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Applying Deming's theories to community issues

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Part 1 explores literature linking the community renewal movement and the quality movement. Part 2 discusses assumptions underlying a project, undertaken by the W. Edwards Deming Institute and the City of Tacoma and Pierce Co. in Washington state, to study the relationship of Deming's theories to community-wide problem solving. Part 3 describes the first phase of an action research project undertaken as part of the Tacoma-Deming study.

Part 1: An old attitude meets a new way of thinking

A paradox is playing out quietly in America's communities. Polls show that people's faith in institutions and elected officials continues to linger near an all-time low. Yet, in cities and towns scattered all around the country, people are rebuilding public trust — not perhaps in city hall, per se — but trust in their communities as viable units for social and civic interaction. Trust, too, in their own capacity as individuals to make a difference. Like the people engaged in an unusual experiment in Tacoma, WA, they are learning to understand the complex social and economic interdependencies that confound traditional civic action programs. Thanks in part to quality management concepts, these communities are taking control of their destiny.

It is an old attitude. One of the first foreign writers to document America's experiment with democracy was Alexis de Tocqueville, a French count who visited the US in 1831 and became intrigued with what seemed to be a peculiarly American phenomenon: small groups of citizens who came together to solve problems. American problem-solvers, Tocqueville observed, were different from what he had seen on the continent. These were groups of common citizens who had decided that they had the power to determine what the problem was, that they had the power to determine how to solve the problem and, more often than not, that they, themselves, would be key actors in implementing the solution. Writing in *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville concluded that these problem-solving citizen groups were the foundation stones of American communities and that they constituted a uniquely powerful instrument. (Tocqueville, 1835)

For a long time now, many Americans have not felt that old sense of power to solve community problems and to improve community life. That's changing. The terminology of the regeneration varies. In some parts of the country, people talk of creating "healthy communities." Elsewhere they speak of building "social capital" or "civic infrastructure" or "sustainable communities." They discuss their "community indicators projects" or "community problem-solving," or "community quality councils." Like the metaphors they use, the projects differ, yet are alike in their vision of creating communities that work efficiently and productively for all their citizens.

Secret success

The sheer number of active, successful, community-based improvement efforts has been called one of America's best-kept secrets by Tyler Norris, director of the Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities. Norris contends that few reporters know how to cover community improvement initiatives and that "many elected leaders do not comprehend how these local initiatives work or what tremendous

potential they hold." (Norris, 1997) Writing in the *National Civic Review* in 1997, Norris sounds very much like a quality spokesman when he describes characteristics common to successful communities. "Continuous quality improvement," Norris writes, "is becoming a standard objective, and effective measurement is key to its success." The reporters that Norris talks about, like the business press who covered quality's glory days in the 1980s and then declared it a dead management fad by the mid-1990s, may not know it, but the quality movement is in many ways a social movement, and it certainly didn't die.

Sometime in the 1980s, the community movement and the quality movement found each other. That's no secret in places like Erie, PA, Greenwood, SC, Jackson, MI, and Madison, WI — the same Madison that *Money* magazine rated as the number one "best place to live in America" in 1996. (Box, 1991, Sainfort, 1997) In these and similar towns, quality took root during the TQM heydays. Much earlier, long before quality became a movement, its better known leaders had argued that statistical quality techniques ought not to be limited to economic applications. As early as 1946, George D. Edwards, in his inaugural address as the first president of the American Society for Quality Control (ASQC), talked about significant social contributions that would be possible through expanded application of the methodology. (Edwards, 1946) Through the years, similar messages came from various other quality spokesmen like Dr. Joseph M. Juran, who repeatedly challenged ASQC to expand its mandate to place a "high priority on service to society." (Juran, 1994) Arguably, however, it was Dr. W. Edwards Deming who ignited America's first community quality initiatives.

Like the rest of the quality profession, Deming was virtually invisible to most of America until NBC aired its 1980 documentary entitled, "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?" Overnight, Deming became quality's most visible spokesman. From 1980 until Deming's death in 1993, more than 20,000 people a year attended his seminars. When he talked about his "system of profound knowledge," some in his audiences heard something besides a theory for doing business. "We are here," Deming often said, "to learn, to have fun, and to make a difference." Listeners with an active social conscience heard not only a reference to the day's events; they heard a life statement.

Meantime, NBC's documentary had launched a TQM bandwagon that was rolling through the business world. Membership in quality organizations was soaring and the demand for books and courses on the subject seemed insatiable. Professional groups like ASQC, whose membership in the early 1980s swelled from about 50,000 to more than 130,000, were for the most part too busy meeting the market demands of their members to focus on the powerful role and responsibility that quality was being challenged to play in community well-being. Almost exclusively, the first community quality councils were grassroots initiatives, often encouraged by the presence a strong mentor like former assistant secretary of commerce Dr. Myron Tribus, an associate of Dr. Deming, who helped pioneers in several community initiatives like that in Erie, PA. Until recently, national quality organizations could not find a mandate within their respective charters to give quality-of-life issues a central platform for research and support. But, that is changing.

ASQ now supports a Public Sector Division and a Community Quality Council Committee. (Schulz, 1997) Recently, ASQ partnered with the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) on a project using a community health improvement model as an approach to address community issues. The work has provided substantive data-based evidence about the applicability of quality methodology to social problems. (*Quality Progress*, 1998) Another national quality organization, the Association for Quality and Participation (AQP), altered its mission statement in 1996 to include a focus on community quality and secured the assistance of Fredericka Joyner of Columbus Regional Hospital in Columbus, IN, to build a data base that could be used as a networking resource for people involved in community quality initiatives. (Joyner, 1996) Joyner documented approximately 200 formal community "quality" initiatives around the U.S. The number, however, is misleadingly low. Community improvement efforts often use quality management methodology without ever using the "Q" word.

For their part, community leaders are beginning to appreciate what this potent new ally from the business world has to offer. Traditional community development programs trace their roots back 30 plus

years to President Johnson's War on Poverty. Yet, in those 30 plus years, most community revitalization and development projects have not realized their objective. Despite pockets of success, poverty has not been eradicated, not regionally, not locally. One difficulty, according to John Foster-

Bey, vice president of programs for the Northwest Area Foundation, is that community development programs traditionally looked at cities, and neighborhoods within cities, as self-contained units. More recently, as foundations like Bey's which fund community development projects have come to recognize that the economy is not neighborhood-based, the focus gradually has started to shift from cities and neighborhoods as self-contained units to a more systemic approach. (Foster-Bey, 1997)

The shift corresponds to what David and Carol Schwinn have identified as three distinct developmental phases of community quality initiatives. The first phase, much like the War on Poverty, is tied to economic development, the theory being that as local businesses adopt quality practices, they will prosper and the community likewise will prosper. In the second phase, communities identify human development problems and begin to attack them on a sector-by-sector basis, launching improvement initiatives in community sub-systems, like healthcare and education. The emergent third phase is based on a view of communities as whole systems. (Schwinn, 1994)

"While we have reached the limits of institutional problem-solving, we are only at the beginning of exploring the possibility of a new vision for community. It is a vision of regeneration."— John McKnight

John McKnight, prominent social scientist at Northwestern University outside Chicago, says that Americans are only beginning to explore the possibilities of a vision for community regeneration. (McKnight, 1987) Similarly, Richard Louv, author of a two-part study on community renewal for the National Civic League, predicts that renewing community will be the growth industry of the late 1990s and early 21st century. (Louv, 1997) Just what does the quality movement offer the community renewal movement? According to quality professionals involved in community work, their contribution is knowledge of improvement techniques and a systems approach to thinking about problems. Like Wayne J. Levin, they contend that most political leaders, like most citizens, do not see measures such as poverty levels, unemployment rates, high school dropout rates, the fiscal deficit, and similar statistics for what they are: outcomes "simple barometric gauges, mere symptoms of an increasingly ineffective system . . ." (Levin, 1996) Changing the outcomes requires changing the system which produced them, and that, as Peter Scholtes says, requires a new way of thinking about community issues. (Scholtes, 1997) It also takes an old attitude.

Part 2: If Japan Can . . .

In the 1980s, American business took up the challenge posed by the NBC documentary, "If Japan Can, Why Can't We?" Today, the challenge of transformation is not so different: "If business can, why can't communities?"

In 1994, participants of The W. Edwards Deming Institute^R conceived the idea of forming a partnership with a community in order to study the applicability of Dr. Deming's theories to community issues. The Institute, a non-profit organization founded by Dr. Deming in 1993, saw a community partnership as a way to allow for active interaction between *theory* and *application*, a way both to study Dr. Deming's philosophy and to extend that philosophy using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) approach.

Institute participants strongly believed that any partnership initiative they undertook should result in real improvement for the partner community and also should result in knowledge that would be transferable to other communities. Simplistically put, the project's twin aim would be to learn and to make a difference. Early on, the Deming Institute planners agreed to a set of guiding principles that would shape their activities:

The partnership will be about continual learning.

The Institute and the community will work collaboratively

- to understand the systems issues behind community needs,
- to implement a system of responses to community needs,
- to document learnings based . . .

Services provided by Institute participants will be donated and voluntary.

The community will be in charge of the effort.

Partnership activities will be apolitical and non-partisan; political compromise will not be a goal of any activity.

Activities will focus on the use of data and other keystones of profound knowledge.

Getting started

At the helm of the Deming Institute's project was Peter Scholtes. For Scholtes, the project co-joined two major themes in his life's work. In the quality movement, he is known as an expert on team issues and a key player in the City of Madison's quality journey, but he had a less well-known career in the 1960s and 70s as psychology-oriented therapist and counselor in Chicago and Boston. Still earlier, Scholtes had been a Catholic priest on Chicago's south side where he worked with prominent community activists including Saul Alinsky, the "father" of community organizing. He even took Alinsky's "plunge," living a penniless week one February on the streets of Chicago. Designing the partnership project with Scholtes was a core group of about 20 volunteers. By profession, they were mainly trainers and consultants from a variety of public sector organizations — including the federal government, community colleges, the military — and from several nonprofit professional and trade associations.

Having decided to launch a project to study the application of Dr. Deming's theories to community issues, the core group set about designing a process to locate a partner. From May 1995 through April 1996, the group — by then known as the Community Partnership Team — developed a "matchmaking" process. They wanted to create an objective, open process, one that would identify a community with strengths and *needs* that complemented those of the Deming Institute. Additionally, the search process needed to align with their two central research questions:

What is the relationship between Deming's system of profound knowledge and systemic community-wide problem solving?

What practices and/or what infrastructures are common to successful problem-solving in communities?

The search process became a de facto pilot study, affording the team an opportunity to examine their preliminary predictions about (a) the characteristics that make communities successful and (b) qualities that enhanced the project's likelihood for success.

In April 1996, the team formally announced the project to the rest of the Deming Institute and asked Institute participants to encourage likely candidate communities to seek application packets. This, in effect, engaged the entire Institute as a nominating body and leveraged its collective knowledge both of Dr. Deming's theories and of existing community improvement initiatives.

Finding a partner

One of the project's assumptions is that collaboration across traditional community boundaries is a key ingredient common to successful communities. Consequently, the matchmakers asked the communities that applied to describe their experience with community-wide collaboration. In reviewing the applications, the search team not only looked for signs that the community had experience collaborating on systems issues, they also looked for signs that the Institute could bring something special to the community's existing initiatives. If, for example, a community's quality initiative were very well established, the team believed that the Institute would be less able to make a significant contribution to the effort.

Because one of the project's goals is for the knowledge gained through the partnership to be transferable to other communities, the search team also looked for economic and demographic diversity. They believed that a retirement community or company-town, as examples, offered less "transferability." They looked too for signs that the local media knew something about reporting community improvement initiatives, thereby providing an initial communication infrastructure for the partnership.

Just as asking the application questions allowed the selection team to explore their assumptions about successful communities, answering the questions allowed each community to focus on what made it successful by its own definitions. In the answers from Tacoma, WA, the selection team saw an emphasis on two hallmarks of Deming's philosophy that their questions had not specifically requested: leadership and measurement.

Tacoma had been one of six sites in the US to participate in a leadership training program, sponsored by the American Leadership Forum (ALF). The ALF program tutored local residents of diverse occupational and ideological backgrounds in leadership skills for community betterment. One of the byproducts of the ALF project in Tacoma had been a "vital signs" report, which captured baseline data on indicators of community well-being. Coupled with Tacoma's other collaborative initiatives, the emphasis on leadership and measurement suggested to the Institute's selection team that Tacoma had a community infrastructure and leadership network that would accelerate the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle. In September 1996, the partnership between the Deming Institute and the City of Tacoma and Pierce Co. in Washington State became official.

Part 3: Who's behind this Deming deal anyway?

Quality literature is replete with stories and research that document the need for both top-level commitment and a critical mass of support if quality initiatives are to succeed over time. In community improvement efforts, however, top-level *political* commitment is another matter. Indeed, C. West Churchman in *The Systems Approach and Its Enemies* argues that the systems approach and a political approach are irreconcilable. (Churchman, 1979) Whether irreconcilable or not, politics do pose huge issues that have confounded many community improvement efforts. Without support from the powerful, new efforts have difficulty gathering the resources to launch and support the work. Yet, if the usual gang of influential community movers and shakers lend visible support to an initiative, the citizenry often read "politics" into the effort. And "politics as usual" — with all the damning connotative baggage the phrase carries — often is the kiss of death in community improvement initiatives.

In launching an investigation into the applicability of Dr. Deming's principles to systemic community issues, the Deming Institute's Community Partnership Team was well aware of the negative potential posed by politics. They believed, however, that in partnering with the Institute a community could gain the "view from outside" that some systems thinkers consider a critical component to effect change in a social system. The activities of the first phase of the Tacoma-Deming partnership aimed in large part at community team building and getting past politics as usual.

Guess who's coming to town

Prior to the Deming Community Partnership Project, Tacoma and Pierce County, WA, were no strangers to the quality movement. The county and nearby Seattle were home to an active ASQ section, whose leadership pool included ASQ past-president Deborah Hopen. A local chapter of the Association for Quality and Participation also served the area, and a Deming "users group" met regularly in nearby Seattle. Numerous, noteworthy quality initiatives were ongoing in area companies like Boeing and Weyerhaeuser. Tacoma's city government had launched a public sector quality initiative starting about 1993, (Birk, 1997) and even had connected with Madison, WI, asking Madison's past mayor Joe Sensenbrenner to come to Tacoma to offer suggestions. Deming Institute records indicate, however, that prior to the partnership only one Tacomian had ever participated in Institute activities: Ken Karch, an executive on loan to the city from Weyerhaeuser. Like Hopen, Karch had served as a consultant to the city government and assisted in its public sector quality initiative. When Karch recommended the partnership project to city leaders, the Deming Institute was an unknown entity. Not so with W. Edwards Deming; his reputation preceded the project into Tacoma, stirring up considerable interest and raising expectations that something special was about to happen.

Just what would take place was less clear. Some news accounts made the selection process sound like a competition, and being selected as the partner community somehow equivalent to being ranked the *creme de la creme* of quality communities — an interpretation that made the matchmaking team wince, remembering Dr. Deming's admonitions against the use of awards and ranking practices. Some Tacomians erroneously thought the community was going to receive grant money from the Institute, yet application materials clearly stated that the partner community would have to help the Institute locate funding for the project. (At this writing, limited funds continue to be a major problem facing the partnership.) Despite the confusion, the prospect of being a "Deming community" fired the imagination

and drew a prominent cadre of about 135 area leaders and activists to the first training event conducted by the Institute in Tacoma in November 1996.

Drawing people together

The training itself sounded daunting: five Institute representatives would spend two days discussing Deming's system of profound knowledge. What kind of people would come to something like that? Invitations had gone to community leaders representing a broad spectrum of organizations, and the registration list revealed that people were coming from a wide cross-section of volunteer and public sector agencies. In random pre-event phone interviews, ten registrants said that they had at least introductory experience with quality initiatives and some knowledge of Deming's philosophy. Only two described themselves as knowledgeable. Uniformly, however, they described themselves as curious, eager, and even "totally pumped up" about the opportunity. (See "High Hopes" at end of this article for more interview comments.)

One of the ten, Daniel Oestreich, was scheduled to be one of the presenters. He accurately predicted the group's expectations this way: "What I know is that people will welcome an opportunity to talk about issues, about community, and how to build community . . . I think that, more than ever, people want to create environments where they are in charge of building, together, a group or a team or a town or something that represents an experience bigger than themselves."

Oestreich was right. They all had high hopes. None were higher than those of Scholtes. When asked about his expectations, he said, "I hope we can take on some spectacularly dramatic community issue — one that people have resigned themselves to as never being able to do anything about — and that we can find ways to make a spectacular breakthrough using these approaches."

"Any kind of training," according to Scholtes, "has the advantage of pulling people together. There is something about sitting in a room full of people all of whom acknowledge that there are things that they don't know that they need to learn together. It tends to equalize things in the group and pull people together."

In this instance, people not only would be learning something together but, Scholtes pointed out, they knew they were about to be engaged in planning community-wide interventions and activities within the community that they themselves would be leading. It was another force of pulling people together.

Discussing the undiscussable

The initial training event in November 1996 shared many of the by now common purposes of the standard kick-off event: awareness-building, team-building, and building common language, in this case, the language of Deming's system of profound knowledge and its interrelated approach to understanding systems, variation, psychology, and learning theories. Midway through a presentation on psychology, Daniel Oestreich edged the audience toward "undiscussables," saying that the only way to get from the first layer of human interaction (common manners and working agreements) to the third layer (deeply shared unity) is *through* a second layer — a field of conflict, discord and negative emotions that people typically avoid. "What sort of things," he asked, "are community undiscussables?"

"Who's behind this Deming deal and what are they trying to pull anyway?" The question popped out of Oestreich's audience and punctured the discussion, releasing a blast of nervous laughter. Within seconds, the speaker clarified. The question, he explained, was not directed at the Deming Institute, but at the Tacoma organizers — members of the city's traditional power base — who had entered into the partnership in the community's name. His real question: would the partnership be a front for pet projects and politics as usual?

It would be nice to think that putting the question squarely on the table and answering it in a public forum would also put it to rest. But, of course, actions speak louder than words, and so far the partnership effort had been only talk. Not that there's anything wrong with talk. Quite the contrary.

Social capital: community conversations

According to Robert D. Putnam of Harvard's Center for International Affairs, one reason that public trust is so low is a four-decade-long decline in American associations of all kind, from

professional organizations to bowling leagues. Americans, he says, have “lost the habit of connecting with people who don’t agree with us.” (*People*, 1995) For years, Putnam has conducted research with local governments in the USA and elsewhere into the decline of “social capital,” a term he uses as a measure of civic life and public trust. Initially, he suspected that factors such as community wealth, educational levels, and political parties might explain why some communities are effective and others are disasters. But, the crucial factors turned out to be the community groups — not unlike the citizen groups that Tocqueville chronicled more than a century earlier — that brought people together in situations where they had face-to-face conversations about local issues.

Training and awareness events, like those that launched the Tacoma-Deming partnership, are one way to engage citizens in conversations. If some of the conversation is “undiscussable,” so much the better. The overall effect is to pull people together. In Tacoma, organizers conducted several additional training events: a mega community-building and awareness effort in April 1997 that drew more than 450 people and several repeated sessions on tools and methodology for skills development among groups ranging from 60 - 130 people. Each time, organizers made a concentrated effort to cast the net wider and pull in a broader portion of the community. They intentionally assigned seating arrangements that put people in proximity to have conversations with people outside their usual networks. The effect was palpable. At one point, a woman stood and described her reaction, saying “When people work this way, they become transcended.” It would not be until real work got underway, however, that anyone would know whether the project actually could transcend politics.

Shared work: public work

In organizations, “shared work” is an important change concept. In American history, the older phrase “public work” is a recurring theme. Traditionally associated with Roosevelt’s New Deal, the term more recently has been used in community literature to refer to any meaningful work that brings people together to address important public purposes. (Boyte, 1996) Whether the setting is an organization or a community, it is work — real, meaningful work — that takes abstract discussions and makes them concrete. Organizers on both sides of the Tacoma-Deming partnership knew that the heart of the project would be to undertake some type of “public work,” a significant improvement effort on an issue of importance to the whole community. Its stated aim would be:

“to demonstrate the power of data-based, well-planned and systemically-integrated approaches to community development, and to do so by making significant, measurable progress on a major community issue.”

In theory, it could be any issue. According to Scholtes, “When a community takes a systems approach to meet its needs, it doesn’t matter where the effort starts. Since it’s part of the overall system, improving any part of the community will lead to improving the whole community.” (Scholtes, 1997) To many in the Tacoma-Pierce County area, however, it mattered very much. Just as the gentleman who posed the undiscussable question probably suspected, nearly everyone had a pet project.

Partnership leaders, however, had a clear focus on *process* and a matching tool set. People with pet projects will always try to lobby, but collaborative decision-making methods can render traditional lobbying skills impotent. The first concrete demonstration that this project was not about politics as usual would be the *method* by which the Tacoma community determined what would be the focus of its improvement effort.

“We cannot afford to waste . . . the trust relationship between citizens and their government on outmoded models of citizen input that make citizens more cynical and government more balkanized.” —Tom Mosgaller, 1997

Designing an issue-selection process

From January - July 1997, a team of citizen volunteers worked on designing a process to select an issue to be the focus of the improvement activities. According to team leader Bob Waldo, the team

met once a week for several hours each week throughout the 6-month period. They had a critical piece to work on and they knew it. They had been entrusted with designing a collaborative method to reach a community decision. Although according to systems theory, it doesn't matter *where* within a system change efforts start, sticking a pin in a leader-generated list of topics just won't do. *How* matters. The process must be collaborative and it must be free of any appearance of partisan influence. Additionally, in any community improvement project, the issues must be relevant to the people who live and work in the community. (Nolan, 1996)

In April, while the team was still fleshing out selection criteria for evaluating issues, organizers used the mega-training event at the Tacoma Dome convention center as an opportunity to collect ideas. A communications team and a logistics team, both consisting of citizen volunteers, actively encouraged — and achieved — attendance from all segments of the community. During the event, participants used index cards to list any issue they believed needed community-wide attention. They posted more than 500 cards on large boards in the Tacoma Dome. The index cards were subsequently collected, sorted, and turned over to an issue-selection team. The community had identified nearly 90 community problems and issues. This broad-based input gathering process helped distribute ownership of the selection process among the community at large. Everyone who chose to do so had a voice. Even a cleaning lady who worked in the Tacoma Dome, but did not attend the training, took up an index card and posted her opinion as to what in the community needed fixing.

Using the process

At this point, a new team started work, the issue selection team. In keeping with the determination to eliminate any appearance of favoritism, this 10-person group purposely was not the same set of people who had designed the selection process. The process design team did, however, send one of their members to the selection team's meetings, in part to monitor the activities, but primarily to be available as resource to answer procedural questions and to learn by observation how the process might be improved for the next time. In addition, the selection team was assisted by an external facilitator. The process spanned three 2-hour meetings, and "homework" assignments. Throughout the three team meetings, discussion was held to a minimum with most discussion aimed at clarification. Much of the process consisted of a series of multi-votes.

The 500 plus ideas had been organized into 90 issues, which the team categorized using earlier work done by the city to collect data on its "Vital Signs - Indicators for Community Improvement." They used these "Vital Signs" indicators as issue categories:

- *Economy*. Overall economic conditions, income per capita, labor force activity, job creation/unemployment, poverty and housing.
- *Education*. Head Start enrollment, student grades (by subject and class) above national average, SAT statistical averages, library visits per population.
- *Community*. Neighborhood and community safety, health (children, teens and adults), arts and culture, homeless.
- *Environment*. Good air/bad air, disposal/recycling, water quality, water quantity.

With the 90 issues sorted into the four categories, the team narrowed the list in successive steps. At each step, they used a 5-point scale to evaluate the issues against seven selection criteria. Broadly speaking the criteria are easy to understand, but difficult to measure up to. To be selected, an issue (1) would have to have broad community impact, that is, it should have the potential for making a significant difference of benefit to a broad spectrum of the community. It would (2) hold no hint of bias or favoritism; it would be something that would benefit and interest people in all walks of life. It would (3) be preventive or proactive rather than corrective in nature. It would (4) offer potential for both near-term and long term benefits; lasting benefit was important, but being able to demonstrate early improvements would generate continued support for the project. Its results (5) would be measurable. It would (6) be "reasonably doable," that is, a stretch goal but not out of reach. Finally, (7) the issue had to be one that offered many opportunities for people throughout the community to be involved.

In the first round of evaluation using the selection criteria, the team narrowed the focus to issues in the category of “community.” Next, they developed draft issue statements for clusters of related issues within the category of “community.” They then evaluated those clustered issues against the criteria and eventually narrowed to a single issue: prevention of family violence.

Next steps

Between launching a community initiative and getting underway with the real work of making an improvement, there is a natural pause in the story. If we were to peek into the next chapter, which is currently in progress in the Tacoma area, we would see teams gathering data on the issue of family violence, providing learning opportunities for building quality skill sets, and taking on a host of other tasks. Like the early citizens Tocqueville witnessed, people in Tacoma have determined that they have the power to define their problems and to solve them. This article tells only a small part of their story.

The Tacoma-Deming partnership has drawn heavily on lessons learned from other community initiatives around the country. This article has emphasized two — community conversations and an emphasis on process — as important concepts for avoiding the traditional political barriers that can impede improvement efforts. As the work goes forward, the partnership continues to be a co-designed venture with the “ownership” residing in Tacoma and Pierce County. Deming Institute volunteers donate their time and advice; they encourage the use of certain processes for analysis, decision-making, planning and problem-solving; but the community sets the agenda, identifies issues, and does the real work.

One piece of this project that differs from many community improvement efforts is the action research component. For Deming Institute participants, studying what happens in the project so that the learnings can be studied, disseminated, and replicated is an important second goal. To date at least one community initiative, just under way in Waukesha County, WI, traces its roots and inspiration directly to the Tacoma project. To help share what is being learned about community problem-solving, both in Tacoma-Pierce County and elsewhere, the Deming Institute is sponsoring an April 1999 symposium in Tacoma that will feature case studies of improvement initiatives from around the country. (Symposium information is available online at www.deming.org.)

Discussion

The presumption that what works in business can be transferred to the public sector has been tried before with widely varying results. If quality concepts are to transfer successfully, some things may have to change. For example, one of the most widely accepted precepts of quality management is a focus on the customer. The role of customers, however, is considerably less complicated than the role citizens who have rights and responsibilities that go beyond the more passive role of customer. The citizen-as-customer model has resulted in notable efficiency improvements government agencies, but how compatible is it with community-wide improvement work? The Winter/Spring 1997 newsletter of ASQ's Public Sector Network carries several articles which argue that treating citizens as customers of government limits the effectiveness of quality improvement and systems thinking concepts in addressing complex social problems.

Another significant difference between communities and business has to do with the differences between public communication and organizational communication. How likely is it that communities will be able to use existing public communications infrastructures to support collaborative problem-solving? Collaboration hinges on intentional communication, meaning communication that is strategic, preplanned and linked to specific work. (Young, 1995) Public communication, the domain of journalists, does not mesh well with that description, although recent “public journalism” initiatives suggest that some journalists are rethinking their civic role. For instance, the American News Service and the Civic Practices Network, two examples of the new public journalism, both distribute stories about innovative community problem-solving. (See “Online Sources for Further Reading” at the end of this article.) Traditional journalists, however, and especially broadcast journalists, are trained and encouraged to feature problems and conflicts. In local TV newscasts, for example, stories about crime continue to outnumber all other local news stories two to one, despite the reality of falling crime rates. (Kaiser

Foundation, 1998) By comparison, very few newscasts feature stories about communities working well for their citizens.

Community challenge

The prospect of using what has been learned about quality to solve community problems is at once exciting and challenging. The story in Tacoma is only one of many. Active, successful, community-based improvement efforts should not be a secret. Elected leaders and ordinary citizens need to learn how these local quality initiatives work and what tremendous potential they hold. After all, if Tacoma can, why can't your town?

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High Hopes

Three days prior to the first training event, 10 registrants answered their phones and agreed to talk about their expectations. The interview methodology was not particularly rigorous. The aim was simply to collect anecdotal information about participants' pre-project expectations and backgrounds. They had high hopes:

"I think we can implement Deming's theories in my department and in use it both in our strategic development work for the city and our own work as department and really become something of a model for how it can be incorporated into other departments in the city." *City government employee*.

"I believe that to solve our community problems, it is going to take more than all of us working independently. We've got to find ways that we can work and solve these things together. I'm also anticipating that I may gain some skills that I can apply in my own organization." *YMCA employee*.

“I am expecting to be introduced to a creative process and some principles and some organizational ‘clues’ that will assist our grassroots efforts to improve community life. ... and create a better living environment, one in which no harm is done to the world.” *Stock broker.*

“I hope to learn new ways to work ‘withinside’ the community as a public servant. I am looking forward to just identifying the issues we need to work on and how I can assist in helping us reach community needs.... We are all hungry for skills and the chance to put it to work.” *Fire department employee.*

“I like the idea of being involved in processes to improve our life style and our life here.” *Bed and Breakfast owner.*

“I want to see what other people learn so that I can integrate with it well.” *Local quality consultant.*

“It is a good opportunity for Tacoma to get all the leadership in the community looking at issues. ... Any aspect of getting people together to look at a problem as a community is something I want to be part of.” *Social worker.*

“I hope to advance the understanding of Deming principles and how they work and/or can be operationalized in a city setting.” *Corporate quality officer.*

“My motives are partially selfish; on a personal level, I want to do the learning. For my college, I want to be looking down the road at the kind of training we provide communities that surround our college, our own target audience.” *Community college quality advisor.*

“What I know is that people will welcome an opportunity to talk about issues, about community, and how to build community....I think that, more than ever, people want to create environments where they are in charge of building, together, a group or a team or a town or something that represents an experience bigger than themselves.” *Presenter.*

Online Sources for Further Reading

Alliance for National Renewal. Part of an initiative convened by the National Civic League. Provides descriptions of successful grassroots community renewal efforts: www.ncl.org/anr .

American News Service. A news service started by the Center for Living Democracy to provide the media with stories of innovative community problem solving: www.americannews.com .

Civic Practices Network. An online journal that shares tools, stories, and best practices of community empowerment and civic renewal: www.cpn.org .

Deming Electronic Network (DEN). File area contains archive documents from the Deming Institute’s Tacoma Partnership Project: <http://deming.eng.clemson.edu> .

Downloaded from the Community Quality Electronic Network Library:

<http://deming.eng.clemson.edu/pub/cqen/files/>