

## Schools Continue To Push Products; Industry Today Has Them Pulled.

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The Industrial Model often cited to describe how our education system works is a curious notion, for it seems to frame our children as products who move along a pedagogical assembly line. Automating tools are used to make the assembly line workers more efficient and less prone to error, standardized measurements of the products (our children) are taken as they move from station to station, and assembly line workers (teachers and principals) are held accountable for the quality of the products that pass under their care. It is a mechanized, and seemingly reasonable, way to produce predictable results in academic achievement.

As a business model, however, the assembly line metaphor has a problem: Industry has moved beyond it. The model has proven to be a wasteful and inadequate way to deal with diverse customer needs. The business model generally embraced today rests on the principles of Total Quality Management, one in particular referred to as SIPOC. Success now depends less on “pushing” products through the system, and more on allowing customers to “pull” products through the system. The well-known 1990 book by James Womack, “The Machine That Changed The World,” helped compel many US companies to abandon their traditional “product push” way-of-doing-business in favor of a “customer pull” way-of-doing-business, with transformational results. The assembly line hasn’t been abandoned, but few executives today run their business as though it were one.

SIPOC, a six-sigma principle, stands for *Supplier => Input => Process => Output => Customer*. It establishes the customer-pull framework widely employed in industry today. SIPOC asserts that business performance significantly improves when it is operationally driven by the *voice-of-the-customer*. This voice is in the form of data that informs the business of its product requirements, which are satisfied by *agile* business processes. SIPOC is an information intensive model: Data flows, in real time, bottom-up and laterally through the enterprise. It gives leaders situational awareness so they can proactively tend to operational priorities. SIPOC is dynamic and efficient. But it involves a metamorphosis for those accustomed to a more regimented way of doing business. It demands that root issues become management priorities to fix at their source, rather than compensated for in overhead. It requires long standing assumptions about how things must work to be challenged. Most of all it requires employees to become information-driven; adaptive and agile, but not arbitrary.

The assembly line metaphor establishes a product-push way of thinking. Perhaps a network of medical providers is a good metaphor to explain the customer-pull approach. Whether they are pre-natal physicians, oncologists, or end-of-life care givers, medical professionals see their patients as customers, not products that are moving from station to station in life. Patients undergo tests that vary according to their circumstances. These tests inform a *needs* assessment methodology that establishes how best to treat each patient. Treatments vary among patients but, importantly, they are not arbitrary because all medical professionals are grounded to common standards. Pull methodologies are needs-driven; they are profoundly different than methodologies that apply pre-determined treatments and

measure their effects afterwards. Consider the impact on the population if medical professionals predetermine the care they provide: How often would a patient's treatment and needs be misaligned when that patient's needs were not first reliably established? Therein lies the inherent wastefulness and inefficiency of the push model.

Nature and nurture forces induce variability among our children that is beyond the manageable control of educators. This is why "pushing" a predetermined learning experience on all students in a given classroom is innately problematic. Even at lower grade levels our GT kids begin to expose the model's shortcomings. But misalignment problems come to a head in our high schools when student variability cannot be contained within manageable bounds. The classroom venue is not the problem: Nor are the students: The push model is what needs fixing. Education executives can follow industry's lead and deal with student variability as a market reality, rather than an assembly line problem. This is what the pull model is designed for.

The customer-pull approach is entirely applicable to education and involves far fewer challenges than what the large pharmaceutical and consumer products corporations had to overcome. Educators could begin by abandoning the notion that students are products. For customer-pull to work in education, students must be positioned as the "pullers" because they alone are the consumers of the learning experience. So long as students are thought to be products of the teaching process, rather than its customers, conflicts with quality tenets will make this premise operationally unwieldy for teachers.

Under SIPOC, students are *customers* whose voices inform teachers of their current needs, not past accomplishments. Teaching *processes* are composed of methodologies designed to deliver, as an *output*, a learning experience that is aligned with each student's current needs. Sounds a bit theoretical, but it's not. In a "pull" world, the iterative cycle of assessing needs and delivering an aligned learning experience becomes a *measurable* business process that incrementally improves, over time, its impact on every student.

Consider where this model leads relative to where things stand today in education. Like the pre-born child who iteratively speaks through standardized medical tests, our students must be given voices that lack ambiguity. This sheds new light on today's standardized assessment practices. In the pull world, assessments belong to a front-end *listening* methodology that informs teachers of a student's needs. Yet today's practices are outgrowths of back-end *grading* methodologies designed to measure the effects of what has already been taught; a typical product-push practice. For reasons built into their design, current assessment practices do not illuminate student needs in ways sufficient to be actionable *inputs* to the teaching process.

One can quickly see implications of a methodology designed to illuminate needs, rather than effects. One being that assessments must occur repetitively while the student is under the teacher's care, because needs continuously evolve. Another is that assessments must be grounded to established standards and benchmarks, otherwise arbitrariness (which is pervasive today) results. Another significant and less obvious implication is this: As with medical professionals, a teacher's impact is intrinsically linked to her ability correctly diagnose each student's needs and deliver a learning experience that is *correctly aligned* with those needs. In other words, "pull" imposes a *proficiency* requirement on teachers that "push" does not. The push model, where the learning experience is predetermined, does not require that teachers possess valid diagnostic competencies even though educators intuitively know this is a good skill to have. The pull model requires that teachers develop a working understanding of established standards to ensure they are diagnostically proficient. Here, the ability of every teacher to correctly assess her students' needs against established standards emerges as a *core competency* to be objectively measured and continuously developed in all teachers.

Teachers cannot successfully employ “pull” methods in a “push” world. These are fundamentally different models that lead to different business priorities, investment priorities, professional development priorities, technology strategies, and ultimately student achievement. And they have different costs associated with them: The scope and cost of intervention programs today are reflections of the voluminous misalignments the “push” model ensures will occur in our high schools.

All educators should be aware that, since the 90’s, customer-pull principles have been transforming industries around the globe. This powerfully efficient way of doing business could be, but is not, how our high schools function today. With proper needs assessment methodologies, our youth could be given unambiguous voices. Educators could become diagnostically proficient, agile, and less arbitrary; and their performance can be objectively measured by these abilities. Attention would turn to the crucial role of infrastructure in our high schools because that is where the process of assessing needs and delivering aligned learning experiences occurs. The IT emphasis would be less on automating tasks and more on improving this core process that teachers and principals own. And, the administrative overhead required to support today’s way-of-doing-business would be significantly streamlined. Industry has already demonstrated these things.

Customer-pull honors the fact that students are wired differently. It’s OK that Sally, because she is more “gifted,” will continually increase her academic distance from Billy who may be less “gifted.” It’s OK because the business model, by its design, helps teachers treat both Sally and Billy in a maximally impactful way. Student diversity is no longer the teacher’s problem alone. Her methodologies no longer tether Sally and Billy together just because an administrative construct, called grade level, does so. Growth can be maximized for each student despite the student population’s diverse characteristics, and the population as a whole will grow faster.

Over a decade ago, competitive forces compelled many US companies to embrace the customer-pull way of doing business, with transformational results. The barriers to bringing this model to our schools are little more than conceptual hurdles. The implementation template is understood. Doing so would not be disruptive because it is introduced incrementally. Nor would it be costly: Quality guru Philip Crosby would assert that it’s free. History suggests that true school reform will ultimately involve an industry-grade customer-pull way of doing business.