

Editorial

The best of America

The death of W. Edwards Deming on Dec. 20, 1993, is a sad event, as is all death; but it is good to know that until his last weeks, even though he was 93 years old, he led an active and productive life. Dr. Deming's efforts to reverse the New Age paradigm shift in the area of overlap of culture and economics, may without exaggeration be called his mission.

Were it not for the abysmal ignorance of even top executives in corporate management, what Deming had to say might almost be called a truism. Unfortunately, such statements as that the purpose of industry should be to produce a good product, not to make money, are virtually heresy in today's Alice in Wonderland through-the-looking-glass world.

His iconoclastic view was that the purpose of an industry was to make goods of high quality which satisfied a customer's needs. He introduced methods of distinguishing between acceptable variation in the quality of a product as it traveled the assembly line, etc., and unacceptable variation which indicated a dangerous flaw in production.

He was absolutely contemptuous of the accounting and worse mentality which has infected American management practice. He believed that every worker inherently wishes to do a useful job, and that his or her failure to do so was a problem with management in most cases. He opposed Taylorism, piece work, speed-up, and the softer T-group variant of these. Thus Deming stressed that the quality of a product can best be controlled when everyone, from the corporate president down to the individual on the assembly line, understands the physical process of production.

This led him to emphasize that most individuals, even in today's hedonistic society, prefer to do a good job, if given the opportunity. When workers are unproductive it is usually because they have not been given proper conditions in which to work, or have been prevented from explaining where problems exist, by higher-ups who are afraid that they will not look good if problems are openly aired. Where putting problems on the table is encouraged rather than frowned upon, inspection becomes virtually unnecessary as a method of quality control. Variations are analyzed as they occur

throughout the process of production, in order to indicate and correct problems at an early stage. Thus he applied Carl Gauss's method to assessing nonavoidable error, and errors which must be immediately corrected, and so on.

It is particularly disgusting that proponents of outcome-based education (OBE) have taken Deming's name in order to promote programs which he completely opposed. Where Deming believed that technical standards of production were paramount—in contrast to methods emphasizing worker speed-up or, worse still, sensitivity training—the latter are being promoted in his name by dishonest educators.

The reason that people feel called upon to flaunt Deming's name while distorting his purpose is not because he was such an important figure in the United States, but because he was very influential in Japan, where he had established close relationships with top industrialists. In the postwar world, the Japanese fought not only to rebuild their industry, but also to transform it, and they found Deming's message suited to their broader philosophic conceptions.

Deming was one of the old school of industrial engineers. He was trained as a physicist, and began his career as an industrial consultant before World War II. Invited to Japan first as a consultant to the Occupation forces, in 1950 he began working with Japanese top management to help them upgrade the quality of their products.

It is sad to reflect that Deming was not so much an innovator as a representative of an American generation which still remembered an America which valued progress and nurtured the technological innovation on which that lawfully depends. Even 30 years ago, Deming's message would have hardly have been considered revolutionary by most Americans.

We have no need to emulate "Japanese" methods, no more have we the right to complain about their supposedly unfair competitive methods. If the Japanese have chosen the America which W. Edwards Deming grew up in and loved, as their model, rather than the America of today which we and he deplored, that is their strength.