

Becoming Your Own Guru

By Lewis. A. Rhodes, Associate Executive Director, AASA

Gurus (a Hindu concept for a spiritual guide) have played significant roles in advancing civilization. By definition, their ideas, or ways of seeing reality, touch something already deep within the human spirit. This is evident when one considers two men regarded as gurus of the quality movement--W. Edwards Deming and J.M. Juran. Because both men's theories resonated from a core of human values, their followers unfortunately sometimes appear to be promoting a religious movement, and setting themselves up in seeming competition. This religious fervor and competition can block understanding and acceptance of "quality's" empowering nature by schools and communities.

It might be helpful to clarify the unique contributions of each man, and their relevance to the transformation of America's school systems. A. N. Whitehead once noted, "Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations we can perform without thinking of them." Gurus force us to think about them. Their usually different ways of looking at, thinking about, and acting, challenge acceptance of what had often been assumed was just-the-way-it-is--or more appropriately, the way we "think" it is.

In the beginning there was just the world - a place where things tended to happen in regular ways. And then there was the world that mankind created in its mind as it tried to understand how that real world operated -- seeking to know its rules and "natural laws" As long as these rules seemed to work, things went okay. Every once in a while though exceptions would become apparent and someone began to look at that real world in a different way. He or she would see different relationships, and develop new understandings of how things seemed to work. For those to whom that view proved to make sense and resonate with their internal values and beliefs, they became gurus.

In this century, Deming and Juran have played that role for the world of organizations, providing different answers to the questions *Why?*, *What?*, and *How?* Deming contributed more to the Why--providing a way of thinking about organizations and the people who make them go, and Juran to the What and How-- providing ways to link that thinking with doing. Until his dying day, Deming insisted he had nothing to do with the methodologies now called "TQM."

As his own understanding developed over the years, he realized that the core of his message was a deeply-held set of beliefs that must frame ways of acting in organizations. That profoundly-embedded knowledge was that organizations function as systems of interconnected people intrinsically-driven to want to do a good job today, and an even better one tomorrow. Juran's equally seminal contributions provided strategies and tools to move that understanding to action.

History suggests that gurus lose their importance as their ideas become the new assumptions and beliefs of the way it is and the "operations we can perform without thinking of them." Their "followers" no longer need to look outside for direction, they become their own gurus. Getting to that point however requires a journey from beliefs to action as Lloyd Dobyns & Clare Crawford-Mason suggest in their book, [Thinking About Quality](#).

*"Before you can change what you do, you have to change how you think.
Before you can change how you think, you have to change what you believe."*

But, as Deming was fond of asking, "By what method?" The answer, if one can judge by the experiences of those in schools who have undertaken this journey, seems to call for a

collaborative personal and organizational learning process that takes advantage of the unique interaction of action and belief in the human mind.

Here are what seem to be incremental personal *Ah-ha's* that launch the journey from beliefs to new behavior:

- * Discovering that your beliefs are shared by others, and they can be acted on together. Many times this happens in a "visioning" exercise or other trust-supported setting.
- * Discovering your connectedness with others in the system- e.g., through internal customer-supplier exercises, or use of a Baldrige-like framework for analyzing the organization.
- * Seeing your own work, and the problems and conditions you address, in a time dimension-- e.g., noticing from flow charting that work is a process affected by different people at different times.
- * Learning new skills that have immediate applicability to your conditions; then using these new skills as part of daily work and getting better results, e.g., meeting management strategies that cut the time allocated to meetings, or consensus building that ensures deeper support for decisions.
- * Entertaining the possibility that things really could be different; then identifying and developing the on-going support needed for things to stay different.
- * Beginning to operate more systemically, collaboratively learning-as-you-go, until behaviors become just the ways-you-do-business.

The ideas of Deming and Juran have played, and can continue to play, key roles launching personal and organizational journeys from core beliefs to new actions. Once the journey starts, however, we must become our own gurus.

Quality management is empowering because, as a way of thinking, it enables this to happen. It can provide a district-wide personal and organizational learning infrastructure that with repeated use can become *just-the-way-we-run-schools*.

And once we are *walking* the quality walk, it may not be necessary to keep *talking* the quality talk.

L.R.