



# Quality Network News

A Service of the Total Quality Network of the American Association of School Administrators

## Leading the Charge

# The Impact of Deming's Legacy

By Lewis Rhodes, associate executive director, AASA

**T**he obituaries for W. Edwards Deming reminded me of three questions that have driven my interest in and learning from him:

■ Why did people keep linking Deming to total quality management even while he vehemently denied any connection?

■ Why are his ideas, which seem so simple and common sense, so difficult to put into practice when we take on roles in organizations?

■ Why is he known as a statistician, economist, or engineer when the base of his most enduring ideas lies in psychology and sociology?

The obituaries adequately catalogued Deming's impact on today's society, but his major influence is yet to be felt. In many ways, his accomplishments, as well as his future impact, parallel

those of Copernicus. What Copernicus was to the conduct of navigation in space, Deming will be to the conduct of human work in organizations.

The ideas of Copernicus were not accepted in his time, first because they challenged *truths* that were accepted because they were *observed* to be so. The sun, stars, and moon do appear to move around the earth. The only tool Copernicus had to counter that observation was mathematical proof. Secondly, the work of few people then (during the Reformation) depended on having an accurate map of the solar system. Farming — and even navigation — were possible with earth-centered maps.

Today, however, we remember Copernicus less for his math than for how he helped us understand our universe. This different mental model has made it possible for future generations to see possibilities hidden by accepted, observable "truth."

I believe Deming will, in the end, be remembered less for his statistical acumen than for reframing organizations as systems of committed, intrinsically-driven individuals connected and aligned to common personal and organizational aims by managed work processes. Soon we will look back at these times much as we look at pre-Copernicans who did not believe the sun was the center of their system. We

have had no common "map" for understanding work in organizations because we lack belief in a common "center." Until the

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*"Deming's legacy: a framework to help us construct the new workplace of the mind."*

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past few years, like pre-Copernican farmers, we did not seem to *need* one.

To me, Deming's system of Profound Knowledge provides the map that is so pivotal, not the often-quoted 14 Points. The system is not widely understood because Deming had a handicap that Copernicus did not. The "proof" of Deming's world view lies in cognitive science — a field of study seemingly less precise than mathematics because it is still in its early stages.

Today evidence from cognitive research and organizational experience are helping us develop new beliefs about the workings of the human mind that provide a "center" for a new common understanding. At the same time, new challenges force questioning of long-unquestioned beliefs about ways that businesses, industries, and schools are *supposed* to function — beliefs that derive from observations of the behavior of management and labor in the workplace.

This new cognitive perspective can already be seen

in modern management theory: Brain power is the fundamental resource — the workplace has become the human mind. This psychologically-based framework or paradigm centers on a belief that humans are purposeful, want their actions to have some meaning or effect, and will continually self-correct to achieve these ends.

With that belief as a central focus, management's task has become to design and operate work settings "in sync" with that basic human programming — settings that provide the information and support to allow each worker and the product of his or her work to get a little better each time they interact.

Deming's Profound Knowledge — four interrelated beliefs about the fundamental nature of people in organizations and how they interact as they work to accomplish the organization's aim — provides a theory or conceptual map that helps us understand *why* these new management approaches work. Once one accepts these concepts as firmly as a belief that the sun is at the solar system's center, then and only then does total quality management become a way to navigate within that workplace paradigm.

This is Deming's legacy: a framework to help us construct the new workplace of the mind. Let's get on with it. ▲

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