EM9360: The Globe and Mail, December 21, 1993, page C6

OBITUARY / *W. Edwards Deming*

Quality expert helped Japan rebuild

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New York Times Service

W. Edwards Deming, an expert on quality in manufacturing who helped Japan rebuild its shattered industries after the Second World War and urged U.S. corporations to treat their workers as associates rather than adversaries, died early yesterday at his home in Washington. He was 93.

Although he was ill with cancer in recent years, he continued to work, conducting the last of his four-day seminars on quality management in the Los Angeles area from Dec. 7 through Dec. 10.

His theories were based on the premise that most product defects resulted from management shortcomings rather than careless workers, and that inspection after the fact was inferior to designing processes that would produce better quality.

He argued that enlisting the efforts of willing workers to do things properly the first time and giving them the right tools were the real secrets of improving quality – not teams of inspectors.

He was an obscure statistician in the United States in 1950 when he was asked by some Japanese industrial leaders, based on his wartime research, to deliver a series of lectures on his quality-control principles.

He and his message were eagerly embraced by the Japanese, who believed that, without many natural resources or a colonial empire, they would prosper only if they could sell products on world markets.

His success in Japan made him the leader of a generation of specialists on product durability and reliability who were then sought by U.S. companies trying to catch up to Asian competitors. But his renown in the United States never matched the success he achieved in Japan.

After the application of his methods brought enormous commercial success to some Japanese companies, the Japanese created a Deming Prize for companies that made striking advances in quality.

William Edwards Deming was born on Oct. 14, 1900, in Sioux City, Iowa, and studied engineering at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. He later earned a master's degree in mathematics and physics from the University of Colorado and was awarded a doctorate in physics from Yale University in 1928.

He used the later years of his long career to try to reform U.S. management, for considerable fees, sometimes as much as $100,000 a year from a single client.

He delighted in telling corporate chieftains who asked him to help solve a company's problems that they were a significant part of the problem.

Although the core of his method to improve quality was the use of statistics to detect flaws in production processes, he developed a broader management philosophy that emphasized empowering workers and using co-operative approaches to solving problems.

He denounced management procedures such as production quotas, performance ratings and individual bonuses, saying they were inherently unfair and detrimental to quality. He said customers would get better products and services when workers were encouraged to use their minds as well as their hands on the job.

His blunt approach offended many executives, who turned elsewhere for advice. Yet some companies, including Ford Motor Co. and Xerox Corp., sent hundreds of their top level managers to his lectures and seminars.

One of the first large U.S. corporations to seek his assistance was Ford, whose officials brought him to their headquarters in Dearborn, Mich., in 1981, when the company's sales were faltering and it was losing hundreds of millions of dollars.

Executives were expecting a slick presentation on tricks to improve quality. Mr. Deming, instead, insisted on questioning the company's culture and management philosophy. Eighty-five per cent of quality problems, he told them, are the result of management errors.

After Ford acted upon his philosophy and its success became obvious, demand for his services grew. He kept his client list short and refused to have anything to do with companies not willing to make top executives available to him.

Among the companies that turned to Mr. Deming and his disciples were Dow Chemical, Procter & Gamble, American Telephone & Telegraph and The New York Times.

Unlike other quality experts, such as Joseph Juran and Philip Crosby, Mr. Deming never built a formal organization. He continued to work as a solo practitioner out of an office in the basement of his modest home in Washington.

His first wife, Agnes, died many years ago. His second wife, Lola, died in 1986. He leaves two daughters, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

The article EM9360 reprinted above is used in Figure 11.10a of the STAT 221 Course Materials and in Statistical Highlight #96.