

Dr. Fix-It

**How's your business or organization running?
This expert has answers.**

by Richard J. Alley

More than 30 years ago, the son of a jeweler came to Memphis from his home in Kentucky and went to work repairing watches and setting gems for Dreyfus Jewelry.

These days, as the Executive Director and CEO of the Mid-South Quality Productivity Center, Donn Fisher's mission is to take the hard black lumps in many businesses and transform them into diamonds of industry.

The Mid-South Quality Productivity Center is a Baldrige-based center in partnership with the Greater Memphis Chamber and Southwest Tennessee Community College, and is the only such center in the country to be partnered with a Chamber of Commerce.

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award is a performance excellence award given by the President of the United States to businesses based on seven criteria: leadership; strategic planning; customer and market focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; workforce focus; process management; and results. When evaluating, Fisher's team will interview the various levels of an organization including top leadership, middle management and the front line of employees. They will ask about 90 questions against the Baldrige standard and then come back with a strategic review of the most important strengths, opportunities for improvement and strategic issues that they need to do to turn the organization around to be the best class in their industry.

"I think a lot of folks in Memphis don't know that we're one of the

leading global Baldrige centers," Fisher said. "We've done over 100 assessments for Memphis City Schools over seven years. We've done assessments for St. Jude, Le Bonheur Children's Medical Center, Shelby County government, and we've assessed most of the infrastructure in Memphis over the last 18 years."

Fisher received an undergraduate degree in business and journalism, and a master's degree in speech and communications, from Murray State University in Murray, Ky. The only job he could find immediately after college was as a trainee with Dreyfus Jewelry, having learned watch making and diamond setting at an early age. Among his customers, he counted Elvis and Vernon Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis, and rose to director of stores for the chain while still in his early 20s.

Upon leaving Dreyfus, he went to a good customer, Dr. Gene Smith, then Vice President of Memphis State University over business finance, for a reference. Dr. Smith hired Fisher as manager of staff and faculty and encouraged him to get his doctorate, which he did in organizational dynamics from University of Mississippi. "After getting my Ph.D., I wanted to do something else," Fisher explained, "so I said, 'I think I'll become a consultant' and I discovered the Baldrige Awards and ended up getting on their national board."

Fisher has developed and copyrighted the Process Activated Training System, which is based on the Baldrige model. PATS is a behavioral-based teaching and learning process that creates an environment of continuous learning

and cycle-time reduction at the job site. "Formalizing on-the-job training is what PATS does," explains Fisher.

Nearly 40 companies worldwide use PATS, yet the first organization to purchase and take advantage of the program helped to put it on the map, Fisher said. The United States Post Office became the first to use the system to do random sampling of data and set its pricing accordingly. Currently, MSQPC is working with the Memphis City School System and its 400 administrative assistants to develop legendary practices based on the Ritz Carlton's system.

Pam Doss, director of institutional effectiveness for Baptist College of Health Sciences, has known Fisher for 25 years. She had the opportunity to work with Fisher in 2008 when he and his team were asked to assess the college. "Donn knows how to ask the right questions and is extremely passionate about his work," Doss said, "I admire him tremendously."

Not only did MSQPC conduct the first round of questioning, but they worked with the college to develop their own questioning for yearly assessments to be conducted with in-house personnel. "We were very pleased with the process, it was very useful, and the goal now is to continue the work on our own, though he is continuing to coach us during the process," Doss said.

Fisher recently traveled to Thailand, funded through the non-profit Asian Pacific Organization, to speak to business leaders and present his 8th book, *Corporate Sustainability*, which includes the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Index. As one of

Donn Fisher, Executive Director & CEO of the Mid-South Quality Productivity Center, may have lost his position at the jewelry store, but now helps other businesses to run more effectively.

nine people invited by the Royal Thai Government out of Miami to represent the Chamber and visit 28 industries, Fisher conducted five seminars and visited the Thailand stock exchange. "It was a whirlwind trip," he said.

He has traveled to every continent on behalf of the Chamber and MSQPC, speaking to leaders of state and industry, and the learning has become a two-way street. "We are definitely an ambassador for Memphis, that's what our role is. I think that's what our mission is," Fisher said. "We're trying to make our business in Memphis global, and we're bringing global best practices back into our city."

The father of three, a son and two daughters, has been married to his wife, Kathleen, a Guidance Counselor at Riverdale Elementary School, for 35 years. His passions are writing and travel, and he hopes to take Kathleen with him on his next trip to Thailand.

The irony of it all is that Fisher was fired from his job at the jewelry store for suggesting that management could improve. He's been working and thinking outside of that jewelry box to help improve business practices ever since. "If I hadn't gotten fired," he laughs now, "I never would have written eight books, traveled around the world many times and become an expert in what I do."

On The Frontlines gives you a closer look at Greater Memphis Chamber executives.

