

"Is the WILL the most important factor for achieving EXCELLENCE?"

I belong to several groups on the Linked In web site and find many of the group discussions to be both interesting and informative. Sometimes, though, the topics can seem somewhat silly. For example, a member of the American Society for Quality (ASQ) group recently posted, "Almost always we hear people discussing methods and tools (management standards, lean six sigma, total quality, etc.) but almost never do we speak about WILL. Is the lack of WILL the real cause of many flops?" The post generated several responses and opinions, among them:

- The WILL to be excellent arises from commitment to creating value for costumers while keeping win-win relations with stake-holders.
- Senior leadership will is the most important prerequisite to achieving and sustaining excellence.
- "It is our attitude at the beginning of a difficult task which, more than anything else, will affect its successful outcome." (William James)
- I believe that total and REAL buy in from all members of a team involved in any initiative is a must in order to attain success.
- An ongoing team commitment is the key for success, not always easy to achieve though.

A number of the respondents identified themselves as ASQ-certified quality engineers, black belts, and master black belts. The responses seemed so vapid, however, I was starting to question ASQ's standards for certification! Totally lacking was any mention of the importance of knowledge or, as Dr. Deming described it, profound knowledge. Deming always insisted that there is no substitute for knowledge. How can one have the WILL to accomplish something he or she neither knows nor understands?

Just as I was about to lose heart, three more responses were posted on the site that started to restore my faith in quality professionals.

- WILL is the second most important factor to reach EXCELLENCE, the first being capability.

- In general, will without having the means, and having the means without having the will - both would lead very likely to nothing...
- Not only the will but willingness to do what it takes, knowing the way, complete understanding of the common goal, understanding of my role in the activities leading to the goal, faith in outcomes and belief in the methods and tools, patience.....all this and more leads to operational excellence.

Knowledge is the key.

In his classic text, Out of the Crisis, Dr. Deming provided the following suggestions (among others) for getting started on the quality transformation.¹

1. Management in authority will struggle over every one of the 14 Points... They will agree on their meaning and on the direction to take. They will agree to carry out the new philosophy.
2. Management in authority will take pride in the adoption of the new philosophy and in their new responsibilities. They will have courage to break with tradition, even to the point of exile among their peers.
3. Management in authority will explain by seminars and other means to a critical mass of people why change is necessary, and that the change will involve everybody.
4. Start as soon as possible to construct with deliberate speed an organization to guide continual improvement of quality...

It's interesting how Deming predicts that leaders will have to "struggle over every one of the 14 Points." Remember, the 14 Points for Management are not "the new philosophy" that they must "agree to carry out." Rather, they're a listing of common American management myths, beliefs and practices that act as barriers to the successful adoption of the new philosophy. And how can one state "the new philosophy"? We can do so as follows:

- ◆ Learning and applying the system of profound knowledge...
- ◆ In order to understand the statistical nature of work; and

- ◆ Understand work as a dynamic process; then
- ◆ Take appropriate action to accomplish improvement; because
- ◆ In this new economic age, there is and can be no such thing as "good enough."²

That, in a nutshell, is the philosophy; and note how it all begins not with WILL but with learning and applying the system of PROFOUND KNOWLEDGE. That system was developed and taught by Dr. Deming over a period of decades, and is comprised of four components:

1. **Appreciation for a system.** Deming defined a system as a network of interdependent components that work together to accomplish some aim. In his short paper about his system of profound knowledge he wrote, "The aim of the system must be stated by management. Without an aim, there is no system." He cited a good orchestra as an example of an optimal system. "The players are not there to play solos as prima donnas, to catch the ear of the listener. They are there to support each other. They need not be the best players in the country."³
2. **Some knowledge of the theory of variation.** Deming stressed that one need not be eminent in any part of profound knowledge in order to understand it as a system, and to apply it. One need not have a PhD in statistics to understand variation. Rather, Deming placed emphasis on understanding and differentiating between controlled, random, or common cause variation and uncontrolled, non-random, special cause variation. Decisions taken absent knowledge of variation lead to costly mistakes.
3. **Theory of knowledge.** Deming wrote that this third component of profound knowledge helps people to understand that management in any form requires prediction – and that prediction must be based on some theory. He added, "The theory of knowledge teaches us that a statement, if it conveys knowledge, predicts future outcome, with risk of being wrong, and it fits without failure observations of the past."⁴ Thus, Deming insisted that examples and case studies without theory teach nothing – a daunting thought to people in organizations managed by graduates of business schools with curricula based on case studies!

4. **Psychology.** Deming wrote, “Psychology helps us to understand people, interaction between people and circumstances, interaction between a manager and his people and any system of management.”⁵ His philosophy for leadership rests on the belief that people are intrinsically motivated. They strive naturally for dignity, pride and joy in their work. Unfortunately, the current American management system destroys intrinsic motivation by substituting extrinsic motivators such as merit pay, sales commissions and grades in school. Thus, too many students strive for high grades, not knowledge. Too many workers strive for merit increases and high rankings, not quality or the intrinsic joy one experiences from a job well done.

Clearly, leaders will require a great deal of will, courage and energy to achieve operational excellence; but American managers have exhibited strong wills forever. Absent knowledge, what have we accomplished? Where are we now? As noted above, there is no substitute for knowledge.

Notes

¹ W. E. Deming, Out of the Crisis, MIT Center for Advanced Educational Services, Cambridge, MA (1986), pp. 87-90.

² J. F. Leonard, The New Philosophy for K-12 Education: A Deming Framework for Transforming America's Schools, ASQ Quality Press, Milwaukee, WI (1996), p. 175.

³ W. E. Deming, “A System of Profound Knowledge,” from J.F. Leonard, The New Philosophy for K-12 Education: A Deming Framework for Transforming America's Schools, ASQ Quality Press (1996), p. 311.

⁴ W.E. Deming, The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education, Second Edition, MIT Center for Advanced Educational Services (1994), p. 101.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 107-108.