

Knowledge Worker

The Age of Contribution

(March 2016)

The industrial era was “The Age of Compliance.” Work was captured in well-defined procedures, working consisted of carrying out those procedures, and management focused on ensuring compliance with those procedures. Then – Wham! – along came knowledge work and knocked all that into a cocked hat. We are now in “The Age of Contribution,” an age in which the worker has to figure out what to do and how to get it done, and management should focus on supporting and enabling the worker in doing that.

A Shift in the Balance of Power

Managers and executives struggle still with the consequences and implications of the shift to knowledge work. They have tried things like participative management, self-managed teams and, most recently, they have been focused on employee engagement. Yet, none of these quite seem to work as desired. Why?

On my part I think it is because all these things (with the possible exception of self-managed teams) fail to address the root issue; namely, that *the shift to knowledge work created a significant shift in the balance of power between management and workers.*

In the industrial era, work was materials-based and working was a visible, overt physical activity. The necessary work routines could be designed in advance (i.e., prefigured) and compliance with those routines could be enforced. The shift to knowledge work changed all that. Work is information-based and working is a covert, mental activity that is not visible. Moreover, it is typically the case that the knowledge worker must figure out what to do in response to the circumstances at hand (i.e., configure the working activity). Relying on compliance is not only impossible, it is also undesirable. In short, the shift to knowledge work shifted the locus of control over working from management to the worker.

Consequently, it is no longer practical to view the workers as mere instruments of managerial will; instead, workers must be viewed as agents, acting on their employer’s behalf and in their mutual best interests. We have left behind the *Age of Compliance* and entered the *Age of Contribution*.

To illustrate just how dramatic this shift and its consequences can be, allow me to tell you a little sea story.

The Computer is Down

In August of 1968, while the Chicago police were clubbing demonstrators outside the Democratic Party’s national convention, the United States Navy was pounding the Viet Nam coast with naval gunfire. One such shore bombardment mission entailed blowing up an orphanage.

Intelligence reports suggested that the Viet Cong might be using the orphanage as an observation post. The purpose of the shore bombardment mission was to confirm or disconfirm that suspicion. In the aerial spotter’s words, he intended to “throw a few rounds in there and see what we can flush out.” Judging from the spotter’s southern accent, those present concluded he was a “good old boy” who thought he was on a quail hunt.

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Up in the Combat Information Center (CIC), the Fire Control Officer (FCO) pointed out that the target coordinates given the ship showed on the ship's charts as a Catholic orphanage, an observation the spotter confirmed. Obviously reluctant to undertake the mission, the FCO asked the spotter what he could see. The spotter replied, "Nothin' but a bunch of kids and what looks like nuns. But you never can tell. They could be VC."

Down below, in the plotting room, home to the gun fire control system's computer and the place from which the ship's guns were controlled, the chief in charge was growing antsy. He recalled the Nuremburg trials and the excuses offered by Nazi officers that they had simply obeyed orders. He also recalled the chief legal counsel's admonition to the Allies that not allowing such a defense would one day come back to haunt them. Uppermost in his mind was a belief that it was wrong – criminally wrong – to knowingly slaughter children on the basis of mere suspicion.

The mission proceeded toward its explosive outcome. Coordinates were set into the computer; the gun orders were calculated; the guns were swung out and loaded; the ship reported ready to the spotter. Just as the spotter gave the command to fire, the chief reported to CIC, "The computer just went down." Efforts to resolve the problem dragged on for hours. Eventually, the mission had to be aborted.

Later that night, after the computer was reported back in operation, there were rumors circulating to the effect that the computer hadn't really been down, that the chief had only reported it as down. The chief was summoned to the captain's sea cabin where he was asked about these rumors. The chief pointed out that he had no control over the rumor mill. More important, he was the only person on the ship qualified to say if the computer was or was not operating properly. If he said the computer was down, it was down, and he said it was down.

The next day the spotter from the day before was back and the orphanage was once again a target. This time the Skipper refused to take it under fire.

That little scenario occurred almost 50 years ago, in the early stages of the shift to knowledge work. Since then more and more knowledge work and knowledge workers have come on the scene. So, magnify that little scenario by millions upon millions of situations in which the worker possesses the knowledge relevant to the achievement of this or that outcome and can apply it or not as the worker sees fit.

Consider also thousands upon thousands of situations in which the worker is the *only* one who possesses the necessary knowledge. For management to continue focusing on compliance and relying on carrot-and-stick practices is sheer folly.

Management, then, is faced with an extraordinary challenge and the late Peter Drucker (1974) articulated it beautifully. He wrote that the central problem of the knowledge society was "to make knowledge work productive and the knowledge worker achieving" (p.177).

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In the end, command-and-control must be replaced with communication and collaboration. Knowledge workers must be viewed as partners in the enterprise, not as pawns in the hands of management. As Shakespeare had Hamlet say, "Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished." Hamlet was referring to death. So am I. I refer to the much-needed demise of outdated, irrelevant and counter-productive management practices and the development of practices more suited to the *Age of Contribution* and the arrival of knowledge work and knowledge workers.

References

Drucker, P.F. (1974). *Management*. Harper & Row: New York

About the Author

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