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Article

## The Excellence Pyramid

By

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In today's world, it can be tempting to jump on the bandwagon for the "Next Big Thing" that promises to revolutionize our business. Then comes the part when we have to actually implement the Next Big Thing. Frequently, once the "new" wears off, we start to look around for the next Next Big Thing. At Missouri Enterprise, we call that being stuck at level two. Take a look at the pyramid below:



We call this the Excellence Pyramid. The pyramid is based on a simple concept. Every level rests on the level below it and you can't advance to the level above until you have a solid foundation underneath you. By the way, the Next Big Thing usually falls on level two of the pyramid.

This concept became clear to me many years ago on one of my first ISO 9001:1994 implementations. In that particular case, our client received a major nonconformance that precluded their registration. The nonconformance concerned a piece of machinery that the entire plant depended on. If that machine failed the plant would be down until the expensive parts could be replaced. Not a problem, we thought. That's what expedited freight is for, right? Unfortunately, and unknown to us, those part numbers had been obsoleted and their lead times were now several weeks if not months. You see, we had implemented all the processes and procedures as required by the Standard, but our ISO 9001 system did not rest on a solid foundation.

In case you're wondering, that organization was eventually registered to ISO 9001 after the issue was addressed, but it made a powerful impression on me as a consultant. ISO 9001 was "hot" at that time and seemingly everyone was eager to implement it. As a result of our enthusiasm, many of us jumped right in at level two without first making sure our fundamentals were in order. We had effectively built our foundation on a fault line.

With that in mind, we came up with the idea of the Excellence Pyramid. The idea is two-fold, really. Firstly, we want to make sure our clients most basic needs are met before moving on to the next level in their organizational growth. Secondly, we want to provide our clients a path to follow in their journey toward excellence.

To those ends, Missouri Enterprise strives to be a full service provider to our clients. Of course, we are quite capable at addressing our client's needs at levels one and two. Rather than stop there though, we realize that the elements are now in place for an organization to rise up to the

next level, respect within the community. That's not just within the manufacturing or service community, but also the local community.

Once a company establishes themselves as an organization on the rise, people want to work for that organization. Many of our clients struggle with finding qualified candidates for positions, particularly skilled labor positions. Being seen as "the place to work" in the local community makes a lot of those problems go away.

At that point, I believe the metamorphosis from a pretty good company to a great company begins. The company has internalized what they've learned on their journey up to this point, and now a true environment of continuous improvement begins to emerge. A colleague of mine calls that transition from level two to level three and beyond a transition from algorithmic to heuristic thinking.

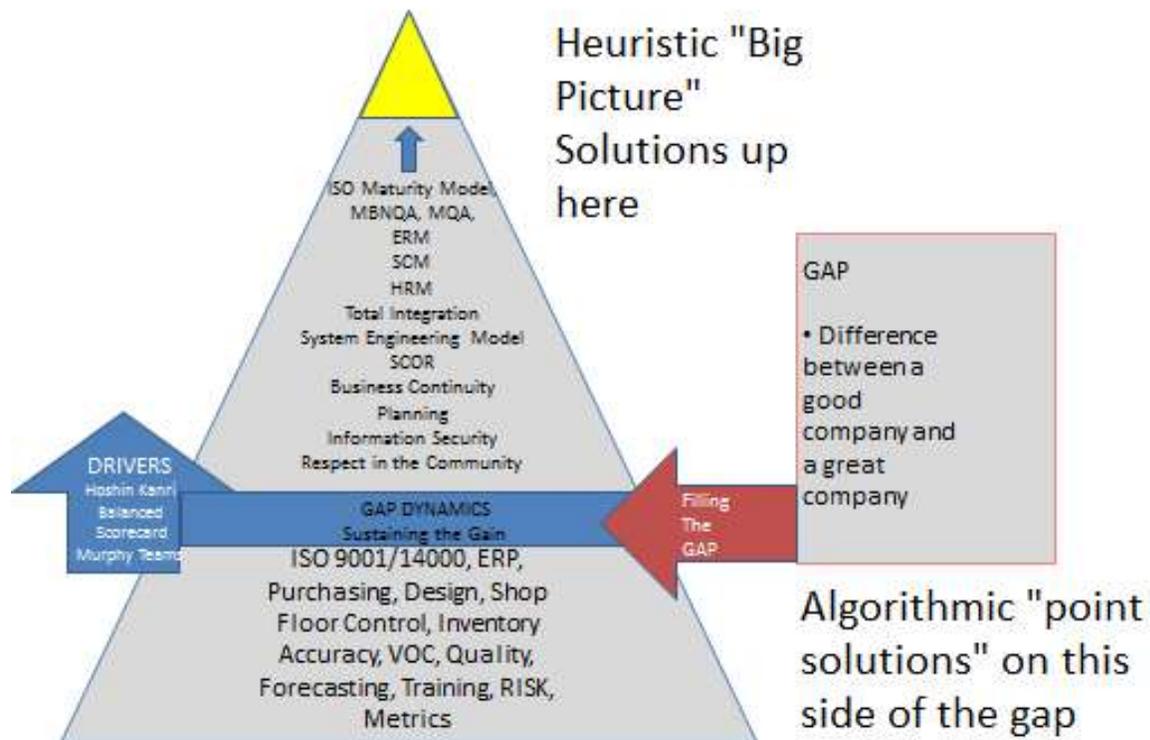
The algorithmic level is prescriptive. Do this, don't do that. We strive for standard work in everything we do at the algorithmic level. While it can be very challenging to implement a maintenance personnel training program, or statistical process control, the requirements are relatively easy to determine. It's in the implementation where the difficulties arise.

Heuristic thinking, on the other hand, is problem solving on a macro scale. Instead of solving problems on a case by case basis, we strive to examine why the problem(s) occur in the first place and eliminate them at the source. In heuristic thinking an existing methodology may not even exist to get you from where you are to where you want to be, so you may have to create it.

Here we enter a fuzzy world of best practices, rules of thumb, hunches, or just plain guesswork. A solution that is less than optimum is better than no solution at all, and may point the way to a better solution over time. I call this not letting perfect be the enemy of the good. That ever practical Missourian, Harry Truman, understood this. When asked about

some of the programs he was proposing to implement and what their chances of success were, Harry simply said, “We’ll just try them — and if they don’t work — why then we’ll just try something else.”

Here’s how the two methodologies fit together under the pyramid concept:



There’s a lot there, but by no means is this a comprehensive list. No two organizations are the same and their needs are unique. But regardless of what type of organization we’re talking about, it’s fair to say that once a solid foundation is established, there is no limit to how high they can climb in their journey toward excellence.