



Deming on Leadership Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPLP

“Where are the Leaders going to come from?” W. Edwards Deming, 1990

I attended a two-day seminar at George Washington University in October, 1990, taught by the great quality guru, W. Edwards Deming. Deming was responsible for more progress in manufacturing worldwide after World War II than any other individual. His methods of Total Quality Management have been taught to millions of people, and his famous 14 Points (see appendix A) ought to have been carved on tablets and brought down from a mountain by the great man.

By 1990, Deming was 89 years old and in failing health. You had to admire this old man with his trademark silver crew cut for keeping up a rigorous teaching schedule, even though he could no longer walk and could barely talk. Some of the content was covered by younger protégées such as Brian Joiner¹, the great statistician, but Deming taught the core material himself. A nurse would roll his wheelchair up to the platform, and he would bend over a microphone and speak in a gravelly voice, just above a whisper.

He described how most leaders waste resources when they ask people to explain apparent problems that were nothing more than normal statistical variability. He called it “common cause” variation, in which the phenomenon was a naturally-occurring random change that really did not have an important cause. In all companies, every day, people are asked to explain why something happened when the observation is a result of common cause variation. Deming would say the leaders are wasting the time of the people.

The most poignant part came when he reflected on the gains made by manufacturing over his lifetime and attempted to project them into the future. Deming’s outlook for the last decade of the 20th century was grim. Unfortunately, it was grim for Deming since he died in 1993,² but in 1990 the great man had a profound message to the audience of about 400 managers and engineers crammed into the huge ballroom.

At one point, he sat up straight; his voice rose up, becoming strong and clear as he asked, “Where are the leaders going to come from?” He paused and repeated himself, “Where are the leaders going to come from?” Then he said it again and again, gaining in volume and strength with each statement. I remember vividly his fist in the air almost yelling now, “Where are the leaders going to come from?”

People in the room became uncomfortable and started looking at each other. Was the old man insane? Did he need medical attention? What was this all about? His question was crystal clear, but what did it mean? I felt like yelling

back, “from over here,” but I held my tongue. Finally, the old man stopped and kind of slumped down again. He muttered some additional points that nobody seemed to hear.

Why was this great man so interested in having the audience think about his question? He obviously knew he was dying soon and was desperately trying to send out a message with all the passion and urgency his feeble body allowed. With all the technology he taught the world for over 50 years, why was he dwelling on this point? There was a good reason: he was right. Without enlightened leadership, his technology would atrophy and eventually amount to very little. Obviously he was doing everything in his power to get the audience to realize this.

The technological advances brought about by the Quality Revolution were no less dramatic than those of the Industrial Revolution 70 years earlier. For the first time, workers and managers really focused on their processes to identify which ones were in control and which were not. People started paying attention to data in ways that were robust. Instead of chasing after a trend based on two points of data, control charts helped to identify situations that required explanation versus those that were basically in control. Deming called this “profound knowledge,” and it transformed manufacturing worldwide for several decades.

By the 1990s, it became clear to the great thinker that this “profound knowledge” would be squandered if it was not understood and nurtured by the next generation of leaders. His justified worry was that there weren’t enough enlightened leaders in the pipeline to keep the gains once the first tier of leaders, the ones he badgered into submission, had moved on. He saw the day coming when complexity and technology would shove the fundamental gains of the quality revolution to a back burner. Yes, the tools were still there and being used, but many of them were becoming rusty as a new generation of leaders became caught up in the vicissitudes of everyday problems.

When Deming was alive, he would work with management teams and get in the face of managers who didn’t understand. He was very confrontational. If a manager said, “We have to increase the number of quality control staff,” Deming would reply, “How do you know that? Where is your data? You have no business making that ludicrous statement. You are just wasting people’s time.” If a sales manager wanted to know why revenue in a particular region was off by 15% over the last quarter, he would say, “That is a totally inappropriate question unless you can show the reduction is due to special cause variability. Don’t bother your sales force with things that don’t matter. ”

His points were correct, and he got away with the abrasiveness because he was a legend and because people trusted his abilities and insights. Nobody dared to challenge him or they would have been melted like a marshmallow at a Girl Scout campfire. Today, if people asked questions as pointed as that, they would be ejected from the meeting and also from the company.

Deming’s words still ring out from his grave, “Where are the leaders going to come from?” That is our collective challenge. We can be the ones to carry on the “profound knowledge” or it can fade away. We can even amplify his profound

knowledge on leadership with ideas that will enhance their usability in today's society. That is what I am attempting to do in this book.

As a leader, embracing leadership knowledge and passing it on to the next generation is not an onerous task, but an uplifting way of doing business. When Deming asks, "Where are the leaders going to come from?" we all need to shout out, "right here!" Unfortunately, none of us in his class in 1990 got that message, and most still don't today.

By the time I heard Deming, I had been studying practical leadership for over 20 years and saw the quality aspects of Deming's work as part, but not all of the equation. The application of profound knowledge in quality is only a tiny sliver of the message presented in this book, but tiny slivers require attention until you find them and deal with them. If better approaches to leadership are going to come from us, then we need to understand what conventional thoughts need to be modified.

My first book, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, introduced the notion that a better approach to leadership centered on the issue of trust. Through years of observation and study, it became clear that trust was the defining characteristic that separated leadership excellence from mediocrity.

The preceding information was adapted from the book *Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind*, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.

Robert Whipple is also the author of *The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals* and, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*. Bob consults and speaks on these and other leadership topics. He is CEO of Leadergrow Inc. a company dedicated to growing leaders. Contact Bob at bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585-392-7763.

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