



Spreading a Virus to Get Non-readers to Read

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 program

Although it happened back in 1991, it seems like it was only yesterday when I graduated from university. My first job was at Trinity University of Asia, my alma mater. I taught there for three years before moving to Betty Go-Belmonte Elementary School (BGBES). It was a big change, transferring from a private to a public school. Sometime during my 20-year stay at BGBES, I

took a 20-month leave to teach at an exclusive boarding school in China. That was when I realised that, though I may not have wanted to move to the public school at first, I left my heart at BGBES. I went back and have been there ever since.

I am a sixth grade teacher. I was chosen to be one of the team leaders of the second batch of teachers attending the PAHRODF-organised training on the Continuous Improvement Program (CI). The CI provides a systematic and customer-centred methodology for problem solving and decision making which, in turn, helps develop a mindset of continuous improvement. In this case, we were to apply it at the school level.

The CI was very focused and change-driven. We did not know how to translate our proposed solutions to real problems. This is where the 10-step process of the CI proved to be helpful.

Our team was already hard at work as early as three days after training. We identified our priority improvement area, which was reading. The second grade was a crucial time for children to develop and learn, but as of June 2013, out of the 339 pupils at BGBES, there were 128 (38 percent) who were non-readers in English and 81 (24 percent) who were non-readers in Filipino. These were children who could not even read syllables. We decided to apply the CI to an existing project called Daily Achievement Road to Excellence (DARE) and to transform it into an intensified remedial reading program for second graders.

We were on fire! There were eight of us working at all hours of the day. We would sometimes stay in school until 2:00 A.M. to organize, use the Internet, and finish paperwork. We would have meetings in hallways, over the telephone, through email—anywhere we had a chance, whenever there was something we needed to discuss. PAHRODF Coach Noly Cayabyab assisted us on Saturdays. Ms. Caroline S. Sonquit, our principal then, would also come to school on Sundays and cook for us. It was challenging to be spending so much time together at first because the team had to adjust to each other and to the workload, but I think we all knew it was a great opportunity. That is what kept us going.

Problems were identified and solutions were strategised. To succeed, we had to engage all the stakeholders—from the children, their parents, peer mentors, teachers, librarian, and even the *barangay* (village) officials. I thought to myself, I must keep the momentum of the program

going for as long as there remains a non-reader in BGBES. That was how we overcame obstacles.

We tried to engage the *barangay*, and the *barangay* Chair offered to print and reproduce our reading materials. We were able to use *barangay* vehicles to fetch parents and students who failed to come to remedial reading classes. This spurred more positive participation from the teachers and the parents because the community was getting involved. The level of commitment of the stakeholders to the project was at its highest. Desire caught on. At the end of the school year, we only had two students who remained non-readers. The program was a success!

It was not easy for me to be a team leader. The only other nongovernment group I worked with was ABS-CBN Foundation, and they mostly gave classroom materials to BGBES. The CI was different because it was a process that needed to be introduced into a system. It involved change. I found that I was able to make change happen not only in BGBES, but also within myself.

My mother was hospitalised during our first training for the CI, but I had to choose to work because I was assigned to be the leader of the team. During the second training, while our

project was underway, my mother died. I was at her wake, with my computer, working. It was my moral obligation to work. I feared that my siblings would hold it against me, but I am glad they did not.

Knowledge is hard to gain but emotions are even harder to conquer. Looking back, I see that I was able to rise above my feelings. I actually surprised myself. I developed my critical thinking skills more, discovered and maximised my strengths, identified and addressed my weaknesses, and saw how cooperation can have a 'snowball' effect. My fire burns brighter than ever!

Our use of the CI has caught the attention of the Department of Education. I have been challenged to "spread the CI virus" without a budget. They want it mainstreamed. Just like my fellow team leaders who are coaching new teams from other schools, I am now assigned to coach a team of teachers from San Jose Elementary School. Unlike materials, which cost money and can be lost, the CI is a process that stays with you once you have internalised it. It also has a big potential to cause ripples of change. The only investment needed is patience in the process. I have a lot of that to give, by the grace and love of God.

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