

Discontented with Quality

Philip Crosby Downsizes

by MICHAEL FINLEY

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Philip Crosby burst onto the scene in 1979 with his readable *Quality is Free*. In it he introduced a generation of a managers to the idea that *doing it right the first time* -- making a sprocket a sprocket, selling an insurance policy, or serving a hot cup of coffee -- was the single best way companies could cut costs and increase profits.

Quality, conventionally thought of as a luxury and a cost, was in fact a necessity and a savings. *Zero defects* was his rallying cry.

Crosby's message spread like wildfire, and he has written eight books and built a small empire of associated management services. But he is not satisfied with the quality revolution that followed.

"Too often quality has meant an emotional charge-up," he said at "The Content of Quality," the February Cargill Quality Management Lecture in Humphrey Center. "Or it has meant a lot of statistical analysis that measures the wrong things. There is a lot of foolishness in quality programs. The worst offense is making it too difficult."

Even the Baldrige Award comes under his fire. "I hoped it would be a bigger deal, like the Nobel Prize. Instead it's got everyone busy doing a bunch of 1960s-era quality assurance things. They're the wrong things."

Identifying and doing the right things is what drives Crosby these days. Three years ago he sold Philip Crosby Associates, a 250-employee group, and he now heads a tiny 4-employee consultancy specializing in "business philosophy."

His new book, *Completeness: Quality for the 21st Century*, sidesteps the quality controversies that have dogged him over the years, and focuses on four simple nostrums of business quality: causing employees, suppliers, customers, and society as a whole to be successful.

"If all you want to do is make money, you'd sell your company, put the money in bonds, and get as good a return with a particle the effort. Money is only a measure of success, it is not success itself. For that, we need to have lives."

Crosby acknowledges that he has evolved, and radically downsized, but denies that his vision has changed much. "It's still about identifying customer requirements, and then taking whatever steps are necessary to conform to them."

To companies wondering how to do better, he suggests a day of "green field thinking." Imagine the offices and factories and computers are all gone, and you're sitting on the grass in a

green field. Ask yourself, if we were starting all over again, what would we need to give customers what they want. Chances are, you'd need only a fraction of what you have."

The son of a West Virginia foot doctor, Crosby was always the "youngster" of the group of quality pioneers that included W. Edwards Deming (93), Joseph Juran (89), and Armand Feigenbaum (73).

Despite their many disagreements, Crosby is grateful to his fellow gurus, for benchmarking a terrific longevity curve for quality gurus. "Thanks to them, I'm still a youngster at 65."

Michael Finley is a St. Paul-based writer specializing in issues of technology, management, and quality.

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