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6 Lessons that Quality Managers Can Learn from 'Star Wars'

15 December, 2015 David R. Butcher, Marketing Communications, MasterControl



Beginning with *A New Hope* nearly 40 years ago, characters in the epic *Star Wars* saga have offered many lessons that may prove valuable for even the most seasoned quality managers. There are numerous examples of positive behaviors that managers might consider emulating in their daily work and behaviors that should always be avoided.

With the seventh installment in the film franchise arriving in theaters on Dec. 18, here we revisit the series and highlight six lessons that quality managers can learn from a galaxy far, far away.

Lesson 1: Don't Build another Death Star

An enormous amount of time and resources were put into building the [Death Star](#), only to be destroyed due to a vulnerable exhaust port in *A New Hope*. Rather than consider an alternative solution, Emperor Palpatine ordered the construction of [another, bigger Death Star](#) that addressed the exhaust port issue but repeated many other mistakes. In *Return of the Jedi*, the second Death Star was destroyed before it was even fully built. The emperor displayed poor risk management, a myopic view of alternative solutions and failure to learn from past mistakes.

No project is immune to risk or failure, but an unsuccessful project or assignment doesn't have to become a long-term problem. While mistakes can be cause for concern, there is always something to be learned from them. By re-evaluating a failed project, examining what went wrong, identifying and mitigating other risks, and considering all possible solutions, quality managers can develop strategies to improve future performance and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

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Lesson 2: Practice the Force in the Swamp

While Luke Skywalker had raw Jedi talent, he knew he needed advanced training to learn how to harness it. That is why, in *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke left the Rebel fleet and headed for the muck and grime of the Dagobah swamps, where he sought Yoda's advanced training in the way of the Force, the energy field created by all living things that gives Jedi their power. Yoda tutored Luke with a variety of physical and mental training exercises, preparing him to accomplish his tasks and achieve his goals.

"If you end your training now, if you choose the quick and easy path as Vader did, you will become an agent of evil," [Yoda told Luke](#) in the swamps. That may be a tad melodramatic for quality pros' purposes, but what cannot be overstated is that professional training and development is critical to the success of every organization and every career. To keep their knowledge and skills up to date throughout their career, quality managers and their staff must never stop learning – through classroom education, online training, workshops, conferences, self-reflection and more.

Lesson 3: Mentor Young Padawans, You Must

Obi-Wan Kenobi served as a mentor to Luke, instructing and guiding the farm boy in the ways of the Jedi. Later, Obi-Wan directed Luke to Yoda for further Jedi training. When [training Luke on Dagobah](#) in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and mentoring him in the ways of the Force, Yoda had a wealth of knowledge to share as a Jedi master with eight centuries' worth of training generations of Jedi.

Professionals new to the quality field would be well-advised to find their own Obi-Wan or Yoda, a mentor who can guide them around common professional obstacles, enhance their knowledge and skills, provide feedback in key areas and strengthen their career development. Becoming mentors themselves, veteran quality managers can also benefit from sharing their expertise with young [padawans](#), boosting their communication and leadership skills and re-energizing themselves in various aspects of their career.

Lesson 4: Managing with Fear Leads to the Dark Side

The Galactic Empire's higher-ups weren't known for their sound management style. Throughout the original trilogy and beyond, Darth Vader's approach to management essentially consisted of [intimidating](#) and [Force-choking](#) his direct reports who failed to meet every expectation. Grand Moff Tarkin, commander of

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the Death Star, and Emperor Palpatine were also adherents of supervising with the Dark Side of the Force's anger, fear and aggression; motivating with fear and managing with unyielding ruthlessness to devastating cumulative effects.



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As [Yoda told young Anakin Skywalker](#) in *The Phantom Menace*, "Fear is the path to the Dark Side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering." Motivating and managing with fear contributes to a toxic workplace culture and almost always results in poor performance – sinking employee morale, decreasing productivity and generating constant turnover. Successful quality managers lead by example and engender trust and loyalty in their team. They do this by helping, rather than threatening, their team, and by not punishing failure with Force-choking.

Lesson 5: Leverage Technology to Save Lives

Technology played an important role in saving lives throughout the Star Wars films. For example, Luke might not have survived [his encounter](#) with Jabba the Hut and the sarlaac on Tatooine in *Return of the Jedi* had it not been for the droid R2-D2 being there with Luke's lightsaber – both vital pieces of technology. Also, if Princess Leia hadn't sent [the Death Star's architectural plans and her holograph recording](#) to Obi-Wan via the droid at the start of the film series, the Rebels wouldn't have discovered the exhaust port vulnerability that enabled them to destroy the space station and save the galaxy from the tyranny of the Galactic Empire.

Without the right tools and support, quality managers will struggle to achieve their compliance goals. Continuing to rely on outdated manual processes and paper-based tools to manage quality comes at a cost that many medical device manufacturers and other regulated organizations simply cannot afford. While technology is no silver bullet to quality issues, effectively leveraging the right electronic solutions can give quality managers the tools needed to maintain compliance and accelerate the delivery of life-changing – often life-saving – products.

Lesson 6: Celebrate the Triumph of Heroes

At the end of *A New Hope*, [an awards ceremony](#) was held to celebrate the success of those responsible for the destruction of the first Death Star, one of the Rebels' first major victories. In front of hundreds of their peers, the successful team members were recognized for their achievements, complete with awards.

Employee recognition can go a long way in boosting engagement, satisfaction, productivity and loyalty. Although quality professionals don't expect to be showered with constant praise simply for doing their jobs, they want to know their accomplishments make a difference and provide value. Whether it's with an awards ceremony or a more informal gesture, quality managers should provide recognition when an employee or team accomplishes something that exceeds expectations.

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What other lessons do you think quality managers can learn from the Star Wars movies? Share them in the comments section below and may the Force be with you.



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