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Interview with Matthis Vermass

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Matthis Vermaas

(Interviewed on 7 April 1992, Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

Video Roll # 9

Q: Your name and title?

VERMAAS: Matthis Vermaas. That is ...

Q: And it is Corporate Quality Director --

VERMAAS: Yeah.

Q: Of Phillips International.

VERMAAS: Yeah.

(OFF CAMERA INSTRUCTIONS)

Q: How do you know Dr. Joseph Juran?

VERMAAS: How do I know him. I met him for the first time, I think, during conference of the European Organization for Quality. He was one of the persons I saw on the list; I'd never met him. I'd read all of his books. And so I said, well, let's try to find him.

And then I found him in the midst of all other participants of that conference -- not trying to have a special place, just being one of the normal participants of that conference.

And that was the first thing which I liked very much when I personally met him, because he was such a normal person, such an able person, humble person. Not trying to set himself apart, but just being like the rest of the people.

So I really loved his way of behaving. And, for me, that was a sign of a real quality guru.

Q: Instead of him, use his name.

VERMAAS: I will try to do.

Q: Let me take you back to that first encounter that you had ever with Dr. Juran. Where were you and how did you meet him?

VERMAAS: I met Dr. Juran for the first time during a conference of the European Organization for Quality. That was in Vienna a couple of years ago. And I saw on the list that he was one of the participants in that conference, and also a keynote speaker at the end.

And because I had read Dr. Juran's books and I was really admiring his wisdom which he portrayed in those books, I thought it was worthwhile to try to contact him, to find him, and to see if I could have a discussion with him.

And that was not easy, because Dr. Juran was just amidst of all the other people, not on a reserved special place for very important persons. He was acting like one of the normal

participants, and so it was quite difficult to find Dr. Juran, as well.

Because his face was familiar from all the photographs, after a while, I detected him. And much to my surprise, Dr. Juran was so easy to approach, so easy to talk with. He was -- well, he portrayed a lot of humbleness.

So that was the first time I met him. And I was very much impressed, also, by seeing Dr. Juran in his own environment amongst the quality professionals.

Q: Do you remember that first conversation that you had with Dr. Juran?

VERMAAS: Yes, well, Dr. Juran had been active and ... in the start in the quality program in Phillips. That was a time that I did not join Phillips yet. And so I was very anxious how his prospectives were after all those years on what has been achieved since that time.

And one of his most famous graphs he showed, which also has been published later on, where Dr. Juran shows the movement of speed and quality improvement in Japan versus that in Europe and the United States. I understood he used that for the first time, outside his own practice, in that particular conference of Phillips.

Well, I was really anxious to see how Dr. Juran thought we developed along the times.

Q: You strike me, sir, as someone who does not take answers easily. And yet, you speak with such fondness about Dr. Juran, with such respect about his books and about his

teachings. What did you find -- even before meeting Dr. Juran -- to be so valuable about what he was saying and preaching and doing?

VERMAAS: Well, I always had the feeling, when I read, or read him later, Dr. Juran's speaking on conferences, that he is actually addressing precisely the root causes and all the fundamentals which makes companies successful or not.

Especially nowadays, because quality is quite popular, all kind of new self-made gurus and writers come up in this field. Many conferences are organized, really overwhelming. But you see seldom the guys like Dr. Juran who really brings everything back to simple, straight forward, but indeed fundamental issues, and addresses that.

And I think that that's really a good example of what quality management is all about. Not making a lot of fizz about it, but doing it, and focusing on root causes, fundamental achievements, and so on.

Q: You raise an interesting point, that there are now so many self-proclaimed gurus of quality running around the world. What are the differences between a man like Dr. Juran and all of these gurus who have suddenly popped up all over the world?

VERMAAS : Well, for me, the largest difference is that Dr. Juran, himself, never tried to commercialize his whole activities. I think that when he would have been a commercial person, he could have been on top of the world, and ... to see capacity and so on.

· But he -- well, he is so focused on helping -- you can say, mankind to improve. And also, in that way, to improve the quality of life to a large extent, that he was kind of unselfish, to a certain extent. And I think that's the main difference, for me, from Dr. Juran and all those others.

Q: It sounds as though Dr. Juran has made a real difference in your life.

VERMAAS: Well, that's certainly true. I've been -- always my life has been directed at trying to get improvements in all kind of activities I did. It's a kind of nature you have, I think. Perhaps you, too, might had occasion, perhaps due to my -- the way I've been raised by my parents.

But he really made a difference by bringing it all into perspective.

Q: Dr. Juran, as time goes by, continues to work as hard today as he probably did 40 years ago. What do you think keeps Dr. Juran churning along? Why doesn't he sit down and grow flowers and play golf like all the other men in their 80's?

VERMAAS: Why, I think that -- and that's a bit ... I recognize in Dr. Juran, his obsession to get things moving, to make sure that improvements are pursued in all kind of organizations. I think that keeps him alive, and that keeps him busy, that keeps him active.

Q: I've asked everyone this question: what is Dr. Juran really like, once you get to know him?

VERMAAS: Today, Dr. Juran for me is a very nice, old, wise person who -- well, perhaps a bit grandfather. But then not in a physical sense, but more in an intellectual sense.

Q: In 100 years, when the history is written of the quality revolution in the world marketplace, what will the history books say about Joseph Juran? Or what should they say about Joseph Juran?

VERMAAS: Well, I think that in history, Dr. Juran will be recognized, like a few others, as being very instrumental in getting better insights for companies in where the real success factors are in the world, and in business.

Q: I'm not sure I understand your answer. You say Dr. Juran and a few others. Obviously, there are people who have worked in the area of quality. Who are the real leaders, and how would you characterize each of their contributions?

VERMAAS: Well, for me, the top most important persons in the quality are Dr. Juran and Dr. Deming. Of course, they are not very similar. There are some differences between the two. But I think their basic motives are the same.

I think that Dr. Juran -- with his European background, perhaps -- is more somebody I recognize myself, my own

background in, being a European. But I also respect Dr. Deming very much.

Q: We, in America -- particularly now that there are so many articles and books written -- tend to characterize Dr. Deming and Dr. Juran as sort of two halves of the same grapefruit. So that their identities have almost blended. It's Dr. Deming/Juran.

Could you help us, because this is a program that will be seen on American television. Separate the two halves of the grapefruit so people will understand and appreciate Dr. Deming, for his achievements and contributions, and Dr. Juran and his achievements and contributions.

VERMAAS: You're posing me a difficult question because, indeed, Dr. Juran and Dr. Deming -- to a large extent -- dealt with the same issues. I think that Dr. Juran, for me, was the one who put leadership in a very high and important position in the quality movement. And I think that's, to a large extent, one of the most important things in the company.

Because leadership is what everything makes happen. Leadership is shaping the culture of the company. Leadership makes it possible for people to release their own creativity and their own motivation. And so that was a very important contribution.

I think Dr. Deming, to a certain extent, was more instrumental in defining a couple of rules -- his 14 points -- which gets somewhat practical hints to managers, what kind

of things they had to do. While Dr. Juran focused somewhat more about the background.

So I think, for the real leaders, Dr. Juran would have been a better source of information, because they were forced to think about it, and by thinking about things, you learn. While Dr. Deming provided more a kind of receipt for improvement. And so that was also very helpful, of course.

Q: All of us carry our memories in kind of photographs and movies that we show in our own minds. Years from now, when you think about Dr. Juran, tell me about the photograph that you will always carry in your mind, or the movie that will always play.

VERMAAS: Well, I think that my strongest memory of Dr. Juran, from a physical point of view, was finding him at the large square in Vienna -- well, quite near to his place of birth, of course, because he comes from -- not from Vienna, itself, but at least from that part of Europe.

And he was there standing alone. A large crowd was looking at all the nice buildings. And he was just standing there, but looking around. And thinking and, I think, reflecting on his own history.

And that was a very typical pose for him. And I think I will always remember him, mainly from that first sight.

Q: Looking at the buildings in Vienna, and somewhat apart from things.

VERMAAS: Yeah.

Q: Was there anything that continues to surprise you most about Joseph Juran?

VERMAAS: Well, I think everybody is surprised by the fact that Dr. Juran is still such a very active person and that he's still very strict at himself about smoking and drinking and so on. So he also tries to bring quality in his own life, in that way, by trying to do everything which is good for his own physical situation. Well--

Q: When we speak about Dr. Juran to people all around the world..i.Japan; US, and Europe .. , we always hear the word "ethical". What is the link for Dr. Juran between quality and ethics and ethical behavior?

VERMAAS: Well, you have to ask that question of Dr. Juran himself, of course. But I think that indeed, a large resemblance between quality and ethical behavior. Because ethical behavior -- and this is my opinion -- is, to a large extent, to behave in a quality way. And so there you see the similarity.

And going back to what I said about Dr. Juran before, I have the feeling that his primary motives for the promotion of total quality management has a strong ethical background. His own philosophy and way of looking at the world and at mankind is bringing him to this active promotion.

Q: Years from now, Dr. Juran will have grandchildren and great grandchildren who, unfortunately, will never have the opportunity to have known him. And may have no

knowledge of engineering or manufacturing or even of the quality process. If you had an opportunity, in 20 years, to speak to one of Dr. Juran's grandchildren, to tell them about the man who is Joseph Juran, that they were related to, what would you tell his grandchildren?

VERMAAS : Well, I will tell his grandchildren that I would have loved him to be my grandfather.

Q: Why is that? That's such a nice thing to say.

VERMAAS: Well, Dr. Juran, for me, has provided me, I think, with a kind of intellectual relationship with somebody who has the same strong feelings about trying to improve, trying to improve not only businesses, but also mankind in general. His strong, ethical background of his reasoning.

And I think that I would have been -- well, I would have been delighted having him as a grandfather.

Q: What is it that drives someone like Dr. Juran, like yourself, to pursue a life whose central focus is to make things better?

VERMAAS: Well, that's a difficult question, I think. You have to go back to your primary motives. I think the challenge, and also the idea that you help a lot of other people to have better lives. And so the basic motive, I think, is that you want to be useful for the rest of the world. And have a useful life. Not only for yourself, but also for others.

Q: For the people of America, finish this sentence for me: Joseph Juran is the man who.

VERMAAS: That's a difficult question. Let me think a moment.

Well, I think that Dr. Juran is, for me, the man who made it clear to me that persistence and tenacity in pursuing quality is a very essential ingredient to make things happen. It's a very difficult role. And so you must really be strong and not shy back from all kind of difficulties you will encounter along that way.

And I think that he made that very clear for me.

Q: What have I been not smart enough or knowledgeable enough to ask you about Dr. Juran that you think must absolutely be on the videotape about his life?

VERMAAS: No, I don't believe that I can -- I think we covered a lot of things.

Q: That if you don't say this, nobody else will.

VERMAAS: Well, the only thing, perhaps, I can say is that, for me, Dr. Juran is the -- is, for me, the strongest symbol of the quality movement. So that's the only thing I think I can add to all the things I said before.

Q: For the record, just so that people know: why it is that you feel uncomfortable in speaking about total quality management as a Phillips spokesperson.

VERMAAS: I don't feel myself uncomfortable. I think I explained you before that giving a perspective on successes and failure -- which, of course, you can see in every large company embarking on the way to total quality management -- is something line managers have to give. And not support people.

Support people know always everything better than line managers. And I think the only people who really can judge from successes and failures are line managers, themselves. And I think it's kind of arrogance of a lot of quality professionals to judge along those kind of things.

Q: We respect that. It seems to me that everyone who we always talk to says that one of the goals of a successful total quality management process is the degree to which people are able to integrate quality processes into work processes. Quality objectives into business objectives. And what you're saying seems to almost drive a knife down the middle of that and say, no, no, quality issues are quality issues; management issues are management issues.

VERMAAS: Then you totally misunderstood me.

Q: I apologize, and I will stop here.

(END OF TAPE 9)

