This is AME’s 20th year. Our pioneering activities helped transform process thinking into common parlance, if not common practice, but we’re far from finished.

Twenty years ago we liked road metaphors such as “Excellence is a journey, not a destination.” Excellence is a level of performance always beyond reach, or as Charlie Brown put it, “By the time I figure out where it’s at, somebody’s moved it.”

Artists symbolize an unreachable goal as a vanishing point, two parallel lines that cross in the distance to become a road stretching beyond vision. No matter how far or fast you go, the vanishing point remains distant.

Road metaphors, while inspirational, were always inadequate. Pragmatic people want specifics — maps, markers, and tools. Early learning concentrates on the tools, but they’re not designed for a race to a glorious vanishing point, but to grub through thickets of waste, guided by value stream maps surveyed by the grubbers, who are often unsure where they are. It’s an expedition of self-discovery, as individuals, and as organizations, because people are a part of the processes they improve.

If persistent, they learn that acquiring every tool in the store isn’t the objective of the grubbing. Instead, from a leadership view, success is developing people to become expert grubbers, then learn to work so that the undergrowth doesn’t grow back. They adopt a process view of the world, gaining experience, skill, and ability to collaborate. Use of the tools and thinking becomes automatic. That’s a culture change, and the main difference between C-Class and B-Class in recent Target articles.

Getting to the B-Class stage in human development is essential for the challenges of our next 20 years. A single vanishing point is too linear an inspiration for this expedition. We need a 3D-360° vision, like the event horizon of deep astronomy, limited by the distance at which observable radiation can be detected.

Twenty years ago, we went for a single vanishing point, correcting glaring deficiencies in manufacturing quality and productivity. On the way, we observed that everything we do, from teaching kindergarten to neurosurgery, is done through processes. We’ve a universe of challenges, commodity competition with China being the one in primary focus right now. But, for example, sustainability issues are building, not going away.

The evolution of award criteria since 1988 mirrors this. At first only manufacturers applied for the Baldrige. Then service businesses; followed by educational and health organizations. The criteria broadened, but remained rigorous. At the plant level, Industry Week’s Best Plant application digs much deeper than manufacturing conversion.

Twenty years on, we’re beginning to grasp a bigger process view of the world, one increasingly at odds with a restrictive bottom-line view — which may not recognize any process that can’t be “dollarized,” a conflict that may become sharper. But it’s time to get on with it.

Robert W. Hall, Editor-in-Chief