

It wasn't long ago that we were reading headlines announcing, "Quality Is Dead": though that knowledge had been useful for a time, things had moved on. It was much like hearing that the "old" economy was dead and that a "new" economy had superseded all the old principles: One starts to think that we need to relearn everything all the time. But throwing out the old and bringing in the new can lead to hugely unproductive shifts in resources; one needs only to look at the huge overinvestment in technology in the late 1990s, and the long hangover we are all still living with as the stock market readjusts, to see the effects of this overzealousness.

The paradox is that while we don't want to throw out the old, we still need to be receptive to the new. When I was at the ASQ May Conference in Indianapolis in 2000, so many quality traditionalists were poo-hooing Six Sigma with statements like, "This is nothing new," or, "This is just a banner." The general tone of the majority of the attendees was, "We invented that 50 years ago." This was despite the fact that Six Sigma was already getting stunning results at places like GE Capital and Johnson & Johnson.

After leaving that conference, I remember thinking that if quality is in the hands of those people, it is dead or, if not, it should be killed. Because the fact is, whether we want to accept it or not, Six Sigma resurrected quality and, in fact, has taken it to a new level, turning it into a sustainable business strategy that has achieved amazing bottom-line results for company after company.

While it's true that many of the concepts had been around for decades – some developed here at Rath & Strong by people like Dorian Shainin in the 1950s - Six Sigma recaptured our imagination with proof of the revolutionary change that bottom-line-oriented improvement can deliver. In the early 1990s, Dr. Joseph Juran told me that we had lost quality to a generation-that it wouldn't be until well after the new millennium that quality in this country would come alive again. We lost it to banners and slogans and not enough results.

But since then, Six Sigma has reinfused the field with a whole new generation of bright, ambitious talent who would not have otherwise been attracted to what was perceived as a dead science. It was thrilling for me to go to a conference last month where Jack Welch keynoted, and where there were a lot of new faces, a lot of energy, and a lot of smart, young people; what a difference two years (and a lot of proven success) makes!

Because of Six Sigma, quality has become exciting again. People are using the tools and methodologies that were created and improved over the last century, they are doing it in a comprehensive and structured way driven by the CEO, and they are getting profound results. Financial analysts are now finally beginning to understand that it wasn't just technology that drove productivity improvements in the United States during the 1990s; it was quality improvements through implementation of Six Sigma methodologies that helped transform some of our largest and most prestigious companies.

All in all, while on the one hand quality professionals need to be open to new ways of implementing our knowledge, new people attracted to the field can learn what we've learned and avoid the waste of reinventing. To them I say, help the movement; help quality move forward, but don't start from scratch. Understand that you're building on what previous generations have taught you, and be ready to pass on what you have learned to the next generation.

This field has been wonderfully rewarding for me. As the Worldwide Managing Director of the Juran Institute from 1990 to 1995, I had the chance to meet and work with many of the prime movers of quality: Dr. Juran, Ed Deming, Phil Crosby, Dorian Shainin, Armand Feigenbaum, and Brian Joiner. And as the chairman and CEO of Rath & Strong since 1995, I have been involved in Six Sigma since the early days at GE, and now with global implementations at companies such as JPMorgan Chase, Siemens, TRW, and ALSTOM, working with people like Jack Welch and Dave Cote. *Rath & Strong's Six Sigma Leadership Handbook*, an outgrowth of our work, was created to help leaders bring sustainable change to their organizations.

One of the most rewarding things about this field is the people. By the nature of their work, they are dedicated to making things better for all of us. Quality has made profound changes in the way humanity works and to the very quality of our lives.

Here's to another hundred years of improvement!

Daniel L. Quinn
President and CEO, Rath & Strong
Lexington, Massachusetts