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Anyone Can Improve His or Her Life: The Principles of Quality

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ANYONE
can
IMPROVE
his or her
LIFE

THE PRINCIPLES OF QUALITY

Don Dewsnap

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Chapter One

What Does It Mean to Make Things Better?

Failure is not lack of perfection. A person is not a “failure” if he is not perfect. Failure is only lack of improvement. A person who is improving is succeeding. As he improves his own life and the lives of people around him, he is more and more successful. There are no upper limits.

Whether a person is five or fifty, he can change. That is one of the wonderful things about being alive. The past, and everything a person has done or thought or learned, is done. It's over. One can do and think and learn new things in the present, and in the future. One can improve. The big question, of course, is how?

This book is one way. It doesn't cover all of life, or provide every possible avenue to improvement, but it does cover one very workable avenue very thoroughly. Some of the things you will read here you will agree with, and start to use. Some of them, you might not. That is okay. I don't expect or want you to take my word for anything in this book. This is not about faith. This is about logic, and experience, and what works for you.

Let's start with logic.

To make something better is to improve its quality.

This is a statement of fact, not an opinion. It applies to everything: food, a car, a poem, a life. It applies to actions and to results. From mudpies to diamond rings, or juggling to chess, if you make it better, you improve its quality.

The definition of quality I use in this book is “superiority in comparison to others in its class.” “Class” means “a group whose members have similar characteristics.” That applies to anything: people, things, or concepts. The definition does not say, “in comparison to *all* the others in its class.” Something does not have to be the absolute best to have a level of quality. One can and does raise the level of quality of something by making it better.

Quality doesn’t just happen. Talking about quality doesn’t create it, and calling a movie a “quality movie” doesn’t make it one. Working hard does not lead to quality by itself; nor does reading books, saving money, or planting so many seeds in your garden that some of them have to grow. Quality happens when people DO the ACTIONS that result in quality. What are those actions that people do? Ask a hundred people who have made things better in their lives and actions and creations how they did it, and you will get a hundred different answers.

Here comes the big news, underneath those hundred answers:

There are actual, knowable principles to quality.

You *can* make things better. It is not that hard.

People make quality a mystery by discussing it with big words and tying it into psychology and philosophy, and talking about what it is and what it isn’t and how to create it and how not to create it, until you wish you had never heard the word. Advertising agencies use the word “quality” with every other breath, and have no idea what it means. They are not trying to make things better – they are trying to sell more of them.

Who should you believe? None of them. You learn the principles of quality for yourself, so you understand them and can use them. The principles are not a matter of faith, belief, or opinion. You learn a principle, you try it, and if it works for you, you use it.

Chapter Two

Four Truths About Quality

Before getting to the actual principles of quality, I have to point out some basic truths about quality. Notice, I said “point out.” These are things you already know; I am just reminding you, so you can relate the truths you know to the principles to come.

The first thing to recognize and acknowledge about quality is that it is real.

Quality is not some ideal that can only be talked about in the abstract. Nor is quality an imaginary concept. The proof of this is easy: if quality did not exist, its absence would not be noticeable. Yet you and I notice the lack of quality every day, in errors, and things that don’t work, and inappropriate actions, and bad drivers.

When does one notice the absence of something? When one is expecting its presence. One does not expect the presence of things that aren’t real. You don’t expect a unicorn, so you don’t notice its absence. You *do* expect a clean fork in a restaurant, so you notice a dirty one.

This actually shows something else about quality: people expect it. At some gut level, people know that quality is real, and is how things should be. They expect when they hit a nail with a hammer, the head of the hammer won’t fly off. They expect when they board an airplane that the airplane won’t crash. It’s just not something most people think about, any more than they think about whether the sun will rise.

The second thing to know about quality, is that there is way too little of it.

Since people generally don't think about quality, they don't have much attention on it. It is not a factor in their calculations in the day-to-day processes of living. Except when it is demanded of them, people do not take quality into account in their actions or decisions. Time, money, and entertainment value are all higher in people's minds than quality. This is harsh, but it is true.

Perhaps a few examples will help. How hard is it to find an auto mechanic you can trust? How often do you wait in line longer than should be necessary? How many of your friends complain about their children, or spouse? How often is your name spelled wrong? The more you look for lack of quality, the more you can find. Heck, just start counting unwashed windows.

Why is this important, that there is way too little quality? Because I want you to fully understand the potential you are playing with here. It doesn't take a whole lot of improvement to reach higher levels in anything. Thus it doesn't take a whole lot of effort to move up. You only have to build a mound of earth a few inches high to stand above the crowd. This analogy only goes so far, but I hope you get the point: there is plenty of room to advance into, and not much competition.

The third truth about quality is that it is under your control.

No one can make you do anything better than you are willing and able to do. Another person can order you, beg you, bribe you, threaten you, or otherwise try to make you do something better, but they cannot climb into your skin and run your mind and body. This is a good thing. What they think is better may or may not be the same thing that you think is better.

On the other hand, and more important, no one can stop you from doing something better. They can put obstacles in your way, insult you, delay you, or betray you, but they cannot stop you. They may even be able to prevent you from reaching your highest goals, but they can't stop you from moving in that direction.

Part of this truth about quality being under your control is deciding how important the quality of something is to you. You might care very much how your food tastes, while another will eat anything. John needs a new car, while Harry is happy with an old one. You might agree that Tiger Woods is the greatest golfer ever but think he is wasting his life on a silly game. That particular measure of quality is not important to you, and certainly not something you would put any energy into improving in yourself. You may decide that the quality of your marriage is very important to you, and worth some effort.

So when I say quality is under your control, I mean you decide how good you want something to be, and how much effort you are willing to put into making it that good. No one else can make those decisions for you, or stop you from making them for yourself.

The fourth truth about quality is that it measures workability.

This truth is fundamental to the rest of this book. All of the principles and actions that follow are based on this truth. This book itself is subject to it, in fact. If what you are about to read doesn't work for you, this book is a waste of paper and your time.

“Superiority to others in its class” must contain the element of workability. One computer program may be more elegant and effective than another for a particular purpose, but be so difficult to operate that it is almost impossible to learn. It is not workable. It is not actually superior, at least not for most people. The same would go for a machine or a football playbook. Great football plays are low quality if they can't be run.

I remember seeing a system for keeping track of the maintenance of a fleet of buses. The paperwork was so involved, down to keeping track of the location and use of every nut and bolt, that I could tell it would never be fully used, would not produce the desired result, would waste huge numbers of man-hours on paperwork that could never be complete or accurate, and would lead to worse maintenance than already existed. It was a beautiful piece of work, and completely unworkable.

One more example, just to drive the point home. How do you measure quality in a husband? If your concept of the ideal husband is one who rules his family with an iron fist, considers his wife as a convenience and his kids as annoyances, but holds a job and pays the bills, you run into this truth about workability. That ideal does not prove to be workable. The wife and kids are not happy, maybe they even leave the husband, but at the least they do not work together as a family. There are constant upsets and battles, and no cooperation. It is not a happy scene.

Here is the bottom line: if your scene is not a happy scene, a lack of quality exists. Something is not workable in the direction you have been going. Maybe you haven't even been going in any particular direction. On the other hand, if your scene is getting better, maybe it's not everything you want it to be but it is moving in that direction, then quality exists, and is increasing. What you are doing is working.

In the first case, adding the quality principles and actions in this book to your life can give you some direction. In the second, they can speed your progress. Above all, they are workable, and lead toward workable ideals.

Chapter Four

Applying the Principles of Quality

Radical changes seldom succeed. Heck, they're seldom even possible. You have an ocean liner going 24 knots, it is not going to turn on a dime. The trick to success is small changes, but directed. Random changes don't lead anywhere. Trying this, trying that, trying something else, just wastes energy and, as failures add up, reinforces the losing idea of "why even try?"

Making small changes which are all directed toward a specific goal is the way to go. The goal may be large, like owning a house, or small, like making your wife happy to see you when you get home from work. You can be working toward many goals at once, as long as the goals do not conflict. Keep the goals in sight, and keep them alive by making small steps toward them.

People want things to happen fast, at least in modern Western culture. Win the lottery. Invest in a business that's going to shoot through the roof. Get in on the ground floor of a multi-level marketing company. Make a suggestion and expect instant agreement and reward. Yet the overwhelming evidence is that very, very few people get rich quick, or make it to the top overnight. The hope is always there, and there's nothing wrong with hope. By all means, keep hope alive. But keep it where it should be: in a back pocket, out of the way. It might not take as long as you think it will to reach that goal. It might take longer. But hoping for it won't make it happen any faster.

The way to get from where you are now to your goal is to move in that direction. Move. That means, change position. Not randomly, but toward the goal. It is going to take many steps, but not an infinite number. Guaranteed, it is going to take more steps than you think it should. You

are going to have to circle around or climb over obstacles that have no business being there, but they are. Life is like that, because life is made up of people, and people are not always looking for ways to make *your* path easier.

You can have an advantage, however. You can understand what it takes, how to get there, and how to get past obstacles. You can have a map and the necessary equipment. It doesn't matter where you start from. With a map, with the tools, and with a goal, you can have the advantage. Let me repeat: it doesn't matter where you start from.

We are moving toward that map, and those tools, with every page of this book. It's taking a while, because the map and the tools are not obvious. Well, actually, they are, once you know them. All this prelude, though, is just to gently lead you to be willing to accept the possibility that they might exist. They are not magic, though they have magical results. They are real, doable actions, and real, knowable ideas.

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