Crosby's Message: Set High Expectations by John Sheridan

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For much of his professional career, Philip B. Crosby has waged assorted philosophical battles with traditional quality professionals. And at age 73, he's still at it.

He doesn't, for example, think very highly of typical quality "programs"—like total quality management (TQM), which has been embraced as a cornerstone of many companies' improvement efforts. "It is a great set of initial," he says, "but the books on the subject never define what quality is." Years ago, Crosby defined it as "conformance to requirement"—with an emphasis on the customer's requirements, not merely on meeting specifications.

Crosby's latest book, *Quality & Me* (1999, Jossey-Bass), is an autobiographical account of his career in the quality and management consulting field. In it, Crosby asserts: "The problem with TQM and the conventional quality management process that has evolved... is that expectations are not high enough. When I talk to people who run programs for organizations, it quickly becomes apparent that they are after an improvement of about 20%.”

What's wrong with that? Well, says Crosby, "You can improve almost anything by 20% simply by becoming concerned about it.”

Back in the 1960s, when he was a quality manager at the Martin Co. (later part of Martin-Marietta Corp.), Crosby rebelled against the concept of "acceptable quality levels" based on the notion that worker errors are inevitable; he began to promote the idea of "zero defects" as the goal that companies should strive toward.

His first book, *Quality Is Free* (1979, McGraw-Hill)—which has sold more than 2.5 million copies—helped to shape the thinking of a generation of executives about management's role in driving quality improvement. Thousands of managers and executives have attended the "quality college" courses conducted by his training and education firm, Philip Crosby Associates Inc. (PCA) based in Winter Park, Fla.

Over the years, one of the principle messages that Crosby has tried to impart is that quality problems often are created by management, and, thus, management action is the key to eliminating them.

In a recent telephone conversation, Crosby pointed out that executives often think that their role in TQM programs is limited to "giving a speech once in a while," rather than becoming proactive in establishing requirements and leading by example. "Most quality programs and other kinds of programs don't work, because they are designed for other people," he contends. "You're buying something for your other people to do.”

Moreover, he says, many TQM programs were developed by people who never had responsibility for making quality happen in an industrial setting. "My golf pro has a sign over his door that says, "Amateurs teach amateurs to play like amateurs," he quips.

Crosby's early advocacy of a zero-defect mentality prompted a "violent reaction" from traditional quality professionals, he recalls. Their stock-in-trade was "quality control", which emphasized statistical measurement and corrective action rather than prevention.

"Quality control started off with the idea of statistical measurements, based on the fact that you couldn't get everything right," Crosby says. But that shouldn't be the goal, he emphasizes. "It does no good to set a goal that says, "I'm going to hit three balls into the water on hole No. 6 today.'"

Many companies, he points out, have learned that it is possible to achieve zero-defect performance, at least periodically, or at least get much closer to that target than was previously thought possible—especially back in the days when managers thought that better quality meant higher costs.

In 1990, Crosby parted company with the firm he had established and built into a $100 million concern. But after watching the new owners drive PCA to the brink of extinction—revenues had dropped to zero in late 1996—he reacquired its assets and re-christened it as Philip Crosby Associates II Inc. He's been slowly rebuilding the quality education firm while continuing to preach the gospel of defect prevention.

"Prevention requires management action," he emphasizes. "You have to manage the company, for instance, in such a way that you prove your processes before you start them—rather than just stumbling along and fixing things.”

This and That

Make sure you don't end up the richest man in the cemetery. You can't do business from there.

—Colonel Harlan Sanders  
Founder, Kentucky Fried Chicken

I've never learned anything while I was talking.

—Larry King  
TV talk show host

The real moment of success is not the moment apparent to the crowd.

—George Bernard Shaw  
British playwright, critic and social theorist

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.

—Frederick Douglass  
Abolitionist