Evangelist of quality

Obituary

V Edwards Deming

One of the earliest and most famous exponents of the idea that close cooperation in industrial life is the key to economic success, W Edwards Deming has died in Washington aged 93. It is said that he was one of the most important contributors to the Japanese economic miracle. In the years that followed he expanded his essentially statistical method into a whole theory of management that stressed teamwork, continuous improvement, goal-setting and communication over competition. If there were lapses in quality then the proper response was not to fire workers but to let them make mistakes.

In effect he was challenging the so-called "Fordist" approach to industrial management in which the central objective was to lower costs by mass production and move down the so-called learning curve. These terms, quality was a statistical measure of production in which the number of poor quality goods could be predicted statistically.

But as the Japanese began to make inroads into US markets, with Sony and Panasonic driving the US consumer electronics industry, almost all business was lost. Toyota, Honda, and Nissan doing the same in the car industry, and in the electronics industry, the growth was beginning to change. US companies recognized the importance of quality and they started using statistical techniques and production techniques that were not delivering what was wanted.

Ford, an early convert, quickly discovered the unconventional nature of Deming's approach. Instead of using statistical techniques, the senior manager would sit down and review the company's quality problems. He called these "whipping sessions". He would then say, "We have to change our management philosophy, every employee has to be a statistician."

"American management on the whole has a negative value," he told his audience. "It's a problem to give your employees a fair salary and pay them what you think they are worth." At that point he added that the United States should never export its management to a friendly country.

In 1980, he launched the now-famous series of seminars for Japanese managers. A new term, "quality circle," entered the dictionary. He argued instead that innovation would come from the shop floor, that quality is not something that can be inspected, but something that is done through teamwork and continuous improvement.

"You can blame the company first and then blame the customer. You don't do that," he said.

He exhorted managers to "drive out fear," so that workers would feel free to make improvements in the workplace. He was fiercely opposed to the free market economists' advocacy of price, quantity, and incentives. He believed in a "human being" model of management, that the worker is like a scientist, that he has to be treated as a human being, not just a machine.

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W Edwards Deming: revered guru of the Japanese economic miracle

get better products and services when workers were encouraged to use their minds as well as their hands on the job.

To convince workers that managers really did want to enlist them as partners, he insisted that companies eliminate management perks like spurious parking spaces and executive dining rooms. When the managers were taken to the meeting at which he was to speak, they were informed that the meeting was canceled and that he would not be coming. The company had];//

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Will Hutton

William Edward Deming, born 1900, died 1993, known for his work in quality control and the application of statistical methods to business. He was a key figure in the development of the Japanese economic miracle. He believed in the importance of teamwork and continuous improvement, and his ideas have had a lasting impact on the way businesses are managed around the world.
Evangelist of quality

One of the earliest and most famous exponents of the idea that co-operation in industrial life is the root to economic access, W. Edwards Deming, has died in Washington aged 93. Invited to Japan after the war by General MacArthur to help Japanese reconstruction, he was credited by many Japanese as being the single most important cause of the Japanese miracle – and to the extent the model has been copied throughout East Asia, he can be regarded as one of the authors of the Pacific boom.

A statistician by training, he became convinced in the twenties and thirties that it was wrong to control the quality of industrial output by individual inspection, and to accept that as long as the proportion of inferior goods fell into statistical limits there was no problem. Instead, he believed the route to high quality production was to raise the quality of overall output. That, he concluded involved the active participation of the labour force in a continual process of upgrading – and that in turn implied revolutionary changes in U.S. management.

Around this central insight he prosecuted a career as an industrial evangelist/management consultant and a growing number of American companies became his clients. Ford issued a statement this week, crediting him with Ford’s commitment to quality. Companies as various as Proctor and Gamble, Xerox and Dow Chemical followed his trail-blazing techniques. “American management on the whole has a negative scrap value,” was a typical refrain. It’s like an old refrigerator you can’t sell. You have to pay someone $25 to cart it off.” At other times he advised that the United States should never export its management to a friendly country.

In 1950, he launched the now-famous series of seminars for Japanese business leaders on how to rebuild their factories and improve the second-rate image associated with “Made in Japan.” The Japanese responded by establishing a corporate quality award in his honour – the Deming Prize, often referred to as the Nobel Prize of Japanese business.

In the years that followed, he expanded his essentially statistically based insights into a whole theory of management that stressed worker involvement, goal-setting and communication over competition. If there were lapses in quality then the proper response is to improve management – not lecture workers about mistakes.

In effect he was challenging the so-called “Fordist” approach to industrial management in which the central objective was to lower costs by mass production and move down the so-called learning curve. In these terms, quality was a statistical byproduct of production in which the number of poor quality goods could be predicted statistically.

But as the Japanese began to make inroads in to US markets, with Sony and Panasonic driving the US consumer electronics industry almost out of business, and Toyota and Honda doing the same in the car industry, attitudes began to change. US consumers plainly valued reliability and quality; and US production techniques were not delivering what was wanted.
Ford, an early convert, quickly discovered the unconventional nature of Deming’s approach. Instead of the usual homilies about production techniques, one senior manager recalls, he instantly homed in on the company culture and management philosophy. Eighty-five percent of the quality problems, he told the assembled managers, are the result of management errors. “Can you blame your competitors for your woes?” No. Can you blame the Japanese? No. You did it yourself.”

He exhorted managers to “drive our fear,” so that workers could feel free to make improvements in the workplace. He was fiercely opposed to the free market economists’ advocacy of procedures like production quotas, performance ratings and individual bonuses to raise productivity, saying they were inherently unfair and detrimental to quality. He argued instead that consumers would get better products and services when workers were encouraged to use their minds as well as their hands on the job.

To convince workers that management did really want to enlist them as partners, he insisted that companies eliminate management perks like special parking spaces and executive dining rooms because shop floor workers found them offensive.

The Deming approach has become incorporated in the new doctrine of so-called “lean production” in which the car industry in particular operates with minimal stocks and fast retooling techniques involving the close co-operation of the workforce. Rover in Britain owes its turnaround to the application of the philosophy.

Deming was a frugal man in his personal life operating out of the basement of his Washington home. One of his daughters recalled that he dated the eggs in his refrigerator with a felt-tipped pen so the oldest would be eaten first and none would go to waste.

Asked once how he would like to be remembered in his native land, he replied: “Well, maybe…as someone who spent his life trying to keep America from committing suicide.”

Deming visited Britain regularly in recent years, usually as a speaker for the British Deming Association. The organisation holds many seminars and conferences in the UK on the Deming philosophy.

William Edwards Deming, born on October 14, 1900, died on December 19, 1993.