

THE (REAL) STORY ON MANAGEMENT

What follows is the byproduct of an enhanced (>140 characters) twitter discussion in February 2015 at @tom_peters:

TP: “Management” is a dreary/misleading word. E.g., mgt/standard usage = shouting (or whispering, if you’re a “Theory Y” aficionado) orders in the slave galley. Consider, please, a more encompassing/more accurate definition:

“‘Management’ is the arrangement of human affairs in pursuit of desired outcomes.” (No kidding. Self-evident.

Or should be.)

TP: Management is not about Theory X vs. Theory Y/“top down” vs. “bottom up.” It is about how humans fundamentally arrange their/our collective efforts in order to survive—and, hopefully, thrive.

TP: Quintessential “management doctrine”: U.S. Constitution?! (Among other things, artfully combines “vision” and “execution.”)

TP: Love the idea of U.S. b-schools teaching full-blown course on U.S. Constitution. Three profs: poly sci, econ, psych.

TP: Constitution Hall in Philly in summer of 1787: Ultimate “board room” debate on “managerial philosophy”—in this case, a bold experimental collectivity called a “democratic” nation, the United States of America.

TP: Constitution defining doctrine on the merits and demerits of “centralization vs. decentralization”/autonomy (the “big idea”) vs. control (a necessary reality). (The drafters of the U.S. Constitution included decentralists like Jefferson and centralists like Adams and middle-of-the-roaders like Franklin.)

Twitter respondent: “Sounds like someone has locked you in a boardroom for a day with a management consultant.”

TP response to the above: Get your point all too well, as a professional jargon hater, but my goal is to suggest there’s

nothing pedestrian about “management”—and, hence, there should not be anything pedestrian about the *teaching* thereof and training therein. It is about the essence of collective life. (Man, in our Darwinian adventure, experienced a “disruptive” brief period in which our brains grew like Topsy. The growth was not the genetic addition of logic/incipient math skills; it was primarily the addition of enhanced social skills, which allowed us to organize and thus surpass the rest of our fellow creatures. I.e., we learned de facto “management.”)

TP: Nations are by definition in the “people (citizen) development business.” Which includes an encasement called “national security” (given, alas, a Hobbesian view of humans at their acquisitive-aggressive worst*). (*The drafters of the U.S. Constitution were by and large Hobbesian—much concerned about blunting the downsides of collective behavior.)

The U.S. Constitution is an exemplar of brevity—and for the subsequent 238 years there has been, as there should be, a battle royal between “small government” adherents and “big government” adherents. While my politics are “liberal,” I would have to admit that I come down squarely on the Philip K. Howard side of the fence; his latest masterpiece book is titled, *The Rule of Nobody: Saving America from Dead Laws and Broken Government*. That is, over time sluggishness

increases and entropic forces rule. Among other things, this by and large explains the pitiful (accurate word choice) long-term performance of large commercial enterprises; e.g., half of the “Fortune 500” of 1999 had dropped off the list a scant 15 years later.

One sage said that dealing with technology change effectively is less about the technology per se and more about the lagging variable—novel organizational formats that must be invented. I would wholeheartedly agree. The Tech Tsunami is exactly that, a tsunami. But the primary work to be done must focus on people (development thereof in the face of, at the top of the list, charging artificial intelligence) and the organizational arrangements that allow firms to adapt on a dime (as hard a task as exists) and exploit rather than be run over by the technology. This is a million miles beyond mere organizational “flattening” and the “agile movement.”

The old battle royal persists. I abhor authoritarianism—but I am equally fearful of anarchy.

We shall see.

(Wouldn't it be lovely if our “management” schools could be a leading variable rather than a lagging variable in embracing change. This wee paper does not hold the answer—but perhaps it is a hint at how tawdry “management,” and education associated therewith, must be

reconceived as a discipline at the epicenter of adapting to/exploiting the revolutions with which we are surrounded—from Washington to Wellington, from Wall Street to Main Street. We could do little better than start with Peter Drucker’s dictum that “management” is not a numbers game aiming for “optimization,” but instead the quintessential “liberal art.” MBA as *“Master of Business Arts,”* anyone? Just a thought.)

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