



Quality Network News

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Leading the Charge

By Lewis Rhodes, *Quality Network News*

Flying home from Sitka, Alaska, I reflected on what I had learned from a week's immersion at Mt. Edgecumbe High School. The experience enabled me to envision what it will be like when practices we now call quality management become transparent, just the way a school does business.

Observing students and staff, I didn't notice which quality tools or processes they were using. The system was so seamless that it was hard to know whether a staff member was a teacher, cook, administrator, or counselor.

Deming's primary theory of organizations as connected systems of individuals driven continually to learn how to be more effective was deeply, if not profoundly, embedded at

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MEHS. This belief is unquestioned there, so observers see continual learners serving continual learners; they are supported by the learning management tools that we call quality tools and processes.

What had transformed this Alaska boarding school? As with many new ideas in education, a creative teacher, David Langford, originally found that Deming's beliefs resonated with his own. In the tools and processes of quality management, he saw ways to act on those beliefs. Eventually the evidence of results — the applied knowledge and skills from his original classes — began to capture the attention of other educators interested in applying quality management.

Many outside observers saw this as proof that applications in education had to focus on the classroom, not on top-down applications to systems problems that during quality management's short history in schools seldom connected to instruction or learning. Classroom results would *prove* this to be an important answer to many of education's problems.

Unfortunately, few examples exist where changes in the fundamental processes of schooling are sustained because they produce better classroom results. At Mt. Edgecumbe, this would have been even more difficult because external interest in

what was happening there resulted in Langford's departure. Today, like Johnny Applesseed, he travels the world spreading seeds of a *new* apple with potential to nourish students everywhere.

But classroom changes *have* been sustained at Mount Edgecumbe. New ways of doing seem to be integral parts of new ways of thinking, both floating on a medium of common belief and trust. Where had students and staff gained the experience to so universally change beliefs and practices? How had they developed that essential profound knowledge? And why did this take root and blossom here on Alaska's cold, rocky shores?

MEHS's superintendent at the time, Larrae Rocheleau, had a similar personal transformation in his beliefs about learning, teaching, and leading. He applied these learnings to his circle of concern, the school system or *tree*. As leader, he was the person Deming says works on the system (others work in it). Until he began using quality management techniques, he had no practical ways to manage relationships and interactions. This is the unique task of management, according to Peter Drucker and Russell Ackoff.

The superintendent realized that the same learning management tools and processes used in the class-

room can also be applied to the needs of the system's participants. They can share responsibility for working *on* the system as they learn to change the constraints of their own work setting.

Results in this arena are visible at MEHS, also. Teachers, administrators, and staff members trust each other and the system. New staff and students make an easy transition to this different work culture.

The superintendent is no longer at MEHS, either, but the system is alive and thriving. Staff members have discovered that they *are* the system.

MEHS proves that if we want sustained "quality apples," we must develop a positive infrastructure, the "quality apple tree." We must continue to have classroom and building advocates, but if this is at the expense of nourishment for the tree, quality education will fade into oblivion like other school reform strategies not sustained when their champions moved on. Quality's tools can help the tree function as a tree — a growing system of interdependent elements able to produce better apples each year. But this can occur only with broad understanding that the job of those who work *on* a system is to help those working in the system to work as a system.

Where are the Johnny Appletrees to spread this word? ▲