(Written in June, 1992 for the TQN, this article offers a sense of the thinking that helped shape the way I subsequently viewed and thought about the Montgomery County Public Schools.)
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Leading the Charge

Beyond the Silver Bullet

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Like flowers appearing suddenly after a spring rain, a number of articles critical of TQM applications in business and industry recently began to sprout in the general and trade press. Several (four or five?) of these are included in this month's Resource packet because this criticism really is *good* news. When things work well, it's difficult to understand all contributing factors. It's far easier to draw learnings from other's mistakes.

The potential *bad* news is that we may discount, and not use, these opportunities to identify relevant pitfalls ahead of us. We may not learn.

In the *Dark Side of Quality*, Patricia McLagan vividly describes how quality management processes--still new to educators--can lead to process rigor mortis, closed loop thinking, and team overkill. *The Post-Deming Diet --Dismantling a Quality Bureaucracy* provides examples of this process rigor mortis and closed loop thinking at Florida Power & Light, and how one CEO reacted to free them up.

The *Wall Street Journal*, reporting on a new study by the American Quality Foundation, claims that total quality applications in American corporations are too amorphous, don't achieve intended results, and can't match quality programs abroad. A page of letters to *The New York Times*, presents a range of responses to an article pointing out the fundamental flaws in ways American corporations manage their quality programs.

And critics of private sector TQM are joined by those in state and local government in *The Cult of Total Quality*. Of particular interest to elected boardmembers may be the claim that "there is no evidence so far that successful implementation of TQM bestows any political benefits at all on those who sponsor it." Yet, as reported in an excerpt from *Baldrige Winners on World-Class Quality*, senior leadership is identified as the key, as well as "the single largest impediment to total quality management."

Reading this month's resource articles, each of us will find different ideas of value. Significantly, these critiques have been written by friends of TQM fighting what they fear as another wave of faddism, or worse, quality practices easily replacing old procedures and leading to mindless bureaucratic actions. Their criticisms are directed less at TQM, and more at the

American management mindset and approach. Since most of us are products of that same culture, their reflections may provide some warning signals.

•   **Tools without vision**. Beware of a *tool box* approach to school problem-solving. TQM tools lose their holistic power without the framework of an underlying, deeply-believed vision of how the *work* of school practitioners fits together to contribute to school district results.

•   **Bureaucracy or Scaffold?**   Middle management as bureaucracy is such an accepted concept that the terms have become practically interchangeable. Yet, isolated from constantly changing dynamics that those at the "top" and "bottom" of organizations must daily respond to, mid-managers' survival has had to depend, until now, on by-the-book management practices. As these industry experiences indicate, in this situation it is easy to substitute new mindless practices for old.

Maybe we should look again at our assumptions about bureaucracies, especially in schooling. Because "Tops" and "Bottoms" leave our schools more frequently than "middles," what we think of as "middle management" becomes the core connecting infrastructure that holds the system together regardless of personnel changes. More importantly, realigned in a TQM framework, middle management provides the key link to support required for core classroom quality teaching and learning processes.

The good news is that what we in education know about how human learning takes place gives us an advantage in transforming perceived bureaucracies into support systems. Actually, what we have thought of as "mindless bureaucratic actions" are the organizational "habits" Whitehead referred to when he noted that "civilization advances by extending the number of important operations we can perform *without thinking* of them."   These "higher order" thought processes are the focal point of training for transformation. Fundamental shifts in these most important, and seldom conscious, ways of thinking underlie the new skills required for planning and implementing new operational strategies.

We now know from research that learning of important skills, that must be integrated to the point of transparency, requires *scaffolds* of support which can gradually be removed. Instructional leaders are being urged to apply this concept to children's learning. It is equally true for adults.   As building practitioners become new "learners" in continual improvement, central offices need to reassess their roles as ever-changing temporary "scaffolds" as opposed to permanent structures. That "scaffolding" has not been accustomed middle management behavior may be one reason why few new practices ever become lasting and meaningful "organizational habits"--*the ways we do business*.

•   **Which "results" indicate quality?**   School leaders should find a familiar ring to one article's note that American industry is "mistakenly isolating quality programs from day-to-day operations . . . as something special. . as an objective with 10,000 activities unto itself, instead of the way to meet (the organization's) objectives."   This cultural mindset evidences itself in the history of piecemeal educational change efforts. When combined with increasing public concern for short-term results and demands to focus on "outcomes" and not "process," it may alert us to some cultural quicksand that lies ahead.

These TQM experiences in the private and public sectors suggest that a pathway through that quicksand does exist.   But it requires differentiating between "final" outcome data and the more critical "internal" results measures that empower TQM. These more readily measured "results" are generated by each of the organization's sub-processes. Without these data, it is impossible to analyze and understand the interaction of forces that ultimately impact final outcomes.

Education's choice is not "outcomes" or "process." TQM's *systemic* nature allows us finally to connect processes to outcomes. But monitoring and managing these processes must take place within a TQM framework that recognizes the unique judgments and creativity of school practitioners at all levels of the system.

"Continual improvement " is all about use of these data to continually question the sub-processes involved in actually doing the work of schools. Handled systemically, this does not have to lead to the one *right* approach. Access to richer, data-based analysis can contribute to new experience-based understanding that allows choice of the *best* approach for each situation.

Maybe in education we can never "do it right the first time." Learning, teaching--and running schools aligned to those dynamic processes--may require instead *doing our best each time, and a little bit better next*.

 Isn't that what learning's all about?