

Manage-mentor

Prof. W. Edwards Deming is the guru of quality control

By STEVE DITLEA

THE MAN WHO MADE HIS NAME TEACHING THE Japanese quality management — look at the results today — is now also New York's oldest active professor, 92-year-old W. Edwards Deming.

Teaching at one school might sound like enough for any person his age. But Deming teaches classes at three city universities. (He also conducts grueling four-day management seminars across the country.)

His name inspires awe in business circles. Besides his work in Japan, which led to their dominance in everything from autos to zippers, Deming later helped Ford become the company where "Quality is Job One."

Deming has yet to see U.S. management routinely apply his lessons of constant improvement and customer satisfaction. So reaching out to the next generation of business leaders, every Monday during the academic year he travels here from his home in Washington, D.C., to teach a morning class



QUALITY IS HIS JOB ONE:
W. Edwards Deming SHONNA VALESKA

at Columbia University's Business School and an afternoon session at NYU's Stern School of Business. In addition, he meets regularly with students from the Deming scholars program at Fordham's Business School.

His teaching routine is obviously an ordeal. He walks with difficulty and needs a hearing aid to listen to those around him. Yet he is energized by his classes.

At Columbia, where he has been Distinguished Lecturer in Management since 1985, he turns a course with the Zenlike name of "Management with Profound

Knowledge" into a lively dialogue with his 30 students.

When responses to one of his questions are slow in coming, he says: "Don't be bashful. There are no stupid answers — some are just better than others, in my opinion."

Driving out fear is one of the 14 points he insists are needed to reverse the decline of American industry. Eliminating work quotas, evaluations and inspections are also essential, as he demonstrates during his NYU class on "Sample Design in Business Research."

Student volunteers scoop up a random mix of white and red beads from a plastic container to exemplify a process where poor quality is built in. Over and over these "willing workers" are evaluated by the "defective" red beads they produce — a number over which they have no control. Pay raises, threats of firings and exhortations for "zero defects" have no effect unless the raw materials are improved by removing the red beads. The point is not lost on the 100 future captains of industry.

After class at NYU, several Japanese students ask to pose with him for pictures — invaluable trophies back home, where the Deming Prize is industry's highest accolade. According to Aaron Tenenbein, chairman of the statistics department, this is the Stern School's most oversubscribed course: "We could double the enrollment, but students would lose the rapport of learning from a great teacher."

Deming retired in 1976 after 30 years as Professor of Statistics at NYU, only to return the following year as Professor Emeritus at Tenenbein's request. "He didn't miss a single class last semester," Tenenbein says of the nonagenarian. Such steadfastness exemplifies the "constancy of purpose" that is Deming's point No. 1 for improving U.S. management.

It could well be the most important lesson taught by the man who, as the oldest member of the NYU faculty, passes a symbolic torch of learning to the youngest NYU student at graduation every year.

(Ditlea is a frequent contributor.)