

Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

On how we all know that:

Frederick Winslow Taylor Lives

On March 21, 1915, Frederick Winslow Taylor died. Honest. As James Thurber observed, "You could look it up."

And yet, Fred Taylor lives. He lives through the ideas that he developed and championed. For Fred Taylor was the inventor of scientific management.

Today, no one believes in scientific management. Would any self-respecting manager from the private, public, or non-profit sectors confess to being a disciple of scientific management? Of course not.

After all, in the world of scientific management, employees are automatons—robots who can and should be directed to do their work in precise, pre-determined ways. Top management decides how the work is to be done. With their stopwatches, their charts, and, of course, some help from a consultant or two, these managers figure out—scientifically, very scientifically—what the best way is to do every individual job. Indeed, they don't merely figure out the best way; they figure out the "one best way."

Scientific management is built on the premise that there is, indeed, one best way (and a lot of not-at-all-best ways) to do every task. And because the managers are smarter than the workers—why else would they be the managers?—it is their responsibility to discover, codify, and implement this one best

way. Then, it is the responsibility of the workers to follow management's instructions meticulously.

It is this obsession with the fastidious implementation of the one best way that gives scientific management a bad name. It is what makes scientific management so controlling, so meddling, so dictatorial. Scientific managers are micromanagers. And today, you can't say anything more damning about a manager than to accuse him or her of being a "micromanager."



Today's managers are too enlightened to be caught micromanaging. They don't control their employees; they empower them. They don't impose detailed instructions; they offer guidance. They don't measure their employees' efficiency with stopwatches; they measure each team's contribution to accomplishing the organization's mission. They don't create procedural rules to be followed; they create performance targets to be achieved. Today's managers believe that each of their employees should help advance their organization's vision. Scientific management is dead; humanistic management lives.

Several years ago, a visitor from New Zealand set out to learn about the different leadership strategies employed in the United States by managers in all three sectors. She compiled a list of managers with whom her

American colleagues thought she should talk, and set out to interview them.

She returned from her interviews having discovered something quite surprising. American leaders didn't employ different leadership strategies. They used only one strategy: the empowerment strategy. Every "leader" with whom she spoke confessed to being an empowerment manager.

Yes: In the United States, scientific management is out. Empowerment management is in. Yet, if you had talked to the subordinates of some of these self-professed empowerment managers (as I had) you would have heard a different story. Some of these empowerment managers were not quite as empowering as they would like others to believe.

Managers want to be known as empowering because this is how managers today are supposed to behave. Some of these empowerment managers are not, however, quite as empowering as they would like others to believe.

All managers want to be known as empowering because—they know—this is how managers today are supposed to behave. Managers don't run around with stopwatches. And they don't hire consultants to run around with stopwatches. Or, if they do, they make sure that their consultants keep their stopwatches well hidden. If you are caught using a stopwatch, everyone will know that you cannot be an empowerment manager.

Yet, look around. Look not at how the managers of public agencies describe their leadership style. Instead, watch how they actually manage. And you will discover a lot of managers who are employing *The Principles of Scientific Management*. They won't have read Fred Taylor's book. They won't even know that Fred Taylor wrote a book. They probably won't even know that Fred Taylor existed. But that does not mean that they will have escaped the magnetism of his "principles."

For example, Taylor wrote: "all of the planning which under the old system was

done by the workman, as a result of his personal experience, must of necessity under the new system be done by the management." Moreover, he continued, "it is also clear that in most cases one type of man is needed to plan ahead and an entirely different type to execute the work." Do you know any managers who, even though they would never use these words, behave precisely as Taylor instructed?

At the very end of *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, John Maynard Keynes wrote: "the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist."

Today's most practical of all men and women—those who manage large private and public enterprises—are certainly vulnerable to this belief—that they are indeed immune to all intellectual influences. Nevertheless, they are Fred Taylor's slaves.

Fred Taylor is dead. . . . Long lives Fred Taylor. **B**

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