

Continuous improvement: Illusion of control (Narrative Part 2)

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

When I play on a jackpot, I tell myself that I sense the right moment to pull the arm, and thus have a better chance of a good outcome. I also imagine that I can have influence with other accidental actions. Pure superstition. In psychology, this is known as the illusion of control, also known as the Gambler's fallacy. At a young age I discovered that almost all people structurally overestimate their influence on random processes. The underlying narrative is that things you set in motion – physically by rolling the dice, for example, or mentally by thinking about something – are also connected in their course with your doing or thinking, even if they are not.

Not only gambling houses earn a lot of money with this. Even at work, as professionals, our illusion of control is also strong. Even with random processes, we secretly believe that we have influence and by definition contribute to improvement. The underlying narrative is that of development, one-way traffic, from A to Better. Many professionals can earn their living with improvement processes, for example as a continuous improvement coach (lean management). For example, an entrepreneur with a consultancy in the occupational health and safety sector told me that his services reduce absenteeism by increasing the mental resilience of the employees. According to him, a lack of mental resilience was one of the main causes of psychological absenteeism. When I asked whether mental resilience can also decrease due to work (for example due to leadership style), he looked at me uncomprehendingly. He went on to explain that mental toughness is a learned skill, like riding a bike, which, once at a reasonable level, does not diminish. Fitness can decline, he patiently explained to me, but mental toughness is like knowledge, won once and for all...

The illusion of control

Both aspects, continuous improvement and growth in one direction, are (sometimes/partly) based on the illusion of control. The why is easy to understand. It is precisely through our actions, by exerting as much control as possible over both natural and artificial processes, that we make things worse, often despite our good intentions. Where in the casino very sporadically still undeniable profit can be made, albeit on the basis of random mechanisms, it is ecologically clear that with our human need for control we have proclaimed enormous crises over ourselves and we are therefore actually "out of control". Some of the paths we've taken have been overtaken by "advanced insight" (another term denoting a one-sided growth narrative...). Looking back, we can now say that the continuous improvement of the past, such as the use of asbestos or fossil fuels, has actually led to a (continuous) deterioration of the situation. In this we are not much different from the gambling addicts, who eventually find out that winning the jackpot every now and then cannot compensate for the big losses in the long run...

The narrative developing in countless directions, being able to resist more and more temptations and eventually reaching wisdom is apparently too deeply embedded in us. Every management believes that the situation will improve under its leadership. If not, reference is made to external factors that cause things to go wrong. This is called the attribution style: success comes from internal factors (competence, control), failure from external ones (bad luck).

While the illusion of control makes us feel content with our lives, it is potentially dangerous in the situation our world is currently in (polycrises). After all, no one knows what the world will look like tomorrow, or which (behavioural) change will really contribute to a sustainable world in the long term. To believe in one's continuous improvement is to drastically overestimate one's own control, without considering the possibility of being wrong - the antithesis. Taking the hypothesis for granted in advance, hoping to arrive at a sustainable synthesis by chance, is like throwing stones at random to create Big Ben by chance. The casino might be more rational...