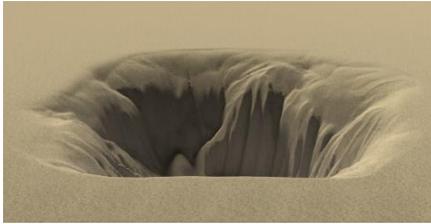


## Leading Improvement why experience and skills are not enough



In this article you will learn why experience and skills are not enough to assure the highest levels of success and sustainability with improvement initiatives in healthcare. The reason this is true has to do with...quicksand.

### From solid ground to quicksand

When I was a kid, quicksand seemed to show up in movies quite a bit. People would be on the beach or in the jungle walking on what seemed like solid ground and suddenly get stuck. In quicksand, you lose freedom of movement. The more you try to move, the more stuck you get.

### Solid ground in improvement

The solid ground of successful improvement is established by the evidence-based changes and quality improvement methods that guide us. This *technical* approach is essential for success.

But, the highest levels of success and sustainability depend on integrating a *relational* approach. Relationships which facilitate psychological safety and intrinsic motivation improve learning, innovation, and performance. This requires maintaining open, honest conversations which elicit and explore each person's feelings, disagreements, ideas, and concerns.

So, the true solid ground for the best success requires *integration* of technical and relational approaches. This demands a lot of mental and emotional agility to fit the needs of each unique situation. The technical approach involves the logical, objective, and systematic. Its focus is role, task, and performance-centered. The relational approach involves the subjective, intuitive, and nonlinear. Its focus is person-centered—that is, on others' feelings and concerns.

### Quicksand in improvement

Just as real-life quicksand restricts freedom of movement, two major factors are quicksand-like in restricting mental and emotional agility by pulling us strongly toward the technical. First, our professional culture has greatly emphasized the technical over the relational. Second, even minor stresses trigger automatic habits of mind hard-wired into our brains. These habits cause leaps to quick solutions and a fast-paced task orientation. If the technical approach is over-emphasized, relational difficulties are at high risk for emerging like resistance, disengagement, meetings that go awry, and unresolved conflict.

The quicksand-like effects of professional culture and automatic habits occur in our blind spots. It is astonishingly easy to over-emphasize the technical even with high relational commitment, experience, and skills. In my years as an improvement leader, despite my strong relational orientation and skills, I now see that I would think I was being relational in my friendliness and positive engagement of others in problem solving. But, under the pressure to get results, I did

not slow down often enough to assure each person was engaged around deeper questions about feelings, what they really cared about, and personal challenges.

### **Getting unstuck**

While quicksand never goes away, we can diminish the frequency and duration of getting stuck through a *steady* practice which continuously enhances our mental and emotional agility. This practice involves reflecting about work situations before and after using questions that hold the mirror to our own thinking and feelings. Here are a few examples that I find powerful.

- How am I thinking, feeling, and acting in this situation?
- What is my vision for the results, relationships and culture I want to achieve?
- Where are there discrepancies between my current actions vs. my vision?
- What are my options for improving my next conversation?

The more we reflect about work situations before and after, the more agility we develop in-the-moment, in the midst of work, to assure progress on the relational and the technical in ways that fit each situation.

Reflective practice is hard to develop and sustain entirely on our own. Ideally, we would receive support through our leadership teams in a group practice. But, this is too often not available. Episodic individual coaching is another option. I have developed a hybrid of teaching, consultation, and coaching to strengthen practice while addressing immediate problems. To find out more, click on the link below.

Through many years of working with reflective practice, I am excited about the success that can be achieved. There are usually far more good intentions and skills to tackle relational difficulties than seems apparent from current behaviors. Even just 15 – 20 minute of practice a week can have positive impact. By taking the time, we get out of quicksand more quickly and ultimately save a lot of time.

**To schedule an introductory meeting about hybrid teaching, consultation, and coaching I offer, click below.**

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I offer packages of 90-day, 6-month, and 12-month services all through video meetings. Customization is also possible.

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## About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. helps healthcare leaders identify and remove barriers to improvement and innovation by linking results, relationships, and culture in their actions moment-to-moment in the midst of daily work.

He is adept at assisting leaders in using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results. He has developed these approaches through more than 30 years as an organizational leader, speaker, consultant, and coach. His clients have included the Peterson Center on Healthcare, Health Quality Partners, the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, and the Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care.

His experience includes serving as faculty and improvement advisor over 17 years for multiple initiatives for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Boston, Massachusetts; Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative (now part of the Kaiser system) in Seattle, Washington; and Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center

You can learn more on his website at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com).