

## Dr. Deming's Thoughts on Motivational Posters

Under this heading, a post appeared on an ASQ (American Society for Quality) web site. The member asked, "What makes a good motivational poster or slogan? This was so important to Dr. Deming, that he made it one of his 14 principles; i.e., 'Point 10: Eliminate slogans, exhortations, and targets for the workforce.' This principle appears to conflict with ISO 9001."

To meet ISO 9001 requirements your company needs to have a Quality Policy. This Quality Policy must be communicated throughout the company. Auditors will ask employees about the details of the Quality Policy. Does your company Quality Policy provide the methods to obtaining product Quality? Most likely not. Dr. Deming would probably disagree with this ISO requirement.

Other members posted responses, among them:

- Posters do not motivate. Leadership does.
- I think "Slogans with a Method" is the key. This is also valid for policies. A quality policy which can really open new ways for the company and for the personnel will be correct and successful.
- The only thing worse than quality posters is the quality profession's addiction to fads and buzz words.

Deming's Point 10 is merely calling for leaders to work on improvement of processes, instead of setting goals or spouting slogans. Improving processes alone will change their capabilities and levels of performance. In this regard, Deming wrote, "A numerical goal accomplishes nothing. Only the method is important. By what method?"

Taken only at face value, Deming's call to eliminate goals and targets seems radical; divorced from the realities of customer and organizational requirements and demands. When viewed in the context of systems thinking and some knowledge of the theory of variation, however, this point – so goofy on its surface – is not at all radical. The theory of variation teaches us that processes will define their own capabilities, as determined by the average plus and minus three standard deviation measures. In other words, processes are stupid. They do not know and they do not care what might be our hopes, wishes, goals and targets. They will provide us only what they're capable of providing – no more, no less.

Some additional thoughts on Point 10 follow:

- Posters and slogans never helped anyone do a better job.

- “Your work is your self-portrait. Would you sign it?” **NO!!!** – not when you give me defective canvas to work with, paint not suited to the job, and brushes so worn that I cannot call it my work.
- What is wrong with posters and slogans? They are directed at the wrong people!
- The company will of course have goals – for example, constancy of purpose and never-ending improvement.

Both the first Bush administration and the Clinton administration set targets for American students to be number one in the world in math and science by the year 2000. They set targets to raise the high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2000 as well. Instead, American students' standing in international tests declined, and the high school graduation rate dropped. In the absence of proper methods, support and leadership, Bush's America 2000 and Clinton's Education 2000 goals remained just that – goals.

Management should not use posters urging workers to do better or to achieve zero defects. Instead, management should coat the walls with what it's doing to improve things. What would you post today?

Notes

W. E. Deming, Out of the Crisis, MIT Center for Advanced Engineering Study, Cambridge, MA (1986), pp. 65-70.

J. F. Leonard, The New Philosophy for K-12 Education: A Deming Framework for Transforming America's Schools, ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI (1996), pp. 171-172.

© 2017 James F. Leonard. All Rights Reserved.