

## Quality Evolution or Revolution?

**There's a direct correlation between the last time you were hungry and your work ethic.**

*By H. James Harrington*

Quality is a universal language - a rallying cry for everyone. It's equally important to all countries, regardless of whether they're large or small, socialist or democratic, developed or developing. They all need to improve. No one knows the best route to quality, and certainly everyone must take responsibility for achieving it.

We've long looked to top management to lead the way to excellence. Some CEOs have picked up the gauntlet, and from that point, we've scrutinized their every move, looking for a single flaw in their shining armor. If they flinch even for a moment, we're quick to say: "See, I told you so. He didn't mean what he said about quality." But who are we to criticize top management? Let's provide support and assistance instead. It's time for all of us to act, striving to be our very best.

Of course, we all have limitations placed upon us—the most common being not enough time, money and knowledge. But "not enough" isn't what keeps most people from doing their very best. Rather, it's lack of desire. Today, it takes all of us working together, doing our best every time, every second, every minute, every hour of every day to provide a product or service that will stand up to international competition.

For years, leading companies and countries around the world have relied on technology to keep them ahead of the competition, but that doesn't work anymore; technology is no longer a competitive advantage. With modern computer techniques and engineering methods, the most complex breakthrough can be duplicated within a few months with just enough changed to get around the patent laws. Almost overnight, modern communication systems can transfer the most complex process to the other side of the world to utilize low-cost labor markets.

Today, many large national companies exist. But Xerox, IBM, Philips and the like are truly international companies--buyers, manufacturers and sellers. Their loyalty isn't to their mother country but to their stockholders. Certainly, these great companies would like to help their home country progress and succeed. Everything being equal, their preference would most likely be to their homeland. But how can they ignore the advantage that low-paid foreign labor offers, countries whose people provide 7.6 hours of productive output during an eight-hour workday? (The average U.S. worker provides 6.3 hours of productive output per day.) These countries have the additional benefit of people who feel that work is a privilege, a means of keeping enough food on the table. Sure, they work hard and are absent less often. Sure, they'll do any job. Sure, they care about quality because they're among the lucky few who have roofs over their heads and whose families get fed daily. There's a direct correlation between the last time you were hungry and your work ethic.

The United States has had it too good for too long. We've lost the "eye of the tiger." Our parents made it too easy for us, and we've made it even easier for our children. Too many teenagers take the line of least resistance through college, and as a result, only a small percentage of students graduate with technical degrees. Our ability to create is slowly slipping away. Buying power peaked in 1993 and since then, there's been a constant decay in our way of life. We've slipped from the world's leading economic stronghold to the world's leading debtor nation. This is the first time in U.S. history that our children will grow up in an economy that's worse than the one their parents enjoyed.

My view of the business environment in 2020 is that China and Japan will have united to form the strongest manufacturing community in the world—China, with its almost endless amount of resources, people, materials and energy; and Japan, with its manufacturing knowledge. The wounds Japan inflicted on China over the centuries have been forgotten as a result of Japan's cooperative joint-venture strategies that started during the early 1980s. If you think Japan is a fierce competitor today, let me warn you that it's a pussycat compared to the China of tomorrow.

How can we offset these disadvantages? Is everything lost? Should we give up and let our economy erode and our standard of living collapse? The answer is obviously a resounding "No." But to prevent this, we must not allow this country's business environment to continue evolving in the way it has for the past 50 years.

Now is the time for revolution, not evolution. We must bring about a change in our very fiber: the way we think, the way we act and the standards we set for ourselves. Maybe we need a student uprising, like the one we had during the 1960s over the Vietnam War, to awaken the need for change in the older generation. I hope not. I hope we can read the writing on the wall and understand that the management principles that worked so well during the 1950s and 1970s became ineffective during the 1980s and obsolete in 2000.

#### **About the author**

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