

Beyond Your Beliefs: Quantum Leaps Toward Quality Schools

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Second of a two-part series

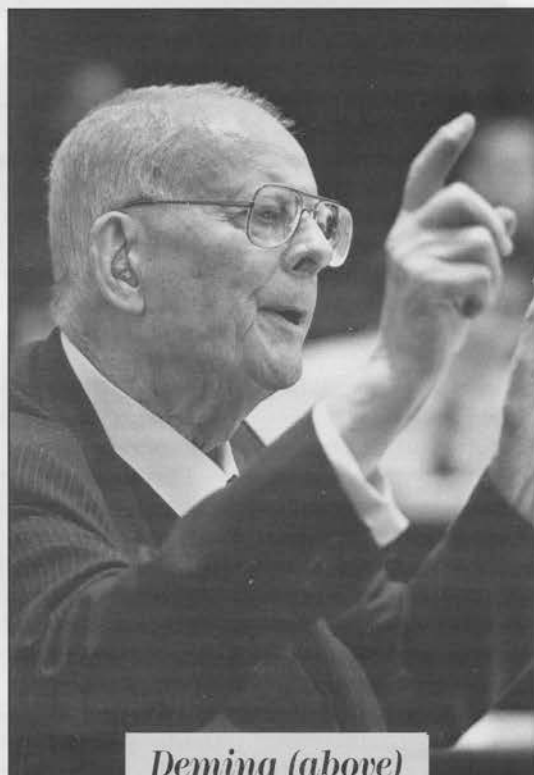
Demands to reorganize schools to better support the classroom's core instructional process usually are "either-or" concepts such as site-based management, bottom-up decision-making, or decentralization. Moreover, they traditionally envision the primary unit of change as either the 2 million individual classrooms or the 89,000 school buildings.

W. Edwards Deming's concepts suggest another alternative—an integrated approach to schooling with each of America's 18,000 school districts as the unit of change. This framework for change uses existing staff, facilities, and materials as efficiently as possible to produce effective, quality learning outcomes.

Deming's approach to quality schools and learning is easy to understand for several reasons. First, Deming's underlying beliefs are familiar.

Many good building and district leaders, especially in smaller districts, already act on their beliefs about intrinsic motivation. As work settings become more complex, they increasingly lack an overall frame-of-reference within which to envision how to support these beliefs organizationally.

Moreover, respected voices for reform, such as John Goodlad and Ted Sizer, have called for similar systemic, ecological approaches to managing



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Deming (above) notes that management is prediction, even though our views of schools no longer seem to allow us to predict results.

schools but without overall strategies.

Second, the public and policy-makers already have seen results.

People may not know the complete hows or whys, but if they own Japanese cars and products they have seen Deming concepts produce tangible, visible results of quality. If they read current popular management literature they may recognize his influence on professional empowerment, productivity, and large-scale, relatively rapid change.

Third, Deming's approach reframes what already exists allowing new perceptions of available solutions.

Solving the popular puzzle in which you must connect nine dots with four lines without lifting the pencil from the paper requires changing the "frame" that you assume around the dots. Similarly, we share a common framework of how schools are supposed to work that limits many potential solutions.

The systemic reframing of the Deming approach forces rethinking—not of just the total school work process, but importantly, the connections (or lack of them) among the elements of the process.

Overcoming Barriers

These three points about understanding Deming's ideas in schools represent the good news. And the bad news? The acceptance of Deming's

ideas and strategies requires us to overcome three critical perceptual barriers.

- *Barrier 1: A fear of industrial models.*

Even the most enlightened school reformers deride the industrial model when applied to schooling. To most, this means mass, mechanistic, assembly-line approaches which treat all students the same.

Because nearly all of Deming's work has been in industry, educators might assume that this approach views schools as factories. However, we know children are not widgets. We can translate Deming's concepts of quality from industry to school and

continued on page 26

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The Deming Superintendent

How might school district leadership be different if the beliefs and strategies of W. Edwards Deming were accepted?

First, consider schools today that are managed by superintendents who believe their job is to run their districts efficiently and effectively.

To do so, they may call on the best consultants available to help operate the best possible school system. They may set up work standards for the teachers and institute performance-based measures for staff supervision and evaluation. They study current research and analyze district data, even on the alert for opportunities to improve.

Superintendents in large districts can't do these things alone. They might institute methods to see that their desires for efficiency with public funds and for effective performance of students are met. Perhaps they will adopt and teach management-by-objectives to their subordinates.

Their central-office staff may collect data and monitor performance, ever searching for opportunities to increase school effectiveness. From this data, superintendents schedule frequent inservice opportunities for teachers during weekends and summers.

In states where legislatures have mandated site-based management, superintendents may direct building principals to set up teacher and parent committees to make some of the decisions now made centrally. They may even convince local industry to provide a Classroom of Tomorrow in one building to demonstrate to staff the technologies they might someday use to improve the instructional process.

In short, their idea of a good manager is one who sets up a system, directs the work through subordinates, and, through crisp and unambiguous assignments, develops standards of performance for his or her employees.

These superintendents set goals for their staff and rate employees as objectively as possible, sometimes even calling on others to help. They identify poor performers and assist them to meet work standards or replace them. They hope, thereby, to create the most efficient system possible.

Connecting Parts

Now, contrast this with the behavior of a superintendent who operates from the same frame of beliefs as Deming.

This leader sees the job as requiring him or her to provide a consistency and continuity of purpose for the district and to seek ever more efficient ways to meet its purpose.

The Deming superintendent sees his or her job as maintaining a constant vision of the whole and the connections among its parts. The job is not controlling but *connecting* the parts of the work process to each other and to their common purposes.

Understanding the psychology of humans at work, the Deming superintendent knows everyone must have a consistent view of the system that allows them to understand their fit and relationship to its outcomes. The Deming superintendent knows everyone must speak a common language and have a common model for understanding how children learn and how the work of the system relates to it.

The Deming superintendent knows each staff member works in education because he or she wants to make a difference in the lives of children, and thus makes sure they have access to continuing feedback to increase their personal effectiveness.

The Deming superintendent will consider he or she and the staff have a natural division of labor. The staff is responsible for doing the work within the system, and the superintendent is responsible for improving the system.

The distinction is crucial. They all work in a system. The



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workers work *in* it and the superintendent works *on* it. No one else is responsible for the system as a whole and for its overall improvement.

The Deming superintendent also realizes quality learning can only be an outcome of the building's core instructional processes, but permanent improvements in that core process will be a consequence of the changes in the district's work processes.

Therefore the Deming superintendent implements changes that serve to align everyone's role to the improvement of the building's instructional processes. For example, the superintendent feels it is important that technology be used to facilitate the work processes, not just instruction.

Functionally connected teachers and administrators have simple access to each other as isolation is bridged by telecommunications-linked peer conferencing, problem-solving, and personal support.

Since distance is no longer a factor, district office staff are accessible to the building teams as information brokers. Teachers and principals are linked to their front-line peers in other social service agencies as they apply their differing perspectives and expertise to the common needs of the same child.

Moreover, unlike other districts reacting to the state mandate, site-based management for the Deming superintendent is not a top-down process applied to principals and teachers who lack time and appropriate skills.

This superintendent understands and accepts that the quality of instruction depends upon the ability of staff in the schools to continually identify and meet the learning needs of students. So the central concern is not which decisions are made at the sites, but rather, *better* decisions be made.

Improvements Never End

Informing those decisions requires processes and central office functions that move information to the building rather than collecting and taking it away.

Building teams have the time, training, and information to better understand the children whose needs they respond to, and the range of responses appropriate to each child's needs. The district office has information to continually improve the systemic conditions that constrain building effectiveness.

The Deming superintendent also realizes the potential for improving the system never ends and thus refuses to call on consultants to teach how to redesign the "best" system. He or she knows it doesn't exist. The only people who really know where the potential for improvement of their system lies are the staff.

And the Deming superintendent knows these improvements must emerge from work.

The school system staff are the essential instruments in understanding what is happening at the places where the work gets done. They must know how to determine which problems are caused by the overall system itself.

Therefore everyone in the system is involved in studying it and proposing how to improve it. Learning is part of work, driven by each person's need to be effective.

The building and district decision-making processes—actually problem-solving processes—address the same problem: how to meet the learning needs of the children for whom they are responsible. Due to the systemic connections between the two, problem-solving becomes a process where everyone is responsible, but no one is to blame.

— Lewis A. Rhodes

continued from page 24

understand the similarities and differences in each workplace.

- *Barrier 2: Poor knowledge of the work, workers, and work processes in schools.*

America must challenge unquestioned assumptions about students, teachers, and administrators as individual workers and the connectedness of their work.

A common framework for understanding the interdependence of this work is vital. Without it, we cannot maintain simultaneous focus on what must change in the child's work environment to impact the quality of learning, *and* on what must change in the teachers' work environment to impact the quality of teaching, *and* on what must change in the work environment of school leaders to impact the quality of the other two.

- *Barrier 3: Unquestioned beliefs.*

Deming's ideas took root in Japan because the Japanese industrialists committed themselves to actions coherent with Deming's beliefs, even when they did not agree with those beliefs. Later on, actual results made believers out of them.

Years later in America, a Ford Motor Company vice president noted the initial "courage it took for many managers at Ford to accept the notion of teamwork and communication. ... The Japanese presume you'll do your job; we [U.S. managers] presume you won't."

This initial commitment to "unnatural behavior" was critical. Profound beliefs are deeply ingrained. Generally, one acts counter to such a belief only at great risk to oneself or others.

Today, our ways of viewing and understanding schools no longer seem to allow us to predict results, yet Deming notes, "management is prediction." Our purposes require a framework for understanding that provides some assurance that we can envision the consequences of our actions. Creating this framework begins by surfacing and questioning the priority beliefs behind how we act.

Moving Toward Quality

Getting started toward creating quality schools will involve three initial steps.

- *Developing community understand-*

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ing, belief, and commitment.

School districts, and especially the political and social communities that support them, will need to examine their beliefs about the work processes of schools or at least begin to act as if they believed differently for at least three to five years.

Most school systems can't commit to system-wide changes affecting traditional roles and relationships without a strong community force. A common base of beliefs and community values provides a rationale for change and helps develop the community's understanding of its own influence on the work of schools, and the system influencing children's learning.

- *Establishing a local business-education learning partnership.*

Maintaining a commitment to systemic, fundamental change in school districts requires establishing new partnerships of learners between system leaders in schools and corporations.

As the similarities and differences between the work settings of schools and businesses become clearer, collaborative opportunities such as joint training in problem-solving or statistical analysis will appear.

Developing this type of understanding and continuing support may not be easy. Most U.S. industry still does not accept Deming's fundamental beliefs. Some who tried to implement techniques such as quality circles, but without beliefs to support them, saw them become peripheral fads.

Even those few who have adapted Deming's ideas to their own work may not yet understand how to transfer those concepts to school systems.

- *Managing schools as adult learning systems.*

A learning partnership among adults in communities who care about children requires dedicated teachers and administrators, whose strongest link is their common commitment to children, to recognize they, too, are managers. Lasting change in the content and processes of instruction depends upon their ability to integrate changes into the daily management of their work.

This, too, will not be easy. Many teachers and administrators, caught up in daily work, have lost confidence that there is any way to modify their organizations systemically.

They can't get beyond the necessary daily focus on children to see how their own work processes are systemically connected. They lack continuing data that would allow them to see where in the system's procedures the problems lie.

Thus, even as they call for "restructuring" of those same organizations, they often turn to partial approaches, or approaches that cut them off from their system, because they have never seen or personally experienced systemic, organizational change.

Quantum Change Possible

As connections, relationships, and possibilities already inherent in the organization appear, fundamental, rather than incremental, changes will begin. Because change reinforces natural inclinations and beliefs, the implementation of more effective and satisfying ways of operating won't have to wait for all the elements to be in place to start.

As followers of Deming's ideas in other settings already have shown, quality results require consistent leadership, effective systemic management, and a common belief-based framework for understanding among all members of the system.

With that framework, communities can realistically expect the same sort of quantum changes in outcome quality and worker productivity that appear in other workplaces. Practitioners and entire districts each day will experience the satisfaction of becoming more instructionally effective.

America will discover school leaders *can* restructure districts and manage whole school systems for quality results without stopping.