“Take the Fear Out of the System”

Edwards Deming was a giant in the world’s emerging adoption of quality improvement processes following WWII. Largely ignored by American manufacturers (who believed they could sell anything to the war-starved populace), he went to Japan, whose industrial sector had been decimated by the war. He became a national hero as they adopted his methods. The result included what we now know as Sony, Nikon, Honda, Toyota, Canon – you get the picture.

Deming sought to capture his philosophy in a list of 14 principles, one of which has become a guiding vision for the ACCJC Commission. “Take the fear out of the system,” he urged. “Fear is paralyzing. Therefore, fear must be eliminated . . . so that everyone can work effectively for the company, feel safe and take risks.”

Consider several reasons why this is so relevant to the work of accreditation.

Where there is fear, artifice thrives. Bad news is hidden; unflattering data are massaged or omitted; unhappy people are scheduled away from the review team. The fundamental goal of a candid and disclosive self-analysis is subverted. “Whenever there is fear,” Deming said, “you will get wrong figures.”

When Jack Welch took over the leadership of General Electric in 1981, he found nine layers of management, each one of which was afraid to send bad news up the chain to the next higher level. No managers wanted to be thought of as incompetent by their superiors; they were afraid to be judged as inept. So, when things were going terribly wrong in one of GE’s many divisions, all the problematic data got filtered out, layer by layer, until the top level was blindsided when the division’s performance was discovered.

How do you make it safe to send bad news up the chain? By taking the fear out of the system. In the accreditation arena, this has to begin, as it were, at the top. If an institution’s board or CEO are afraid of earning a negative report from a peer review team, or a long list of compliance recommendations from the Commission, or, worse yet, a sanction, that fear can trickle down to other levels. Fear can flavor the self-study, tilting it toward a public relations blurb where all is goodness and light.

To take the fear out of the system does not mean that every institution gets a free pass in an accreditation review. Peer review teams and the Commission still take their responsibilities very seriously. This includes making an informed and accurate determination about the strengths and the compliance challenges of an institution as it is weighed against accepted standards. There are, however, several specific strategies that are focused on reducing fear.

These strategies include ensuring that the ACCJC vice presidents are very available to each institution to explain expectations, to answer questions about data and interpretation of Standards, and to become better acquainted with the institution’s issues and achievements as they staff and train the peer review team. These strategies embrace carefully training team members to ensure no one is looking for “gotchas” in order to prove they are doing their job. They include a spirit of collaboration to assist an institution in identified areas of weakness. And they include ensuring that the Commission’s decision processes are marked with informed fairness, unquestioned integrity, and a posture of helpfulness.
In my years as a classroom teacher, I saw that fear induces anxiety in my students. And as anxiety goes up, learning goes down. Defensiveness takes over as students seek to protect their sense of who they are. It becomes more difficult for them to acknowledge blind spots, admit errors in understanding, and embrace new insights. As a teacher, with a responsibility to assign grades to my students’ work – grades that could impact their chances for scholarships or graduate school admissions – I knew that the grading event was laced with fear. It was my conscious goal to make the classroom a safe place for learning, even though the end-of-term grading event remained fraught.

A Commission action letter, conveying its judgment on an institution’s efforts, is akin to a grade report. It’s a fact that accreditors do make consequential decisions. Institutions are always a work in progress, with shortcomings of varied weight to address. These must be named if improvement is the goal. Sometimes accreditors have to take actions designed to gain an institution’s serious attention, or to bring together contesting power centers that haven’t been able to bridge their differences in order to serve the institution. To achieve this without relying on fear as the motivator is an ongoing challenge.

In spite of an accreditor’s efforts, there will be times when its actions will provoke fear. Though this fear can be powerful, it remains the poorest of all long-term motivators for productive change. Fear drives attention to extrinsic factors, getting in the way of the need to internalize the motivation for change and to embrace the underlying principles in the Standards.

Unfortunately, fear can become systemic. Accreditation is a process that touches thousands of people. If fear has been a component of that interaction, it can shape their attitudes and subvert their work. If it flavors every conversation about accreditation, it has pervaded the culture. And culture is the most challenging aspect of the human experience to change.

For ACCJC, taking the fear out of the system is not a pronouncement; it is a step forward in a long journey.