

AN INADEQUATE PROCESS VS. ZERO DEFECTS

By Philip B. Crosby, Sr.

February 8, 1985

Managers in a true process business have difficulty now and then with the concept of zero defects. They watch themselves making glass, sheets, copper wire, cookies, books and other continuous flow products - and they see inadequacies. They know that little things happen here and there that are not really understood.

Sometimes those little things are seen to require a great deal of money to eliminate, sometimes the knowledge to eliminate them is not available, sometimes the customers don't mind so nothing needs to be done.

How then do you explain to the people that inadequacy is a part of real life and that it doesn't conflict with zero defects? What's a manager to do?

In the stories told about processes, the subject usually gets switched around. What the manager really wants is permission to make defective material under the guise of built inadequacies. By shifting attention to the final product and to the customer's tolerance we are suddenly up against the laws of physics or capital.

ZD is a personal performance standard. If something is difficult to do or contains aspects that are not absolutely understood that puts it in line with the rest of life. We all battle that every day in living. Raising children, operating a budget, managing a diet, writing a report - all include the unknown.

ZD is a personal performance standard, not a process standard.

Consider a baseball team. There have been very few games played where zero errors occurred, where every batter hit every ball, where every seat was filled, where the home team won every game - baseball is a process.

What performance standard should we give the players? Even the golden glove winners have a few errors during the season. Batters that hit safely one third of the time represent less than one percent of those playing. This would let us assign error rates to each one.

But that is not the case. Each one tries as hard as they can to do everything right the first time and they are disappointed if they don't. They practice every day. They bat, they slide, they catch, they pivot - they really work at it. No real player ever stops trying to improve.

Don't let the difficulty of the process delude you into thinking that it has to be that way. The mythology of yields and quality levels is hard to root out. But it must be done.