The Quality Movement's Challenge to Education

When I first heard about Total Quality Management, I thought, "Oh no, another gimmick from the management training people." It is indeed the latest hot topic in management training, but now that I have read more about it, I think the idea is crucial to the future of the United States — and every other country that expects to compete in today's global economy.

The quality movement is deceptive because most parts of it are familiar. Sadly, they are familiar only in the abstract, because most organizations, including schools, apply them erratically and inconsistently. For example, the model is based on the assumption that people want to do good work and it is management's job to make that possible. "Well, sure," we say, "that's McGregor's Theory Y. So what's new?" What is new is that large corporations are taking Theory Y seriously, assigning authority and responsibility to frontline workers. Of course, TQM is much more than delegation: it also requires teamwork, focused training, and extensive use of data.

In schools, practices in harmony with the quality movement include site-based decision making, quality circles, outcome-based education, team teaching, action research by teachers, cooperative learning, and teaching thinking. All these things are advocated in the literature, and all exist here and there, but few schools have been able to implement them throughout the system.

Practices that many experts say violate quality principles include issuance of detailed directives at state and district levels, setting quantitative goals and quotas, teaching obsolete curriculum, using norm-referenced testing, and grading students competitively. Again, these practices have long been criticized by some educators, but they continue anyway, partly because policymakers, many of whom are not educators, insist on them.

The quality movement is too complex to explain in a few sentences. For those who want to know more, several articles in this issue provide an introduction. And we will be hearing more — much more — in the years ahead. Numerous books, such as Quality or Else (Dobyns and Crawford-Mason 1991) show that Japan's phenomenal success and America's economic decline over the last two decades resulted from Japanese devotion to quality and long-term thinking while most U.S. corporations emphasized quantity and short-term profits.

Education's role in this situation has been not cause but collusion. It was not education but poor management that lost whole industries, such as consumer electronics, to other countries in less than two decades. It was political irresponsibility, not education, that transformed the United States from the world's largest creditor nation to the largest debtor nation.

But schools reflect the society they serve. American schools have the same problems, and face the same challenges, as American corporations. Like corporate CEOs, school executives have emphasized quantity over quality. Like top-down industrialists, state and large-district officials have sought to prescribe how schools should function. Like alienated factory workers, some teachers and principals have resisted efforts to make schools more productive.

If the U.S. is to remain a world leader, that cannot continue. The challenge to education is well defined by Ira Magaziner and Hillary Clinton (p. 10), chairs of the commission that produced America's Choice, and Marc Tucker (p. 19), head of the National Center on Education and the Economy (1990), which sponsored it. Unless businesses opt for quality, it will make little difference whether schools do or not. But if business leaders get the message, they will need a better-qualified work force. In that case, to attain significantly higher standards of student performance, educators too must make the commitment to quality.

References


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