

Why Quality Is Within Our Grasp ... If We Reach

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First of a two-part series

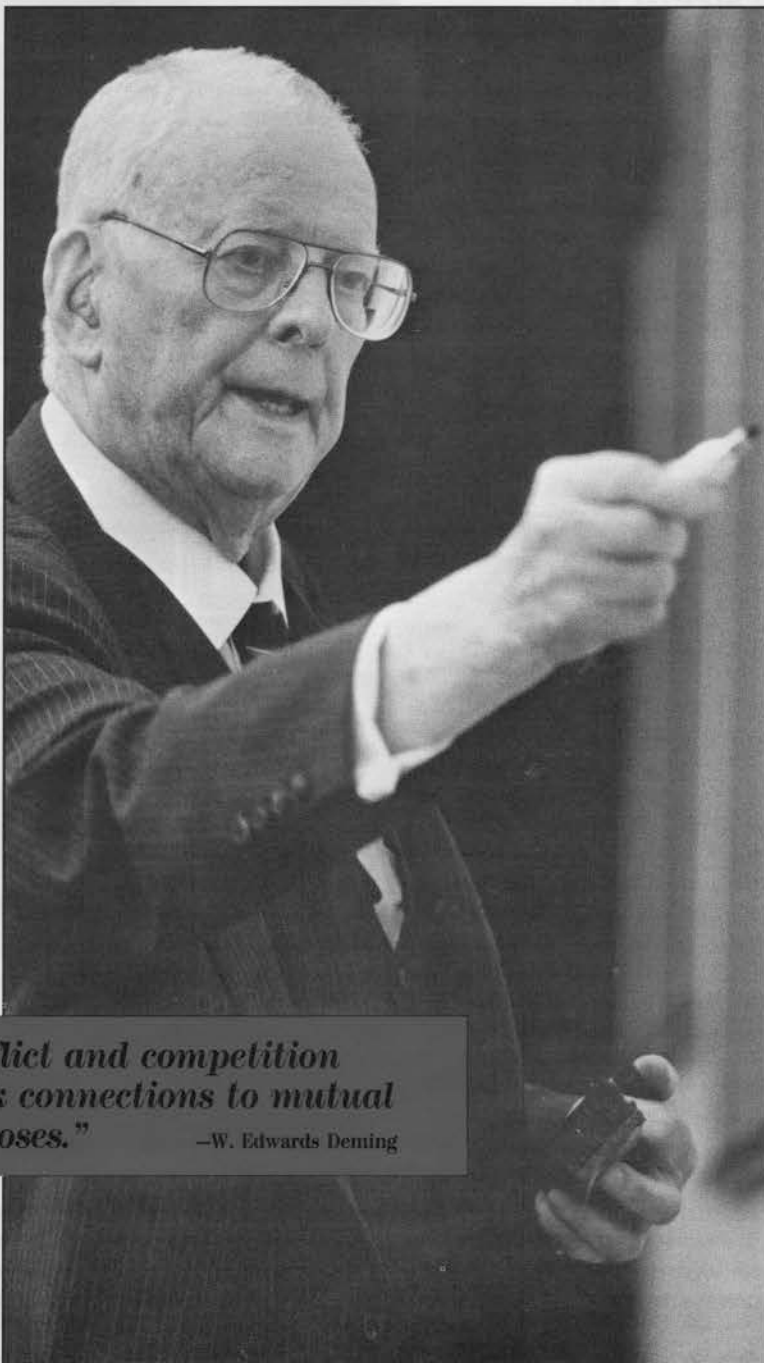
Today's calls to "restructure everything" are a growing recognition that public education must respond with something more than piecemeal tinkering. There has to be a realistic way to influence the entire process simultaneously. Unfortunately, few restructuring solutions match the scope of this systemic problem.

What are the alternatives? Throw out everything and start over? Develop a duplicate system and switch when it's ready? Or change everything at once without stopping the current process—that is, develop new roles, establish new relationships, create new forms of instruction, concurrently—and do it largely within present time and resource limits?

Complete organizations can't change in relatively short periods of time, can they? If it is possible, how do you bring it about when so few have experienced such a phenomenon?

This form of total organizational change started over 30 years ago in Japan as industrial leaders applied to their work the beliefs and strategies of an American, W. Edwards Deming.

The Japanese transformed their human work processes to produce a quality revolution by committing to a coherent, psychologically-based framework for understanding organizational processes. This framework aligned an organization's economic need to focus all parts on the common purposes of its work, and its workers' intrinsic needs to have positive influence on those purposes and products.



"Conflict and competition break connections to mutual purposes."
—W. Edwards Deming

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Quality Work

Viewing schools within this same framework or paradigm, several features of quality work are relevant:

- *Quality* is a characteristic of appropriateness to purpose. Quality outcomes are achieved in organizations when people and products both accomplish their purposes.

- In service organizations, quality measures responsiveness and appropriateness to the customer's need. For example, the criteria for a quality school would be found less in external standards, such as Carnegie units, and more in intrinsic abilities to identify and respond to the differing needs of its students.

- An organization's work takes place through two interdependent processes: (1) a core production process that provides the environment within which the worker and the product interact until the product satisfies the worker's and the organization's standards and expectations; and (2) work processes of the rest of the organization that are designed to support the core production process.

- Quality of an organization's outcomes or products can only be assured in the core production process. In most organizations, including schools, support processes often inhibit the flexibility and responsiveness of the core process.

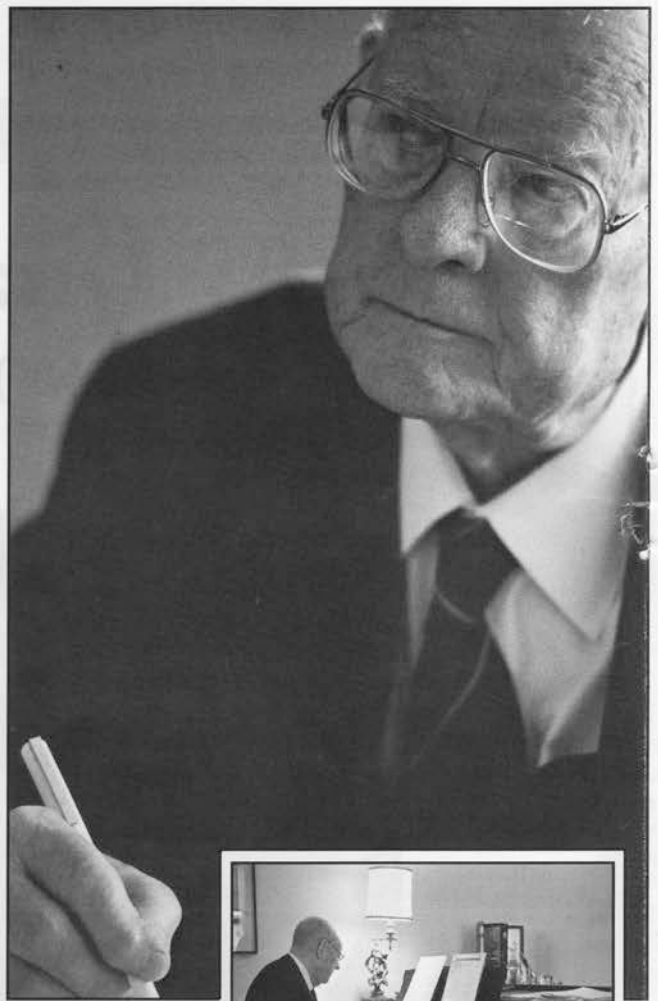
- Quality results emerge from frequent, informed interaction between the worker and the object of the work, and between the workers and the processes that support them. Two bodies of information continuously inform those actions and interactions: feedback on the current state of the product and the processes influencing it, and information from other perspectives on the situation the worker confronts.

Product- or outcome-centered frameworks like this are certainly not new. Management-by-objective advocates and others have promoted this idea for years. What distinguishes Deming's approach and success is that he integrated statistical training and experience with his beliefs about people and organizations. Deming believes:

- *Humans want to be effective.* They are purposeful beings who want their

"Intrinsic motivation is a person's innate dignity and self-esteem; his natural esteem for other people. One is born with a natural inclination to learn and be innovative."

—W. Edwards Deming



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actions to have meaning and effect on the world around them, and will take self-correcting actions until their purposes are achieved.

- *Organizations are connected systems that require management of connections.*

Thus, leaders must put systems in place and manage them in ways that allow people to be effective.

- *Both management and labor are trapped in processes they feel powerless to*

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modify. Between 80 and 90 percent of the problems blamed on employees actually are caused by the system or process itself.

In Deming's framework, the system and workers become aligned in an environment of information and trust. Workers are given information that allows them to work smarter, and are trusted that they care enough to work harder.

If American educators want quality results, then it is time to assess the relevance of Deming's beliefs—and then the strategies that support them—to schools.

However, there is no Deming system or Deming process. What he has to offer is a different way of looking at and understanding our educational world and then acting on what we see. Deming frames his views of the world within the four components of profound knowledge.

Essential Beliefs

Each component below provides a fundamental belief for viewing the world. Such beliefs serve the mind as filters, frames, and organizing structures. Seeing what we believe and believing what we see frees the mind to focus on immediate tasks at hand.

Deming's strategies and techniques, such as quality circles, statistical process controls, and even his famous "14 Points," have little meaning outside the four components of his profound knowledge:

- *Psychology*. Deming believes people are purposeful cognitive beings intrinsically motivated to seek satisfaction through the accomplishment of their purposes:

"Learning is not easy, but it can be satisfying ... results come from people trying to satisfy themselves."

"The most important things we need to manage can't be measured; they take place in the interaction between the worker and the process."

"Changes in these capabilities don't show on balance sheets like equipment and resources."

"Intrinsic motivation is a person's innate dignity and self-esteem; his natural esteem for other people. One is born with a natural inclination to

learn and to be innovative. One inherits a right to enjoy his work. [Our knowledge of] psychology helps us to nurture and preserve these positive attributes of people."

"Extrinsic motivation is submission to external forces that neutralize intrinsic motivation."

Deming asserts the American system of MBO, incentive pay, and pay for performance is destructive.

Under extrinsic motivation, one is ruled by external forces. One tries to protect what one has. One strives for a high rating or for a high grade in school.

He states, "Judging and [providing monetary incentives] does not help people. Monetary reward under such conditions is a way out for managers that do not understand how to manage intrinsic motivation."

- *Systems*. Deming believes organizations are systems whose "functions or activities work together for the aim of the organization."

"Without an aim, there is no system. The components of a system are necessary but not sufficient of themselves to accomplish the aim. They must be managed."

"Management of a system requires knowledge of the interrelationships between all the components within the system and of the people who work in it."

"Management's job is to optimize the system through relationships that ensure that all the components win."

"The greater the interdependence between components, the greater the need for communication and cooperation between them."

"Conflict and competition breaks connections to mutual purposes."

"All the people that work within a system can contribute to improvement, and thus enhance their joy in work."

- *Perceptual Frameworks Based on Theory*. Deming believes individuals construct knowledge from experience within frames provided by theories and beliefs. Everyone in the organization needs the same theoretical roadmaps:

"Theories lead to questions; if you are asking questions then you can learn."

"Experience is no help in management unless studied with the aid of

theory."

"No number of examples establishes a theory, yet a single unexplained failure of a theory requires modification or even abandonment of the theory."

"A statement devoid of prediction or explanation of past events conveys no knowledge."

"There is no such thing as a fact concerning an empirical observation. Any two people may have different ideas about what is important to know about any event."

- *Causes of Variation*. Organizations should expect variations in the outcomes of any complex work process. Variations should be monitored, but not used to judge, blame, or grade. Rather, variations should be used to understand and determine one's next actions. Deming believes:

"Eighty to 90 percent of variations in expected outcomes are caused by problems in the system or process, not the worker." If you want their occurrences to lessen, the system must be modified.

"Some understanding of variation, including appreciation of a stable system, and some understanding of special causes and common causes of variation, is essential for management of a system—including leadership of people."

In a world perceived as increasingly fragmented, Deming's profound knowledge provides a way of understanding the connectedness of things, supporting individual human growth in work organizations, and framing the right questions on the road to restructuring schools.

The first issue for American educators and their supporters in local communities is their willingness to examine their own profound beliefs and assumptions about people in organizations. Most will find their own beliefs align with Deming's.

Then, they must consider Deming's strategies for making fundamental changes in the quality of our students' learning.

Next month, Lew Rhodes explores ways to apply Deming's approach to schools and describes what kind of leader the "Deming Superintendent" might be.