

18 On the Road to Quality

Total Quality Management can provide the continuing information and management support all school personnel need to get a little better every day at teaching and learning.

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I was halfway out the door heading home when the office phone rang. "You don't know me," the voice said. "I'm a middle school civics teacher in Sioux City. I read your Deming articles," he continued, "and I want you to know that for me Deming is the last great leader of the Enlightenment. . . . He's provided the final, and missing, element of natural law."

Normally a comment like that would have surprised me. But this was one more of a series of unanticipated reactions evoked by an article I had written six months earlier about the acknowledged founder of the quality movement, W. Edwards Deming (Rhodes 1990). What was going on? For example, "For an administrator who just 'hung it up' after 29 years of trying to influence public education, I found Deming's words heartening." The most frequent reaction, however, was "I thought I was the only one who saw possibilities for schools!"

These, and other reactions, were different from those I'd heard regarding other "new" ideas in education, and they started me on a yearlong quest to discover why. This article suggests some answers.

Why Quality? Why Now?

It's relatively easy to answer the question, "Why has America suddenly become so interested in quality?" One need only listen to economic news about America losing the productivity race to world-class competitors.

However, it's more difficult to find answers to why these ideas are proving so attractive to educational practitioners, even before being touted by university-based theorists or outside reformers. Why the growing interest and commitment when there are no full working educational "models" as there are in other systemic programs such as Outcome-Based Education? Why such appeal, when few can even agree on a definition of "quality"? And why such seeming understanding now, after decades of exposure to many of the same ideas in the writings of organizational researchers and theorists such as Drucker, Herzberg, Argyris, Likert, Maslow, and McGregor?

Apparently Deming's words and ideas resonate with something that many people already personally believe is "right." The ideas seem to validate long-held feelings of working individuals who know they want to be effective in their jobs, and who by and

large have given up on their organizations ever acting as if they believed it, too. As one midmanager, whose organization had sent her to a Deming seminar, realized with a shock, "You mean our organization might actually do this . . . when now they're rewarding people for doing just the opposite?"

It's becoming clearer to me that the power of Total Quality Management concepts of Deming and others derives (1) from their psychological and value-driven base, and (2) from their "totalness." They deal with an organization's work processes as a single system.

As one elementary teacher wrote to me, "Schools have a head start over industry in implementing quality concepts because we have a better foundation in psychology and human development than industry." On the other hand, it's also clear why school people don't feel they can act on those principles. The prevailing organizational paradigm has all the characteristics of a dysfunctional family. That is, its members believe that their present roles and relationships (isolated practitioners, relying on little but their own experience and expertise to respond to children's needs) are the way things are supposed to be. If there's a problem, they — not their "family" — are the ones responsible and in need of fixing.

Until now, this dysfunctional condition has characterized most modern organizations — not just schools. Humans are born as purpose-driven, trial-and-error learning, self-regulating organisms. But most organizational life limits this natural behavior.

Regardless of what Herzberg's (1959) research might have told us about the power of intrinsic motivation and the ineffectiveness of external rewards, we could not imagine our work settings existing without grading, evaluating, and labeling the people in it. We could not imagine that "top" organizational leaders would be willing to give up what seemed like the power of problem solving and decision making to those on the "bottom." Moreover, with little experience to support it, we really haven't believed that total organizations could change.

So what happened? In a way, W. Edwards Deming has done for management of work processes what Roger Bannister did for the 4-minute mile. Deming's work in Japan provided evidence that something not believed possible was possible. Total organizations could change, it could cost less to produce quality results, and the brain power of the workers on the front line could be an organization's most valuable resource.

A Student's Eye View

Total Quality Management (TQM) has been termed "a thought revolution in management" (Kim 1991). For business and industry, it created a fundamental paradigm shift by refocusing attention on the "customer" whose needs, requirements, and potentials must now drive the work process. In industrial TQM, the *voice of the customer* provides the information an organization must have to remain responsive. In education, our paradigm shift also involves seeing things through the eye of the customer.

I started out the year thinking that Total Quality Management could help all those involved in schools to view their actions from a perspective that had a "customer/student" at the center. Today, my concept of student-

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centeredness has changed, and along with it my understanding of the potentials of TQM for education. I had always been bothered by critics' declarations that education is too process-oriented and not sufficiently student-centered. On the contrary, I had observed that student-centeredness already was the cause of some of education's most serious management problems. Underlying most decisions in educational practice has been the unstated belief: this is what's best for the kids. The separate acts of teachers, administrators, and board members alike are driven by their personal views of what's best for children. Unfortunately, the potential power of this common focus has become instead a fundamental weakness because decisions are made in isolation, with no way to take advantage of relationships to others who share the same goal.

The work of schools has been student-centered in the same way that the work of a basketball team might be called "hoop-centered." The success of the whole team (organization) is tied directly to success in putting the

ball through the hoop. But imagine a team in which the centers, forwards, and guards were each trained separately and each provided with opportunities to individually practice the necessary decisions and moves for putting the ball through the hoop. What would happen when they came back together to play a real game? Because of their "hoop-centeredness," each would attempt to shoot directly for the basket every time he or she got the ball. The result: many cases of individual "success" but a team that most often would lose the game.

What does that metaphor have to do with paradigms for education? Keeping the student foremost in our thoughts has little to do with shifting our sense of the system. We still are looking *at* the student. The total quality view allows us to see *with* a student's eye view — to understand what the school and the world around it looks like to children growing up today.¹

This student's eye view also allows us to understand that there are always two parallel "systems" in operation. One we control through planning and operational management decisions to achieve the *results we want*. The other "system" is composed of all factors that influence the *results we get*, whether or not we can control them.

Two Parallel Systems

The "two systems" view of schooling may help explain why the work processes of the central office and the classrooms seem so disconnected. Each is responding to a different criterion. As an example, the work of curriculum developers in the "first system" starts with what students *must know*. This first system then provides educators with goals for general direction-setting, as well as general support for attaining them.

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The work of daily instruction, on the other hand, takes place largely in the “second system.” It starts with, and must respond to, what students *already know*. And much of this base of knowledge increasingly is a product of the “second system” — the one over which educators have little control. As Bill Moyers has noted, the *popular culture* is the “most powerful chancellor, superintendent, principal, or teacher in America” (1990). The images and fragmented reality that children confront every day and from which they evoke meaning and values provide the canvas and frame on which schooling starts. And because this starting point on each student’s learning journey is constantly changing, those planning and helping students make that journey must have access to continuing information about where each child is.

This continuing information becomes necessary for appropriate and effective instruction. But until now, districts have not had tools and processes to support a classroom capability for this degree of diagnosis and prescription. Information has been pulled out of classrooms to support others’ decisions, instead of being moved down and made accessible to those who could more readily act on it. Compounding the problem, America’s concern for the *results* of the learning journey currently overshadows the vital need to know where you are at all times. While goals are an obvious direction-setter, if you’re not where you think you are when you start out, you can totally miss your goal.

Until now, in both public and private sectors, *systemic* strategies such as strategic planning, mission development, and visioning have been effective ways to develop and gain agreement on desired results. But we have lacked comparable systemic

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processes that can be used to accomplish the results through continually adjusting the work environment. In education, without such processes to bridge the two systems, many current reform efforts have attempted instead to shrink the boundaries of the two until they appear as if they can both be addressed by building personnel.

A Quality Lens Applied

Districtwide TQM provides, in effect, such a bridging process: a process of *strategic management*. Building on the context and direction-setting provided by systemwide agreement on outcomes, it focuses the total system’s daily attention on the “other end” of the process — where the students really are, and it brings to the work setting the strategies necessary to continually generate information required to maintain a journey of incremental improvement between the results we plan for and those we’re actually getting.

One shorthand way I’ve begun to think about what TQM might be like in practice is to imagine a school

district entirely staffed by developmentally appropriate educators. These practitioners — usually found in early childhood and special education — always start where the child “is.” They do this, not because they know more than other educators, but because in most instances they have no other choice. The realities of disabilities and age (try to group 2-year-olds and keep them quiet) prevent them from making the *management compromises* “regular” educators, operating as isolated practitioners, have to make. The daily negotiation between quantitative curriculum requirements and the qualitative needs of 20-30 individual children — within the fixed limits of time, space, and accessible resources — leaves most isolated practitioners grasping the most manageable alternatives. Most of the “bad” things that reformers rail against — lectures, standardized tests, ability-level grouping, bell schedules, uniform texts, marking on curves — are merely practical ways for isolated practitioners to handle on a continuing daily basis the scope of that management task.

Applying a quality lens to schooling allows us to see management as the common work of the school practitioner and of the administrator. Both create and manage environments in which others can work, and continually learn from their work. Both are decision makers who must solve the same basic problem: how to combine what they know with the resources they have to best meet continuing learning needs. This work process is little different than in industry today where, as Shoshana Zuboff notes, the changing requirements of work have made it necessary for workers to become learners and for managers to become teachers — that is, to provide environments where workers can learn from their continuing experience (1988).

No Substitute for Knowledge

One final point I've learned this past year has been that I am not alone in my search for the meaning of TQM for education. We each seem to start out by trying to understand it in terms of what we already know. This is no easy task because so much of what we know is filtered through other beliefs, and TQM challenges many of them.

This portends a period of time when we all will be engaged as much in unlearning as in learning. It will also require that as educators, we be able to untangle our perceptions of ourselves as cognitive, purposeful beings from the jumbled web of "everything-connected-to-everything-else" that comes to mind when we think of learning, teaching, and schooling. All three are, and must be managed as, learning processes.

Moreover, as educators and non-educators attempt to translate into schooling business terms such as "customer," "supplier," or "product," new insights may develop that illuminate the more complex work processes of schooling.

For instance, our "customer" may not have chosen to be one. Unlike industry, the "raw material" that emerges as our "final product" never belongs to us at any point during the process. We can have no "scrap." External judgments of the quality of an industrial product are made after the development process is complete. External inspectors of education's products and processes are daily facts of life.

Current pathways to this understanding of schools as organized work systems and the relevance of TQM to them seem to follow one of the three directions. Perhaps the easiest route is to start with translating Deming's 14 points into education. (For further discussion, see also "Lessons from

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Enlightened Corporations," p. 71.) This usually is a rewarding group experience because it uncovers how much agreement there is about what's wrong with the ways we manage ourselves in organizations. One important caveat, however. The 14 points are not a sequential checklist. Much like the "Ten Commandments," these 7 do's and 7 don'ts merely illustrate the ways people would behave if they bought into the philosophy underlying them.

This is why Deming subsequently had to develop his *Theory of Profound Knowledge*. "Hard work and best efforts, put forth without guidance of profound knowledge, may well be at the root of our ruination. There is no substitute for knowledge. . . . We are being ruined by best efforts directed the wrong way. We need best efforts directed by a theory of management" (1989).

As statements of what people need to believe and know, each of the four areas of *Profound Knowledge* challenges a prevailing mental model loaded with unquestioned assumptions. Each forces one to confront what he or she accepts about people

and processes in organizations with what they intuitively "know."

For example:

- His concepts about *systems* confront what, because of our acceptance of the isolated practitioner paradigm, we believe about the lack of interdependency in organizations.
- His thoughts about people, as *psychological beings intrinsically motivated* to want to be effective in their work, force one to apply to others a principle that some of us may think applies only to our selves.

- His demonstration that management's processes are the causes of up to 90 percent of the variation in outcomes and results in any system challenge directly our attempts to improve schools through monitoring of results, then assigning blames, and trying to fix individuals.

- And his *theory of knowledge* forces awareness of humans as cognitive beings trying to construct knowledge from experience within frames provided by theories and beliefs. In a confusing way, his four elements of *profound knowledge* are themselves an illustration of this one element.

It would seem logical to enter into an understanding of the implications of Deming's ideas through the portal of profound knowledge because it is the sine qua non for long-term commitment. However, initially this path may not provide as many easily glimpsed signposts as the 14 points, and it can require skilled facilitation to help people "let go" of their paradigms.

But What Does It Really Mean?

Finally, because TQM is a process designed to make continual improvement a fact of organizational life, it has been natural to attempt to contrast it with other "improvement" strategies such as Outcome-Based Education, Effective Schools, Accelerated

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Schools, and Essential Schools. While a point-by-point comparison may help communication, it can blur a fundamental difference between *improvement* processes and *management* processes. Whether true or not, the former tend to be perceived as processes with *change* as a goal. Total Quality Management, on the other hand, connects the "where-we-are-ness" of daily practice to the "where-we-want-to-go-ness" found in the organization's goals. Change becomes just a natural consequence of people managing themselves in a way that allows them to get a little bit more effective every day. The result: continual growth in *total* organiza-

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tional and personal capacity to act differently.

What seems increasingly clear to me as I've tried to describe TQM in

terms of current educational understanding is that it can provide a broadly applied constructivist approach within which students, staff, and the organization itself are each engaged in continually creating meaning, acting based on that new meaning, and being involved in processes that increase their capability to act again. My current definition of TQM is relatively simple:

Total Quality Management is a value-based, information-driven management process through which the minds and talents of people at all levels are applied fully and creatively to the organization's continuous improvement. □

¹Remember, the oft-cited Copernican paradigm shift — from a view of an earth-centered universe to one that was sun-centered — was not accepted for several generations because people had to intuit the new system concept. No one could stand on the sun, look up, and find that Copernicus' logic was immediately apparent.

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