

## AGAINST MANAGEMENT<sup>1</sup>

*A business is a lot like a garden. Individual plants can't grow to their full potential if they are shaded from the sun by the ever-present shadow of the gardener.*<sup>2</sup>

This essay describes the benefits of democratic management relationships (defined as when subordinates actively participate in the decisions their superiors make), with a focus on explicating the perils of micromanagement, and followed by a brief personal application.

Rather than starting our management analysis from the perspective of any one of the abundant management theories, we will rather ask the fundamental question: why manage at all? The limits of anarchy, applied in this case as an absence of hierarchy, have their roots in human diversity. Not everyone can do the same job; a variety of talents will ensure that a fragmented field exists in any profession, often according to work experience and academic certification and realized in the types of positions held by workers. The diversity of positions within an organization allow it to run more efficiently, and the variety of jobs therefore needs managing to ensure smooth and logical operations.

Looking at the management principles applied today, there seems to be a lack of awareness of how advances in technology and shifts in the economy (including the global trend from products to services) entail that industrial age management models be overhauled to have value. The mechanical models of production processes, tasks for which technological resources are increasingly available, have evolved into more organic models. These involve rapid growth and perpetual change, and require more educated employees to perform in realms of greater and more interactive complexity. Management styles should therefore be directed towards granting workers self-reliance: "More and more people in the workforce – and most knowledge workers – will have to MANAGE THEMSELVES."<sup>3</sup>

Systems that improve productivity, especially those based on relaxing authoritarian control in favor of a more democratic management system (where workers can influence their environment), have been proven valuable in many ways:

To be deprived of any decisive influence within the social environment generates an intense and a seemingly inescapable experience of powerlessness and resort to 'world views' of an essentially passive, fatalistic and dependent kind. But a determination to transform this situation has occasioned a worldwide search for an appropriate means to create industrial democracy. Indeed, as a by-product of an enthusiasm for workers' participation and control, an appropriately persuasive case has been argued for the democratization of social

institutions. This is upheld, first, by an appeal to selected values which are widely advocated in most industrial societies; second, by recourse to a body of ethical principles which strengthen this underlying reasoning, and finally, by reference to abundant, carefully collected evidence, of the substantial socio-economic benefits of effective participation.<sup>4</sup>

The benefits and arguments for the management system as described above fit with what management should accomplish. The best relationship between superiors and subordinates will produce the highest quality of work from both of them, and they will also as a consequence enjoy their work. An adaptive focus in management styles is best suited to cope with the inevitable changes that organizations will face. The bureaucratic or scientific management approach, however, offers too rigid a framework for handling the essentially human behavior (such as creativity and critical thinking) that drives an organization.

A necessary component of any successful management style is the correct approach to delegation:

Delegation is the best productivity skill a manager can master. Effective delegation reduces a manager's workload while developing employees' skills, knowledge, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. The ability to delegate prepares employees who work for you to handle your responsibilities and simultaneously enables you to advance to other career opportunities within the organization. Delegating is a win-win activity. It produces more satisfied managers who are able to take on larger jobs at higher salaries *and* it produces more satisfied employees who are able to develop a broader range of skills and thus be prepared for promotion when you are.<sup>5</sup>

When properly executed, delegation establishes responsibility and accountability, and builds mutual trust and reciprocity between superiors and subordinates. It is especially necessary because people want and need to feel in control. This simple fact, unfortunately, often creates paradoxical situations where superiors refuse to relinquish any control to their subordinates, who require some degree of power in order to take pride in their job (and therefore produce quality work). Giving employees power to make important decisions and participate in organizational development is illustrated by the following analogy: "Not many people take the time to wash and vacuum a rental car ... this is likewise true of the workplace. For most people, the workplace is a rental car in which they feel no ownership."<sup>6</sup>

A sense of ownership among employees helps them to develop their sense of worth. Once this is accomplished, and all workers feel some sense of control, they are by their very nature hard-wired to thrive within their environment.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the intrinsic rewards of accomplishment and achievement derived from completing work oneself should not be underestimated:

Probably one of the most destructive misinterpretations of the American way of life has been to belittle, attenuate and degrade the concept of the worker's initiative and achievement as pursued for economic profit. Man does work

for profit in order to avoid pain; but in a positive sense, he works to enjoy the excitement and meaning that achievement provides for his own psychological growth and therefore his happiness.<sup>8</sup>

Harnessing the power of self-motivation illustrates how subordinates can accomplish more when managed from a democratic approach:

Most of the research (literally thousands of studies) has looked at the effectiveness of the many practices that are commonly part of an organizationwide installation of the involvement-oriented approach. Most of these studies have found positive results and support the argument that the approach is likely to produce better results than the control-oriented approach.<sup>9</sup>

When workers are more involved in their organizational development, they are motivated to become more productive.

Besides the positive influences on productivity stemming from the increased motivation workers feel when they are involved in managing their work, an even more direct reason for supporting this democratic approach to management is the fact that subordinates are often more capable of making decisions about the nature and direction of their work than are their managers. By the nature of their duties, workers doing a certain job have a closer perspective on the meaning of their various responsibilities than will their superiors, and will therefore be best suited to participate in management decisions about their jobs.

The different responsibilities of managers, who must retain broader perspectives on organizational development, means that they must delegate, and especially transfer responsibility for, the details of explicit tasks. There is an underlying tradeoff in technical, personal, and conceptual abilities that occurs as people advance within an organization: “the appropriate mix of these skills varies as an individual advances in management from supervisory to top management positions ... proportionately less technical skill tends to be needed as one advances from lower to higher levels in the organization.”<sup>10</sup>

In matters where subordinates possess greater expertise, managers should not have the right to overrule the decisions of those with a greater grasp of the relevant issues. Differences in the knowledge that superiors and subordinates within an organization possess demands that the management decisions and responsibilities be distributed accordingly. As the CEO of a successful corporation remarks: “What is it about a business that we can decide at the top of the company that could not be decided just as well and much faster by those running the business if they had the same information?”<sup>11</sup>

It could be argued that as people rise within an organization, their growing knowledge entails that they are better suited to manage all tasks occurring below them. Over time, however, ways of performing tasks may change, and because promoted workers must focus on their new duties more than tracking changes in their old ones, having held a previous position is becoming less relevant to the capability of deciding how it is presently performed. Changes in the typical career path also illustrate the disparity between what subordinates and what their superiors know: “Today’s ‘superiors’ usually have not held the jobs their ‘subordinates’ hold ... the superior in an organization employing knowledge workers cannot, as a rule, do the work of the supposed subordinate any more than the conductor of an orchestra can play the tuba.”<sup>12</sup>

We do not have time to fully discuss why management systems do not exist as described above. Successful systems, by their established nature, resist change, while contrary views can be repressed.<sup>13</sup> Yet it remains clear that any apparent advantages in authoritarian systems (over the necessary commitment of involving workers in managing their own work) are short-lived:

In a variety of studies that took specific factories and experimented with productivity based on autocratic and participative leadership, it can be seen that autocratic leadership can spark an initial, short-term increase in productivity. People will work harder, at first, when placed under tighter control. However, this control leads to higher turnover (the best people leave), and general employee resistance to the autocratic control in the forms of increased absenteeism and apathy. Over time, the workforce becomes endulled and the productivity fails. Empowering leadership compares well with the performance of autocratic leadership in the short run, and in the long run builds higher and sustained productivity, lower turnover, lower absenteeism, and greater employee commitment to the organization.<sup>14</sup>

There are also the classical problems of power corrupting, and worries that people who have devoted their efforts to being in control are not necessarily best suited to handle their responsibilities.<sup>15</sup> As a result, there is the widespread phenomenon of micromanaging: a practice employed by managers who fail to properly delegate responsibilities and workloads. This makes subordinates helpless and therefore less effective: “[micromanagers] expect you to deliver successes, but their interference assures failures.”<sup>16</sup>

Our societal values serve as additional support for adopting a democratic management approach; micromanaging is in contradiction to the values cherished by democratic societies:

Even though most Western countries practice democracy in the political arena, their business leaders have assumed that the highest level of organizational effectiveness can only be obtained by practicing a form of management that is at best described as control oriented and bureaucratic and at worst as arbitrary and autocratic.<sup>17</sup>

At the heart of the matter is the moral obligation to respect our fellow humans. Treating workers as ignorant labor machines has occurred in the past as slavery and continues today in sweatshops.<sup>18</sup>

Even if it were more productive for an organization, should they adopt the practice of slavery? A preferable approach does not exploit employees, and therefore allows democratic relationships between superiors and subordinates (so that all people involved are empowered to function at their best). Such an organization is also more successful for doing so; at a thriving company, for example: “at the foundation of everything ... is a deep, genuine, and unshakable belief in the ability of the individual.”<sup>19</sup>

As anyone rises through an organization (or even if they enter it at the top), being a successful people manager requires that they retain perspective on what it is like to be a subordinate worker in the organization. This is done not just for empathic reasons, but also helps managers realize the feasibility of what they expect their workers to accomplish. This “other person’s shoes” way of thinking is the central tenet to my philosophy of interpersonal relationships, and I have found it to be consistently enlightening.<sup>20</sup>

As I develop skills and responsibilities throughout my career, keeping in constant check with the management warning signs illustrated by the gardener metaphor (at the beginning of this essay) will become increasingly important. In my dealings with both superiors and subordinates, there must always be an acknowledgement of the basic values and moral obligations described in this essay, as well as growing understanding how to best motivate, lead, and coach my subordinates, develop a productive relationship with my superiors, and participate in organizational development as a whole.

There is no substitute for real-life experience. On top of the theoretical framework provided by my schooling, my personal experiences with both good and bad management styles are teaching me successful management techniques. Above all I hope to retain a passionate opposition to management styles that disrespect subordinates, exploit workers, or repress individuality (and all other forms of fascism). I hope to count myself as one of the people described below:

The path towards a future which promises the realization of creative human potentialities may, therefore, be strewn with major obstacles but it remains a vital goal for those who, despite adverse economic and political conditions, have continued incessantly to strive to eradicate permanently antagonisms which have disfigured productive activities since the dawn of industry itself, and which should have no part whatsoever in those truly humanitarian societies which should be the birthright of all progressive, visionary and democratic people.<sup>21</sup>

I am far more interested in developing my personal and family life, however, as well as producing tangible work myself, than aspiring to have my primary work responsibility being the management of other people. Yet from whatever position I find myself, I hope to retain and practice the democratic management philosophy outlined in this essay.

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<sup>1</sup> Or more appropriately, “Against Micromanagement,” but since the two terms are unfortunately equated by many managers, I have hoped, with this title, to draw an expository advantage from its shock value.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Chittenden, quoted in Linda Formichelli (1997), *Letting go of the details: Drawbacks of micromanagement*, *Nation's Business* 85, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Peter F. Drucker (1999), *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* (New York: HarperBusiness), p. 163.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Poole (1986), *Towards a New Industrial Democracy: Workers' Participation in Industry* (London: Routledge), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Robert B. Nelson (1994), *Empowering Employees Through Delegation* (New York: Irwin Professional Publishing), p. xi-xii.

<sup>6</sup> John R. Dew (1997), *Empowerment and Democracy in The Workplace: Applying Adult Education Theory and Practice for Cultivating Empowerment* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books), p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> That humans are driven to thrive in their environment is a matter of fact with millions of years of evolutionary support: organisms that don't simply die out. Our adaptive nature, furthermore, retains this simple truth in the modern world, but with one increasingly important exception: if we feel that our actions don't matter (such as through a sense of helplessness that an autocratic management system often produces), there is no incentive to thrive.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick Herzberg (1966), *Work and the Nature of Man* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company), p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> Edward E. Lawler, III (1992), *The Ultimate Advantage: Creating the High-Involvement Organization* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Hersey, Kenneth H. Blanchard, & Dewey E. Johnson (1996), *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources, Seventh Edition* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> William McKnight (CEO of 3M), quoted in Sumantra Ghoshal & Christopher A. Bartlett (1997), *The Individualized Corporation: A Fundamentally New Approach to Management* (New York: HarperBusiness), p. 56. This also illustrates the need for organizations to play an active role in and encourage the continuing education (and therefore innovation and creativity) of its employees.

<sup>12</sup> Drucker, p. 19-20.

<sup>13</sup> As evidence, consider how the most rigid, tradition-based societies are the ones that have experienced the least upheaval.

<sup>14</sup> Dew, p. 37.

<sup>15</sup> An example I would offer here is policemen: typical policemen may be different from the ordinary citizen in ways that do not necessarily make them suited for the job.

<sup>16</sup> Sal F. Marino, (1998), *Micromanagement leads to mismanagement*, *Industry Week*, 247(15), p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Lawler, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> The probable conclusion to the viewpoint that workers are nothing more than machines to be exploited for their production value *is* slavery, and our global society has still not yet fully emancipated workers from conditions resulting from these viewpoints. We are still, if you will, in the John Brown stage of recognizing the autonomy of individuals and respecting their human dignity.

<sup>19</sup> At 3M, quoted in Ghoshal, et. al., p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Having held a job in the customer service industry, for example, I try to remain conscious of what my outlook was as an employee in situations where *I* am the customer (and I am further amazed at how other customers may fail spectacularly in at least realizing that they are talking to another human being).

<sup>21</sup> Poole, p. 180.