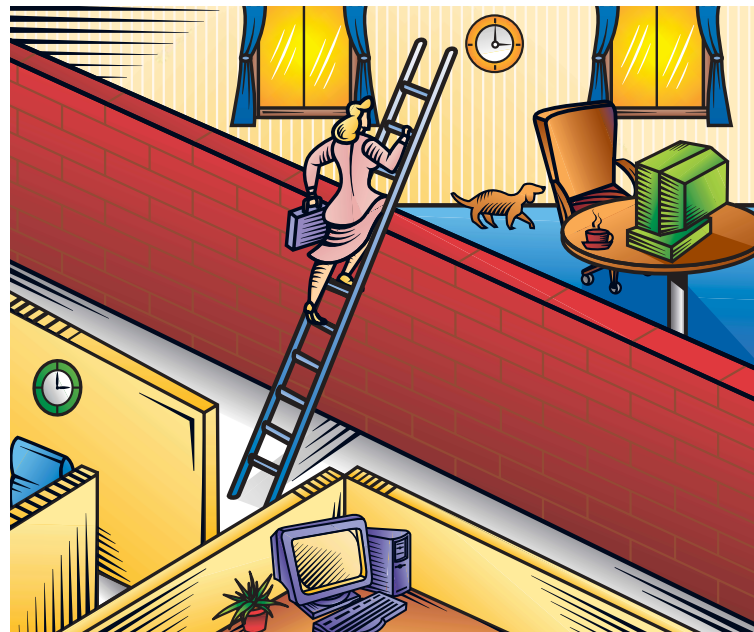
Early in my business career I was fortunate to work for a man named Max Barney, who challenged me in an interesting way.

Max observed that our company, Indiana Bell (a subsidiary of AT&T at the time), invested significantly in educating our associates in the skills they needed for our business to succeed. Consistently, those skills were put to use effectively to improve our results.

However, Max observed that while people applied their newfound knowledge on the job, they rarely

In 50 Words Or Less

- At work, apply quality principles to personal processes such as meetings and e-mails by setting standards and measuring against them.
- A checklist provides a simple way to measure your progress against standards you set.
- Examples show how quality principles and measurements can improve your personal life, too.



used that learning to improve their personal lives. Max challenged me to apply the lessons from work to become better both professionally and personally.

At the time Max and I were having this discussion, I had been married for about a year and was looking for a better way to manage our family finances. This was the first time I implemented Max's advice.

At Indiana Bell, I had to develop a budget for the current year by category. At the end of each year, I



FIGURE 1 Professional and Personal Quality Checklist

Professional improvement	Month: July																															Total	Base line				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31						
On time for meetings							✓																													2	1
Phone: next day response														✓																						1	2
E-mail: within two day response																							✓	✓												2	6
Call client daily																																					
Relevant reading material																																					
Personal improvement	Month: July																															Total	Base line				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31						
Weight (190 pounds)					✓	✓						✓	✓					✓	✓	✓																7	10
Sugar intake				✓	✓			✓		✓						✓	✓																			6	9
Exercise (three times a week)																																					
No unpleasantness							✓					✓												✓									✓		4	5	
Resolution																																				2	
	✓ Missed opportunities																																				

Measuring Results

Once each of us started to measure ourselves (similar to keeping your own score in golf), change for the better occurred immediately. For example, all our meetings started and ended on time, and they all had written agendas that were circulated in advance.

Because we no longer wasted time at the beginning of meetings waiting for everyone to arrive and there were no interruptions due to latecomers, our meetings took one-third less time. And they were more productive.

One morning I walked into the conference room 10 minutes early for an 8 a.m. meeting, and everyone who was to attend was already there. So we started the meeting, and it lasted only nine minutes, ending before it was scheduled to begin. At the time, members of our leadership team and I were attending about six hours of meetings per day. The direct benefit to each of us was two hours a day of saved time.

Every member of the leadership team focused on other communication processes by setting standards and measuring themselves against these. As a result telephone calls, e-mails and requests for

information were all handled promptly with follow-up processes unnecessary. Bob Galvin, the former CEO of Motorola, taught us that whenever cycle time is reduced, productivity and service metrics improve. That was exactly our experience.

We implemented the checklist concept throughout our organization of 2,000 associates. Everyone gained experience with the principles of quality, allowing us to create effective quality teams and sustain improved performance. We realized another significant benefit that positively impacted all of us: When everyone was on time for meetings and promptly returned telephone calls and e-mails, we were all consistently showing respect to each other. This mutual respect changed the environment positively, enhancing personal productivity and job satisfaction.

Influence on Customers

Our customers observed our higher level of performance, and many asked us to assist them with their quality initiatives. We formed joint quality teams, most often chaired by our associates. We also developed a shared expectations process. Our customers identified their expectations of us expressed

in standards that were measurable. We then identified what we expected from our customers using the same methodology.

Many improvements resulted, bringing service benefits to our clients and cost benefits to both parties. A key advantage for AT&T was teaming with our customers on quality became a formidable barrier to entry for our competitors.

One day it occurred to me the only time I talked to customers was when there was something to talk about. I decided to start calling at least one customer each day when there was no particular reason to do so. I asked my clients how we were doing from their perspective and what we could do to improve.

I was amazed at how much my calls were appreciated. Invariably, the clients thanked me for initiating the call and provided candid feedback that was very valuable to me. I learned about problems before they became big ones, and I learned about opportunities before my competitors did.

I decided to put this impromptu calling item on my checklist, and I rarely had to make a check mark. I was making more than 200 calls a year that my clients found valuable, and I learned this was a competitive advantage whenever those clients made a decision.

Quality Principles

- The customer comes first.
- All work is part of a process.
- Quality improvement never ends.
- Prevention is achieved through planning.
- Quality happens through people.

Some Personal Examples

Many of us learned we could positively impact our personal lives with this approach. The quality principle that all work is part of a process applies to everything we do as individuals—including every activity in our personal lives.

I cannot think of anyone I worked with who did not add personal items to his or her checklist (see Figure 1). The approach was the same as for work related items: Set standards based on what is expected by you or someone important to you, measure against those standards and keep track of the measurement on a checklist.

In establishing standards, it is important that each item is measurable. For example, setting exercise as a standard is not sufficient. A definition of measurement for exercise needs to be added, such as: three times per week for at least 20 minutes.

Many of us had exercise goals for some time, but the results were spotty. Once we added exercise to our checklists along with a measurement factor, we were amazed at how we were able to consistently meet that standard.

Phil Scanlan was vice president of quality for AT&T at that time, and, like many of us, he struggled with managing his weight. I knew Phil very well, but one time after not seeing him for several months, I walked by without recognizing him. He had lost 25 pounds, and he looked trim and fit. I asked how he did it.

Phil told me he put the item “sugar intake” on his personal quality checklist. Whenever he ate anything with sugar content, he placed a check mark next to that item. He said he still ate things containing sugar on occasion but now was aware of the frequency. The result was less calorie intake and a shedding of pounds.

My approach to the same problem had been to set a standard of 190 pounds for my weight (my height is 6 feet 5 inches). When I was over this weight, I became conscious of the need to reduce my calorie intake. After seeing Phil’s success, I added sugar intake to my checklist, and it worked well. I now keep track of both weight and sugar intake, and the data show a direct correlation.

One of the young men in our organization was the



father of two boys, who at the time were five and three years old. His job responsibilities required him to travel out of town often, and he was looking for a way to consistently spend quality time with his sons.

Using what he learned at work, he engaged his sons to design a process for him to put them to bed on nights when he was home. What changed? The resulting process included giving a bath, reading a book and telling a story before turning off the lights. He, his wife, and his sons were all delighted with the outcome. And, of course, he kept track of the results on his checklist.

A young woman in our organization was having difficulties in her marriage. In fact, the problems had become so serious the couple separated and shortly afterwards were divorced. The woman had learned about and used process improvement techniques, root cause analysis and quality checklists in her work and decided these quality practices could be applied to her personal life.

She and her ex-husband maintained contact and wanted to reunite but had concerns about taking that step. So she made a list of five to eight of his behaviors that most irritated her, and he made a similar list of what she did that most irritated him. They both added their irritating behaviors to personal quality checklists and tracked their individual behavior. As a result, she said they both matured from the experience. "We learned to grow from being young adults to a married couple whose actions affect one another. We credit the checklists as a major factor in our remarrying. This occurred 11 years ago, and we are still happily married."

When my mother, who is now deceased, lived in a retirement home, I tried to call her every day. In fact, I thought I was calling her every day. When I decided to make "call mom" an item on my checklist, I found I was calling her only three or four times a week.

Once it was on my list, I consistently called my mother daily—no matter where I was. I called her from all over the United States and also from Germany, England, Poland, Spain, Japan and Korea. We wouldn't talk long, but those calls meant a lot to her—and to me. It is nice to have the memory of having talked to her so often in her later years. I

recommend the daily call to everyone who has an elderly parent.

Checklist for Perfection?

When some people hear about the concept of keeping a personal quality checklist, they become concerned it borders on behaving compulsively or trying to be perfect.

"Personal mastery ... means approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to reactive viewpoint."

Regarding quests for perfection, checklists do help people continuously improve in areas in which they set standards. Being human, none of us will ever be perfect, but there is merit in achieving consistently better performance through awareness and focus. The checklist is the means to improve our way of life. Aristotle said, "Quality is not an art; it is a habit."

Regarding compulsive behavior, keeping a checklist is no more compulsive than recording your golf score when you are playing a round. Our memories are just not good enough to know the facts without making notations.

To test this theory, identify a standard and write on a piece of paper the number of times you think you missed an opportunity relative to that standard in the last 30 days. You most likely don't have a clue.

In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge devotes chapter nine to personal mastery and says,

"Personal mastery ... means approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as



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opposed to reactive viewpoint.”²

All of us handle an enormous amount of stress and stimuli on a daily basis. It is often difficult not to live in a reactive mode; therefore, it is natural to question the practicality of Senge’s concept. But surely it would be energizing and exciting to live one’s life as a creative work.

Senge continues to describe two underlying movements for integrating personal mastery into our lives: “The first is continually clarifying what is important to us. We often spend so much time coping with problems along our path that we forget why we are on that path in the first place. The result is that we only have a dim, or even inaccurate, view of what’s really important to us.”³ The standards a person places on his or her monthly checklist do exactly what Senge suggests, “continually clarifying what is important to us.”

Senge then says: “The second is continually learning how to see current reality more clearly. We’ve all known people entangled in counterproductive relationships, who remain stuck because they keep pretending everything is all right. Or we have been in business meetings where everyone says, ‘We’re on course relative to our plan,’ yet an honest look at current reality would show otherwise. In moving toward a desired destination, it is vital to know where you are now.”⁴

Making checks for missed opportunities lets us “see current reality more clearly” in a way that is both continuous and accurate relative to what we have established as our most important personal standards.

If people can master such things as the violin, business practices or baseball, then it is certainly possible for people to achieve personal mastery. Once a tourist asked a New York taxi driver how to get to Carnegie Hall. The response was, “Practice, practice, practice.” I believe personal mastery is achievable for those of us who want to take the journey, and it is well worth the effort in order to live a creative life instead of a reactive one.

Galvin is an excellent role model for anyone interested in achieving personal mastery. He walks the talk. Here is what he said in a speech delivered to The Economic Club of Chicago: “Quality is a very personal obligation. If you can’t talk about quality in the first person ... then you have not

moved to the level of involvement of quality that is absolutely essential. ... You must be a believer that quality is a very personal responsibility.”⁵

All of us have learned lessons we regularly apply to our business challenges. If we apply these same lessons to what we do personally, both in our professional and private lives, we can have even better business results and richer and more rewarding lives with our family and friends.

It does not cost a penny to try the concepts outlined here, and the benefits are enormous and possibly life changing.

REFERENCES

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5. Robert Galvin, speech to the Economic Club of Chicago, Oct. 25, 1990.

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