

Evangelist of quality

Obituary

W Edwards Deming

ONE of the earliest and most famous exponents of the idea that co-operation in industrial life is the root to economic success, 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 what as long as the proportion of inferior goods fell within statistical limits there was no problem. Instead, he believed that 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 US 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 in 1951 seeking his help in reducing scrap with Ford's consequent to quality, and companies as various as Procter 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. "If you are an old refrigerator you can't sell. You have to pay someone \$25 to cart it off." At that time he advised that the United States should never export its management to a friendly country.

In 1960, he launched the now-famous series of seminars for Japanese managers, teaching them 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 by-product of production in which the numbers 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 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's culture and management philosophy. Eighty-five per cent of quality problems, he told the assembled managers, are the result of management errors. "Can you blame your competitor for your woes? No. Can you blame the Japanese? No. You did it yourself."

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 procedures like production quotas, performance bonuses and individual bonuses to raise productivity, saying they were inherently unfair and detrimental to quality. He argued instead that competitors would



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 special parking spaces and executive dining rooms because they drove workers crazy, then, off jobs.

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 did the eggs in his refrigerator with a felt-tipped pen, so the oldest would be eaten first and the rest 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 at the British Deming Association organisation holds many seminars, conferences in the field of quality management.

He was an incurable optimist and his personal secretary was convinced he would die of his cancer, but he was determined to finish his regular seminar course this December at Los Angeles University. He died — and a few days later, confirming that he had made "his bid". A remarkable man; a remarkable philosophy.

Will Hutton

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

Obituary: W. Edwards Deming
Will Hutton
The Guardian
Wednesday, December 22, 1993

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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.

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XXXXXXXXXX individual xxxxx and not minimal xxxxx welxx become xxxxx to the end of his life. His cancer by now had confined him to a wheelchair complete with oxygen tent, but he was determined to lead his regular seminar course this 7-10 December at Los Angeles Universal. He did – and a few days later he commented that he had made it "to the end." A remarkable man: a remarkable philosophy.

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