

HE TAUGHT THE JAPANESE

By STEVE LOHR
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H E is an unlikely looking celebrity, this 80-year-old man with thick glasses perched on his beak-like nose. What little is left of his hair is clipped in a crew cut. His jacket hangs baggily from his rounded shoulders.

Yet in his realm, W. Edwards Deming, a statistician and professor emeritus at the New York University business school, is an unadulterated superstar. At a time when the battle for global markets is increasingly won by those who make products better and cheaper, Mr. Deming is the high prophet of quality control. Fittingly, he is best known in the world's most quality-conscious nation - Japan, where businessmen each year vie for a coveted quality-control prize known as the Deming Award.

The sprightly octogenarian, who now works from his house in Washington, delivered his creed last month to more than 100 corporate executives attending a three-day conference at N.Y.U. The setting was a classic business school lecture hall - an amphitheater with the speaker in the "pit."

"I'm not here to tell people what they have to do," Mr. Deming said. "I'm here to tell them what they must do if they want to get ahead. We're in a new economic age. We cannot tolerate poor quality work anymore. We're in an age when one defect in 5,000 is too many."

The reception accorded Mr. Deming and his teachings in Japan is an example of the approach that has fueled that nation's rise to worldwide supremacy in key industries. Japan has borrowed business and management practices from its foreign competitors, especially from the United States, and applied them with a vengeance.

American executives, lulled by the era of easy economic growth that lasted into the early 1970's, have often ignored home-grown methods like Mr. Deming's quality-control techniques. Now, however, they are scrambling to re-learn some neglected skills.

In the United States, in Mr. Deming's view, a real commitment to quality control by top management is often lacking. In fact, Mr. Deming refuses to consult for companies that lack that commitment. "If the president doesn't have time, neither do I," he says.

Mr. Deming's speaking style is elocutionary, anecdotal, aphoristic. He knows the art of the well-placed pause, the repeated phrase, the occasional self-deprecating aside. He has an encyclopedic mind but knows how to use a memory lapse, real or not, to engage his audience.

"No one knows the cost of a defective product - don't tell me you do," Mr. Deming told his listeners. "You know the cost of replacing it, but not the cost of a dissatisfied customer."

In its essence, the Deming message is deceptively simple: tally defects, scrutinize them, trace the source of the problem, make corrections and record the results afterward.

One of his themes is that only a tiny fraction of all quality problems are attributable to what he calls "special causes" - those related to a particular tool or worker. The rest, he says, can be traced to "common causes" - namely, a production system that, for whatever reason, is faulty. Repeatedly, he stresses that the system, not the workers, are to blame for quality problems. And that system is the responsibility of management.

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To explain, he cited an example of the shoe manufacturer. One line of its shoes kept falling apart, and the company didn't know why. After testing, Mr. Deming found that the leather being used had slightly too high a grease content. The result was that adhesives could not hold the leather upper to the plastic sole. The company added the proper testing step and made sure drier leather was used.

In addition, the shoe producer noticed that, once the corrective steps were taken, worker turnover went way down in that department. The moral, Mr. Deming says, is that "people don't like to make mistakes. Change the system and the workers are suddenly a lot happier. They're no longer being blamed for what they have no control over."

Because of the emphasis on defective systems, Mr. Deming's message is fundamentally optimistic. Quality control is not governed by either lazy or motivated workers, he says. In a properly designed system, workers will be motivated. And since the manufacturing system is subject to management control, it is changeable.

"American industry can do a whole lot better than the Japanese if we get going," Mr. Deming said. "A lot of the horror stories I tell come from Japanese examples."

In Japan, Mr. Deming has been part of the accepted wisdom for decades. "Deming is seen as a god over there," said Emil J. Misisco, director of corporate product assurance for the North American Philips Corporation, who has viewed the Japanese penchant for quality control first-hand.

In 1950, Mr. Deming was invited to Japan to lecture on the techniques he had developed for statistical analysis of quality control. Back then, the phrase "Made in Japan" was synonymous with shoddy merchandise. Japan recognized that to compete successfully in international markets it would have to change its image as the world's purveyor of junk. Hence, the invitation to Mr. Deming. And, as the results indicate, his teachings met with characteristically Japanese devotion.

EACH year, Japan's major corporations engage in a quality-control competition that has as its prize the coveted Deming Award. The preparations for the competition are so rigorous that some managers' wives have been known to complain about their husbands' seemingly endless workdays. The contest includes oral inquisitions at which corporate representatives must answer questions about the quality-control steps initiated in the preceding year, the results and the statistical records to back up their claims.

The Japanese consider the Deming prize, now in its 31st year, important enough that the annual award ceremony is broadcast on national television. To date, more than 100 Deming Awards have been handed out. The honor roll includes such major corporations as Nissan Motor, Toyota Motor, Hitachi, Matsushita Electric and Nippon Steel.

With American business trying to enhance the quality of its products, Mr. Deming's services are much in demand in the United States these days. "Our customers want to know what Deming is saying," said Kemon Taschioglou, director of productivity studies at Teradyne Inc., a Boston producer of assembly-line test equipment. "In the last year or so, he has become part of the conventional wisdom."

Mr. Deming and his wife, Lola, 74 years old, have been married for five decades. She is a former mathematician for the National Bureau of Standards, and the two have jointly written several research articles. They have three grown children and five grandchildren. Mr. Deming is an accomplished pianist. An Episcopalian, he has composed canticles and masses.

Besides Mr. Deming, there are other respected quality-control experts, most notably Joseph M. Juran, a 76-year-old former quality manager for Western Electric. Still, Mr. Deming is the dean. And except for Cecelia Kilian, Mr. Deming's administrative assistant for two decades, he has no staff. Mr. Deming's travel and work regimen would have to be deemed exhausting for someone half his age.

"He called yesterday from three dif-

Illustrations: photo of W. Edwards Deming



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