



ASQ Primary and Secondary Education Brief

Learning to Work Together

Q&A with Henry Lindborg and Stephen Spangehl

Interview by Megan Schmidt, editor

It takes a village. Two heads are better than one. There is no “I” in team. Even if these phrases are a little trite, most of us would acknowledge that there’s some truth to them. One person can only do so much alone. However, there may be an essential element missing from education quality improvement—teamwork.

When it comes to improving education, it’s often the case that one advocate of change focuses on one problem at one school. But this is not the way to achieve sustainable change, according to [Henry Lindborg and Stephen Spangehl, hosts of a preconference workshop on Nov. 16 before the National Education Quality Conference \(NEQC\), Nov. 17-18, in Milwaukee.](#)

Representatives from multiple stakeholder groups must collaborate and use a systemwide lens to understand and fix quality problems, they said.

Lindborg and Spangehl's workshop will explore how successful project teams—transcending organizational silos and empowered to work collaboratively—can create permanent and systematic improvements that continue to improve even when senior leadership changes. Recently, Lindborg and Spangehl answered some questions for the *ASQ Education Brief*, providing a preview of what they'll cover in their NQEC workshop.

ASQ Education Brief: *What role does organizational culture play in improvement?*

Lindborg and Spangehl: Culture shapes, influences and determines how employees work, think and act together and independently. A healthy organization's culture promotes teamwork for innovation and problem solving. We've found that the most dependable sources of improvements in organizations are diverse teams whose members can see a problem from multiple perspectives and whose combined ideas are most likely to contain the most innovative solutions.

Organizations can improve their cultures and work processes to achieve better performance. Our work with hundreds of institutions demonstrates that the most effective way to stimulate positive cultural change is to use project teams to design and implement specific improvements. While the projects get important things accomplished, each project team acquires valuable new skills and attitudes. This provides their institution significantly increased capabilities to undertake future improvements.

ASQ Education Brief: *How does culture in education differ from other sectors? What considerations make it unique?*

Lindborg and Spangehl: Teachers develop and mature as independent agents, working alone and managing the operations for which they are responsible—their classes, independently. As students, they learned to work without help from others. Their success in the academic world encouraged them to continue those habits as teachers. But to solve the challenges educational institutions face, we need to help them participate in focused collaboration with other faculty and staff members. Isolated individuals working independently can't solve the complex problems that schools face.

Everyone working in a school has lived in the culture of educational institutions from childhood on, and consciously or unconsciously absorbed the sector's assumptions, norms, values and ideals. Consequently, each teacher also has his or her own perspectives that are rooted in personal experience. No other environment comes close to affecting so many minds and lives. Collectively, any school's employees offer an incredibly rich resource. But to use that key resource productively, teachers and staff need methods to pool their perceptions and experiences, discover where they agree and convert their shared conclusions into actions. Projects teach them how to do these things.

ASQ Education Brief: *What do you think is one of education's greatest opportunities for improvement?*

Lindborg and Spangehl: There is constant innovation among educators. Teachers and administrators uncover new ways to motivate students, organize knowledge to improve learning, confront and solve learning obstacles, and reduce cost and waste so schools run more

efficiently. However, many educators are so focused on their own schools and their own students that they fail to share what they have learned and never transmit their discoveries and innovations to others. This forces teachers and administrators to duplicate what others have already done and it makes real progress in education much slower, more costly and painful than it should be.

Creating a more robust and systematic network to help educators learn what their colleagues have already discovered would accelerate improvement. We've had some success in creating such a network, and have immediate plans to build on our successes. Project teams let individuals pool their creativity and energy within a school to make needed improvements, and we believe effective networks of schools working on similar challenges could have the same benefits at a super-institutional level. Benchmarking is a primitive form of sharing between institutions. Thoughtful and systematic sharing among an assembly of diverse schools powers a much stronger engine to drive improvement.

ASQ Education Brief: *Your session focuses on the quick identification of improvement projects—why is this approach important or effective?*

Lindborg and Spangehl: Momentum is critical. Until a school's teachers, staff and administrators appreciate that real change is within their grasp, their willingness to work together to make significant things happen will be hindered. Dampening the energies and enthusiasm of all the smart, creative people that make up an educational institution squanders its most precious asset. It's important to highlight dramatic examples of how teams can quickly

size up problems and solve them—supplying the catalyst that enables others to see they can be part of teams that could do the same. If done right, the result is a chain reaction of improvement projects that add up to significant advancement for the organization

Projects conducted by teams have beginnings and endings. Committees often undertake tasks that drag on for years without visible results. Initiatives with clear timelines and progress milestones create confidence, build momentum and renew faith that change is possible here.

ASQ Education Brief: *What advice would you give to faculty or staff just starting their quality improvement journey?*

Lindborg and Spangehl: Improvements sometimes happen spontaneously, but relying on accidental improvement is a perilous strategy. Conscious improvement comes from identifying an area where the current status quo isn't good enough, putting together a diverse team that can analyze what's going on by examining it from a variety of perspectives, and empowering and facilitating the team to come up with new approaches that can be tested, fine-tuned and deployed effectively. Our experience shows that finding these improvement opportunities, creating teams to exploit them and enabling teams to implement successful solutions doesn't just happen. It requires conscious and intentional effort. Organizations that learn how to create and nurture improvement projects advance quickly and consistently, while those that don't will travel in circles and be doomed to repeat past performance mistakes instead of solving them.

About the authors

Henry J. Lindborg is a graduate professor in the organizational leadership program he developed based on the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. A pioneer in the application of quality systems to higher education, he has made significant contributions to regional accreditation in design and implementation of the Academic Quality Improvement Program. He has served as division chair, dean of faculty, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Senior Vice President. He consults with organizations on strategic planning, quality systems, project management and values integration. He is a founder of the ASQ Education Division and chairs Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers' Career Workforce Policy Committee. He holds degrees from Fordham University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Stephen D. Spangehl directs higher education programs for Plexus International, a Minneapolis-based provider of quality assurance training. From 1999 to 2012, Spangehl created and directed the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), the Higher Learning Commission's alternative accreditation process for over 200 institutions focused on systematic continuous quality improvement. Before founding AQIP, Spangehl worked (from 1991 to 1999) with traditional institutional accreditation processes for over 250 colleges and universities. He has also held faculty and administrative positions at the University of Louisville in Louisville, the University of Akron in Ohio and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he earned a doctorate in English philology.