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The Wisdom of Brian Joiner

Guest was Brian Joiner

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Dr. Brian Joiner has since 1997 been a full-time community volunteer working toward helping to create a just and sustainable society. He is co-founder and President of Sustain Dane, and formerly served on the Board of Trustees of Shorewood Hills, and chair on its Traffic and Storm Water committees.

Prior to his early retirement, Brian was Chairman and co-owner of Joiner Associates, a nationally recognized management consulting firm. Prior to Joiner Associates, Brian was a UW professor. He is the author of [Fourth Generation Management](#) and co-author with Peter Scholtes of [The Team Handbook](#), published by Joiner Associates and one of the best-selling business books of all time, having now sold over one-and-a-half million copies.

Brian was a protege of W. Edwards Deming and has received the Deming Medal, the Shewhart Medal, the Hunter Award, the Ott Award, and the Wilcoxon Prize. In addition, he was one of the original nine judges of the [Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award](#) and one of the originators of the [Minitab statistical software system](#). Since 1997, Brian has contributed much of his time to the environment and sustainability working primarily through the [Sustain Dane](#) community. Brian is at this time is contributing to greater health care solutions through his work at [Joiner Associates LLC](#).

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Transcription of Podcast

Joe: Welcome everyone! This is Joe Dager, the host to the Business901 Podcast. With me, today is Brian Joiner. Brian is an accomplished author, consultant and co-founder of Joiner Associates. Stemming from his relationships with Dr. Deming and Peter Scholtes, Brian has had an illustrious career in the quality world with so many acclamations that it is difficult even to start.

Brian, I would like to welcome you, and I'm honored by your participation and would like to mention that I recently re-read Fourth Generation Management and felt as it was written yesterday. What have you been doing with yourself recently?

Brian: Well, that's interesting; because I did a little bit back into Fourth Generation a Month or so ago just to see if that stuff still made sense and so on. I was pleased with it because I knew a lot of stuff that I don't know now. So anyhow, I think it's a pretty well-done book, and I have to give credit, also, to the person that did a lot of the actual wording that's in there, Sue Reynard, she couldn't get credit as a co-author, but I put all the content in, but she showed me the thing in a way that I could never have done without her.

What I've been doing is I've been walking through a little journey I've been on for the last 20 years, maybe pushing 30. In the 1990's, I really became

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concerned about what we were doing to the Earth, and it was great to do good quality work, very important to do good quality work, but if we were destroying our only planet in the process, that didn't make sense to me to keep doing that.

So I had clients that were major US companies, and all of them wanted to sell more, sell more, sell more, expand their markets and sell more to China in particular. That was the big deal, how much can I sell to China?

China had a quarter of the earth population. We did a little math; "If we get everybody in China consuming as we consume that would be just the destruction of Earth. I still believe that, and so, it just wasn't stable, more consumption, more destruction, it just wasn't going to work.

Deming's basic mantra back behind all of the things was, "Commerce can lead to prosperity can lead to peace," but the thing that's missing from that, I think, is the impact on the Earth, and then he grew up and lived in an area where that really wasn't the problem. In his early years, in Iowa and Wyoming, just to get through and have enough to eat was a big deal.

So, to get to the place where we had to worry about what we were doing to the Earth, I don't think he ever got there. I never heard him talk about that, and I try to promote it, talk a little bit more about that a couple of times, but it just wasn't on his radar. So anyhow, it was on mine. What to do about that wasn't clear.

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So it happened that I had a son that was in China. In the fall of '96, I went to visit him. He was studying Chinese there. There was an international conference on quality in Japan. He had gone to that, and from there went to China, and I could see first-hand the changes that were happening in China and how neighborhoods, that had existed and functioned pretty well for people for a long time they were getting bulldozed and other things, were being put up, and it was US-ifying, making it look like the US going on rampant.

We've seen a lot more of that in the years since '96, but that was, to me, just a real whack on the nail to say that I had to be concerned about this. So then in the spring after that, that same son arranged a trip for me, and his twin to go through Nepal, to walk through Nepal, the mountains of Nepal, for 23 days.

So I did that, and we saw not one wheel in all that time. It just wasn't an industrialized at all society. People were carrying things around. They had \$200 a year per capita income, and they had smiles on their faces.

So I came back to the US, saw people with lots of consumption, with frowns on their faces and obese and unhappy, and I said, "There's something wrong with this way of thinking." I tried to talk with clients that I had, and at that time, the big environmental issues, that were on the news, were the spotted owl and the Namaqua Dove. You young people probably don't even know what those things are, but that was the main things that people were debating what to do about

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preserving the habitats of the spotted owls and the Namaqua Doves.

They would just go to that and wouldn't want to talk about the big picture that is just a symptom of. So, what to do? I really did a lot of soul-searching without helping or without making things work; I don't know what I was doing. I was flying around, being with these companies, and putting a lot of CO2 into the air every time I fly.

I figured I had to do something myself, to reduce my intakes from the Earth and to help others to think globally and act globally, and so I wound up leaving Joiner Associates and selling it. All, I did at the time, was to found a small, local organization in the Madison, Wisconsin area, which is where I've lived for a long time, called Sustain Dane. Madison is in Dane County, so the idea is to sustain Dane County.

The notion of doing that was that a good mantra of the quality of the environmental movement to think globally and act locally. I was trying to do that, trying to think globally and act locally; the big step in my journey to leave quality and go into environmental sustainability.

Joe: That is a pretty interesting journey, and just as I think Fourth Generation Management was ahead of its time. Sustainability was ahead of its time because now we're talking cradle in the grave type consumption and starting to look at it. Just recently, I read where GM has \$1 billion savings because recyclability. It is

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an interesting journey, and it seems the rest of us may have just caught up with you. How do quality, sustainability, how do you see all that being related?

Brian: It is that people are now doing a lot that was sort of like what we would dream of them doing back in the 90's. It is happening, and companies even find that they get better customer acceptance from products that are more sustainable. Lots of good things are happening now.

If you look at the net of all of it and say, "How is that impact on the Earth? We impact the Earth a lot less now than we did then. Are we on the path to keep the place a good place to live for the next 100 years, 1000 years, whatever? Are we just teasing ourselves a little bit when we're thinking we're making our progress?" The answer to that is we're not really there yet.

One of the things you can look at is the whole thing about the global warming. What's happening with CO2? What are we doing about that? We've yet to sign the treaty, but that was done way back in the 90's, I think it was, to say that we're going to start reducing our carbon emissions. We just aren't really serious yet.

We've gotten a little bit, and it's, I think a change in the generation. The people, that were kids or young people back when I was frustrated with the stuff are now in positions of power. I think the next generation after that will go further, but it's almost as we'll have to take this in steps. Pre-school steps, I think if you

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really look at the impact that we're having on things.

Joe: When I review the quality journey, people always talk about how quickly they can go on a journey of quality whether it's lean or something else. I always remind them that Dr. Deming started in the 50's and really did realize all of the accomplishments of many of manufacturers he worked with in Japan till the 80's and 90's.

Brian: They were a lot of ways ahead of us, and people in Japan have begun to get onto this. They are not as far ahead of a lot of the sustainability stuff as we are in the US yet, but I think they'll get there with more agility than we will.

Joe: What do you look at as the relationship between quality and sustainability? Do they relate?

Brian: It took me a while to begin to understand and make that connection in a way that had some depth to it, at least that meant to me some depth. My best way of thinking about this at the moment, and I continue to try to learn about it, is that if you think about sustainability primarily having to do with externalities, these are things neither the customer nor the producer wants to pay for and to create the stuff that we're putting into the atmosphere, the by-products and so on.

So those kinds of things are externalities to the process, and nobody wants to take ownership of those things and say, "Okay. I'll pony up. I'll pay for that."

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Those things are the things we have to do to deal with relative to sustainability. If you broaden that, and I've had discussions with some of the leading Japanese consultants, and they said, "This makes total sense. How can we call something quality if it's not sustainable?"

I think they are beginning to get that in Japan and some of the leading consultants in the US as well, to say that we have to look at this more broadly.

Brian: Well, the big pictures of my evolution over the last 30 years, 20 years, I don't know.

Joe: A while, as I would put it.

Brian: A good while, 20 years or thereabouts, is that I made the step from quality to sustainability. I did that, and I'm still doing that, of course, and still doing quality, but the thing, I've gotten focused on, is the health system because the economic impact of that is liable to clobber society before these other things do. So now I'm thinking, okay, now what do we do to deal with this economic tsunami coming at us from the cost of health care that is totally, totally out of control.

That's what got me interested and how that all fits. Because certainly, quality principles can help with other lives, sustainability, how do we do things with less impact on the Earth and less impact on other things? All those basic concepts

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can tie in together to help.

Joe: I can understand why this has led you to work in these areas and things just for your passion for yourself. Is there an underlying theme that drives you in this area?

Brian: When I was a little kid, I was always at my cousin's, and I would have to do some work. They would say that, by the time I figured out how to do it better, they'd have it done. I had always been interested in how to do things better and more effectively. So that is a constant theme through all this, and I've always hated waste and anything, that was waste, was not good. So that's been a big deal for me through the whole thing.

Joe: Well, I have to ask you because I have been amazed Bill Hunter and you both being from the Madison area, and the first, I think, local government really working on quality area, was probably the Madison city or county government. I'm not sure which anymore.

Brian: It was the mayor of Madison that did it.

Joe: It was a hotbed for those that were interested in quality. Why was that?

Brian: First of all, people are often the big factors in these things, and George Box is still alive, still functioning and working well. He's 93 now, just completed his

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memoirs, and I think you can look for that in the next six months. It's a beautiful, interesting set of vignettes from his life.

He's such a great statistician. He revolutionized so many aspects of statistics in his way of doing things, and he was head of the statistics department and attracted other people. That was the main reason I came here was because of George Box, way back in the 70's. Bill Hunter is one of his protégés from way back. George Box really had a big effect. Then, of course, the tie-in with Deming was another thing.

I've had the incredibly good fortune to share an office with his (Deming) wife, my first job, when I first became a professional as a statistician. I got to know Dr. Deming back in the 60's. It was always a big thing for me to have had the chance to talk with him face-to-face, and listen to him, and hear what he was doing and so on.

Bill Hunter and I started lapping up the wisdom that was there with Deming. Reading everything he wrote and having conversations with him on statistics and so on. That was a big part of things, and George Box, I think if it hadn't been for George Box attracting the talent and the statistic department and Deming being a statistician, all that might not have happened the way it did.

Joe: Well, I always find it interesting that most of the people on the stage with Dr. Deming were statisticians.

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Brian: He insisted that statistics were at the heart of this. I think he probably overemphasized it a little bit, but maybe not. I don't know. He was a brilliant guy. The other thing is that not only is it a hotbed for quality, but you can ask the questions, sometimes it's also a hotbed for other things, like sustainability.

There are three giants in sustainability. John Muir, one of the major reasons we had the national park system we have, and Sequoia Canyon in California, he firsthand worked to say that he's from this area. He's from the Madison area. Aldo Leopold, who is famous among all the people that are environmentalist, has a book called the Sand County Almanac, which is just a treasure of little pieces that he wrote about life in the area and what was sustainable, what wasn't, and whatever. Then Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day, he is from the Madison area.

We got some of these giants in sustainability that have come from this area, and I think that part of is just that Madison seems to be a hotbed for most anything that's progressive anyhow, and that's my humble opinion of that.

Joe: It's been very progressive as you just well pointed out. When you look back on your career, Brian, what jumps out to you?

Brian: What jumps out at me is how amazing Dr. Deming was. What he did for us, beginning when he was 80 years old. Here I am, just turning 75, and in five

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more years, I'll be in a bed. I don't know how I'll be functioning at all, but he took on this whole thing. For 13 years, he was working, not quite a day and the night but almost. He was working six and a half days a week to help us get out of the pit that we were in.

He had a big effect, and I thought, "Where do you get the energy and ability to do that?" He just was an amazing man. That's one of the things that sticks out to me when I think about my career and what I've done, in the future to do more things and so on. I say, "Well if he did it..."

Joe: So you're just starting out, right? You just learned what you needed to learn, and now you're going to start out and teach us a little bit, maybe.

Brian: I don't know, but it's interesting that I do find that people think I have wisdom sometimes, and I've never got accused of that before. They thought I might know something, but to have something that, every now and then, something just comes out of my mouth. I don't know where it came from, but in reflection, from other people, it was a wise statement. So maybe that's some wisdom building up over the years.

Joe: And you stopped writing? You would think that the passion you have with sustainability that you would have written about that.

Brian: Well, you would think that. I've done a couple of pieces that are about the

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connection between quality and sustainability, nothing major. I don't think I've made any major contributions or have any special knowledge about sustainability. I still feel that I'm a learner. I had a lot of years before the quality thing happened. I'd been doing statistics and learning about it for years before that, so I don't feel like I have the same kind of background in that.

I haven't mentioned the health system we designed. That is sort of like the third leg of the stool here, which is that our health system as I said briefly, is an economic tsunami that's about to overwhelm us if we don't do something very significant very soon. And so, I got the call to work on that and said, "Okay, what I do now if I feel like I really want to try to do something about that?"

I went got two partners, re-initiated Joiner Associates, with Tim Harrington and Jim Bower, two other people from Madison that are just real superstars. We are setting out to do things that can change the health system dramatically. Here's a couple of statistics that show how important this is. 70% of the cost of health care in the lifetime of a person is associated with chronic conditions. If we can do something, and it's been proven that you can help reduce the cost of those chronic conditions, chronic diseases if you catch them early and you treat them well early. Take diabetes, for example. If you can help people reduce the impacts of their sugar and do that better, they will wind up with a much better quality of life and a lot less cost to the health system.

So Tim Harrington has a book that came out last January so about a year ago

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that is entitled Great Healthcare: Making it Happen, the co-author, Eric Newman, from Geisinger. The highlight of that book is that they have chapters about each of the major chronic diseases written by an organization that has made huge strides in reducing the impact of that disease on the population, and how they manage those diseases. There's a chapter about diabetes, one about congestive heart failure, one about kidney failure, etc., just a jewel of a set of knowledge there that helps with that aspect of the health system.

The next point about the health system is that, and this has been known for some half a dozen years now. On average, it takes 17 years between an innovation and getting it sort of implemented, pretty broadly, in the health system. 17 years are a long time in something that's got the momentum built up to keep on increasing costs that the healthcare system does.

If we want to take and make a change in that, make a significant change in that trajectory, if we wait 17 years, that's going to be too much. So there are things that, in particular, my two partners are doing now that is very innovative, very creative in figuring out how to get changes introduced more rapidly into the system.

Joe: How would someone learn more about that?

Brian: Start with Tim's book and look at that, and then we do have a website, and you can look for that, Joiner Associates.

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Joe: Tim's book, I can find that on Amazon, I assume?

Brian: There are two books by the same name, so you have to get the one that's by Tim Harrington and Eric Newman.

Joe: I just have to ask you, on a side note, did you develop the Joiner Plain & Simple book series? Was that yours or did they just use your name to promote that series?

Brian: No, I came up with the idea for it. I was out consulting. I said, "You know, people need simple ways to learn how to do these things, and little templates so they don't have to go back and try to figure out everything from scratch. That was the genesis of that series.

Joe: I can't say that I have the entire collection, but I have several of them, and I always thought they were excellent introductions for anyone.

Brian: I think they're good, really high quality. Rather a good quality stuff guy got done at Joiner Associates without me having anything left to do with it, which is a wonderful thing.

Joe: In today's the world, does the original seven qualities tools still fit?

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Brian: I think all those things are still very important. Lean, I think, is very important. I'm not so high on Six Sigma. One thing, that I think Six Sigma made a major contribution to, was the process of construction and developing capabilities that, from the beginning. They had this notion that you needed to develop people to high levels of confidence to help others do this stuff. They came up with the notion of the black belts and the greenbelts and so on, and that was a real innovation.

We at Joiner Associates, and the other thing that happened are that companies, we had one of our clients at that time got heavily into Six Sigma, one of the early companies to do that, and we already had a thing that was like the black belt training but wasn't quite as rigorous, and it included more of the people aspects of consulting and how you get teams to work together and so on, but it had the basics of it, which are para-statisticians training, like paramedics and other things like that.

We had that, but what we never had was the ability to get the company to put the high potentials into the course. That's what made that hum, I think, was special, was that they had the high potentials, learning and learning by doing it themselves before they go out and try to help other people, getting good at it themselves that creates a whole new culture. That was a big, big impact from the Six Sigma. I think that the content of it is okay. Lean has much better content, and I think they had better content even in the beginning approaches. We didn't have that access to the high potentials to make that work.

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Joe: Well, I've always been amazed at your work. I mentioned the Joiner Plain & Simple Series, the Seven Step Joiner problem-solving method that has been popularized your work with Peter Scholtes using CAP-Do instead of PDCA.

Brian: I think that those things are, I mean, that comes from Japan and the Japanese taught me that, and I learned so much from them. I had some very esteemed colleagues. One of the good things that happened early on was that some of the Japanese consultants, the best ones that are in charge of the Deming prize, things like that, and were curious about what Deming was talking about these days, and so they tried to find a way to find out what was going on in the US with Deming.

We were the lucky ones that they happened to choose to be their portal to what Deming was doing. We developed this very strong relationship with a number of the leading Japanese consultants and a number of the Deming acolyte consultants in the US that started meeting in the late 80's. We started meeting, and we still do. I don't go very regular, now, because of the CO2, but they still meet now and it's called A Global Quality Futures Workshop, and the who's who, in my opinion, of the best consultants in Japan and some of the best in the US are the members.

It's a small group, 20 or 30 people included in this thing. We learned so much from the Japanese early on. I had those connections, and I always want to give

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credit to them because they knew a lot, and they helped us learn things, and they learned things from us.

Joe: Brian, I would like to thank you very much. I appreciate it. This podcast will be available on the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 blog site, so thanks again, Brian.

Brian: Thank you very much.

Joe Dager is President of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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