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Editorial Comment

Only Systems Orientation Can Bring Quality

There was a time when I thought that quality could begin to happen within one's own domain, from the ground up, with the system following along. I thought quality systems would work in one classroom, one school, one department. I must confess I was wrong and Deming was right all along. Quality can only improve outcomes when the entire system is oriented toward it.

Over the past four years, since I began to apply quality systems to education (and this Journal came into being) I have had the opportunity to work with individual academic departments and higher education divisions, schools and classrooms and several school districts. The verdict is clear, unless quality improvement and ALL of Deming's Fourteen Points are in place, our work is wasted, produces no results. In fact, in some cases, it may have produced negative results as those hard working souls who fought to improve quality feel burned-out and distressed and some have simply left for more congenial and less exciting pastures.

I have been part of great successes, but all at the system's level. In one case (a small school district) tested outcomes have improved 100% every year and are now reaching the same levels than school systems with more predictable demographics. One university with multiple campuses reports higher grades for students, greater faculty satisfaction, improved level of research and the successful international accreditation of a crucial program.

In both these examples not all the departments, schools or classrooms have implemented quality systems. But at the system's level there has been an acceptance and promotion of the principles of quality and those schools, departments or classrooms which have attempted to follow at lower levels have found the kind of understanding and support that has made their work effective.

On the downside we met with failure when we tried to introduce quality systems in a college classroom ignoring the rest of the system. We found ample student collaboration, but as we discovered new ways of learning which required a change in schedule and facilities, first the department and then the college objected and killed the innovation before it got started. In this same college the professor in question was reprimanded for going outside the "known traditions" in search of "untested experimentation." So much for academic freedom and inquiry.

In another university the "business division" tried to implement quality systems to no avail. The workload increased for each worker without any apparent result except that the division Vice President became the target of numerous grievances and lacking the support of the President, is now struggling to survive.

How can quality systems have an impact in the hopelessly decentralized and politicized educational systems?

To me it's back to the drawing board and to Deming's principles. In a seminar conducted by Dr. Deming in which I participated, he made the point that only a complete commitment to quality on the part of a CEO would make him a consultant to that corporation. I either forgot or failed to see the crucial importance of that absolute condition and instead accepted to work with lesser-committed organizations hoping that, as results were demonstrated, we would have additional cooperation from the top. "Hope springs eternal" or so the saying goes, but some things are beyond hope and Deming was right and I was not.

Quality can come to educational systems and when continuous improvement takes hold it is beautiful. People become more satisfied in their work, clients become more loyal and cooperative, the sun shines, the birds sing and the promise of organizational sanity comes near. As quality systems take hold in educational systems, more students want to join the successful system and teachers and professors think twice before jumping to another job. The sweet smell of success permeates the environment and "out of crisis" a new hope flourishes. That is the hope we must embrace, but only after the system has embraced us.

Submit your comments to: [J. R. Llanes, Managing Editor](#)