

# Be Your Own Boss

## One professional's tale of starting his own consulting firm

**MY INTRODUCTION TO** quality started in my childhood when my dad, a senior inspector with Underwriters Laboratories (UL) in Enfield, CT, would take me to various manufacturing plants. My grandfather also worked in one of those plants as a quality control manager.

I spent time following my grandfather around his quality lab where he taught me about micrometers, dial gauges, continuity tests and statistical process control charts before I was 12 years old. As my curiosity grew, I learned about manufacturing boilers, insulation materials, circuit boards, and several other products requiring UL approval.

I was so interested in manufacturing that I earned a master's degree in industrial engineering and operations research—the lean Six Sigma equivalent education of the day.

I worked summer jobs during college, alongside my grandfather as a union continuity tester supporting the production and quality departments, and I have continued my education aggressively throughout my

career. Looking back, I am blessed that quality was embedded in my DNA.

### A quality foundation

I spent my earlier career working my way up the operations, quality and supply chain leadership ladder in several *Fortune* 500 technology companies.

I was able to actively participate in the 1980s era of quality gurus such as W. Edwards Deming, Philip Crosby, Taiichi Ohno and Genichi Taguchi, and was fortunate to meet a few of them.

I learned about the complete alphabet soup of quality acronyms, worked directly with operators and supervisors, and facilitated improvement teams. This hands-on experience taught me how to lead and manage the human drama of change while I was improving my formal education with an MBA.

I became my organization's go-to employee to work with outside consulting firms. I served on internal councils and steering groups that interfaced with these

firms on several large-scale transformation engagements.

At the time, the big brand firms brought colorful strategies, high hopes, extravagant fees, lots of training and boilerplate solutions. But these firms didn't implement much of anything.

I thought I could fill this huge void with my knowledge and experience, and decided to accept a senior operations and practice development position in the management consulting industry.

### Lessons from consulting firms

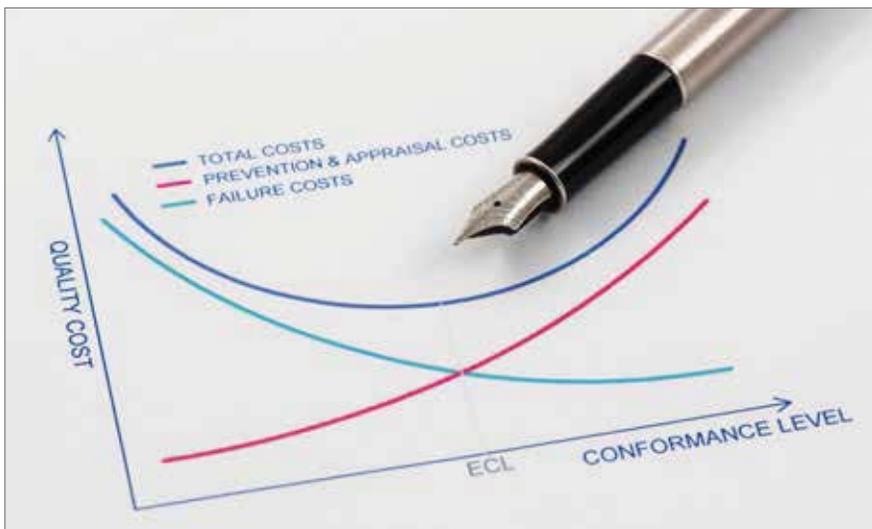
I spent eight years with a large consulting firm and had the opportunity to continue my quality and continuous improvement journey while working with dozens of premier organizations.

I enjoyed the confidence, successes and recognition for leading international engagements, going deep with clients and delivering results.

However, I eventually became frustrated by the large consulting firm model, which was heavily skewed toward billings, resource use, new MBAs and creating the standard recipe binders to enable teachable, repeatable generic offerings. It was an outstanding experience, but the model flew in the face of what I believed to be acceptable service quality, especially client-tailored execution and results.

I learned that without leadership, improvement plans are severely sub-optimized and generic, flavor-of-the-month programs come and go. I also recognized that implementation matters, but is impossible without experienced resources, and consulting fiascos are preventable.

Strategy development is a definable,



repeatable process. Implementation and delivering tangible operating results beyond expectations is much more difficult.

### Executive change leader

I came to realize that continuing to wallow around in a large consulting firm model was not going to help clients achieve the implementation opportunities that I envisioned possible.

So I went back into industry as a vice president of operations, growing an organization and implementing many breakthrough improvements that extended beyond the plant to the entire enterprise.

I enjoyed this work, but I wanted to help more organizations that were frustrated with their consulting experiences and needed additional assistance implementing quality and continuous improvement initiatives.

I found myself giving tours of our facilities and reaching out on my own time to help customers, suppliers and peer executives in other organizations. I felt bridled with the deep passion I developed for quality and continuous improvement.

In too many cases, the egos, politics, and conflicting day-to-day priorities got in the way of change. Throughout my career, I was particularly frustrated by executives who abandoned their strategic improvement initiatives when the urgency to improve was highest.

I learned that not having time to improve and do your regular job is a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure.

### The start-up

While winter mountaineering in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, the vision and brand of a new start-up company emerged. Like most entrepreneurs, the combination of frustration and opportunity usually drives the big leap into the wilderness of the unknown.

Between frustration and opportunity,

## Not having time to improve and do your regular job is a self-fulfilling prophecy for failure.

my inner voice that kept saying, “Do it!” This inner-self provided persistence and determination, and my previous work experience gave me confidence in my convictions. I soon left the corporate environment again, and started my own management consulting firm, the Center for Excellence in Operations Inc.

The mission was simple: Strategic and operations improvement, with a primary focus on “for real” implementation and tangible results, and a bold goal of annualized benefits equal to at least ten times our fees—our 10x principle). That was 25 years ago. Today, we retain the fresh, start-up culture of leading and delivering innovative solutions to strategic improvement.

Implementation represents about 80% of the scope of our engagements, and we have a successful and documented track record of achieving results equivalent to an annualized client return on investment of at least 10 to 50 times our fees.

Today, we have worked with more than 350 organizations in 23 countries around the globe on their strategic and operational improvement initiatives with billions of dollars in accumulated savings. We have certified thousands of Six Sigma champions and Belts, and adapted strategic improvement to the complex network of professional, knowledge-based transactional processes.

### Looking back and ahead

The journey has not been some magic mantra. It all came down to thinking big, filling the implementation niche, innovation and translating my continued deep passion for improvement into a full-ser-

vice management consulting practice.

I was able to do this because of the thousands of people I worked with who shaped my skills and development, especially emotional intelligence and conviction for quality and continuous improvement. If you're missing this passion, you simply cannot achieve excellence in quality or any other pursuit.

Another critical success factor was proactive creativity, innovation and execution capabilities in delivering solutions. There's no standard recipe for implementation, and the next implementation project is always more robust and value contributing than the previous one.

Tangible results, validated by the client's financial organization is a huge differentiator of performance. A small firm cannot compete by doing the same things as the larger firms.

This constant search for critical-to-customer needs, continuously improving our service offerings, and learning how to walk between the toes of the larger firms is the key to success.

It's a continuous process of finding the niche, and applying the principles of quality and continuous improvement to create unmatched service and value proposition. **QP**



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