

Fitting Your Management Practices to the Kind of Work being Managed

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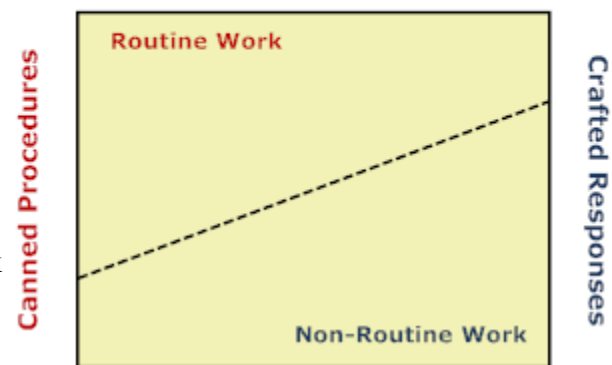
Introduction

You wouldn't manage a file clerk the same way you would a research scientist, would you? Of course not; you would adjust your management practices to take into account the fact that these two people perform very different kinds of work. Therein lies the central point of this post: *Management practices must be adjusted to fit the kind of work being managed.*

The Mix of Work: “Canned” Procedures and “Crafted” Responses

All work falls into one of two categories: routine and non-routine. Routine work consists of activities that have been prefigured, that is, specified in advance. They are essentially “canned” procedures. Non-routine work consists of activities that are configured or “crafted” by the worker in response to the situation at hand. The work of most people consists of some mix of canned procedures and crafted responses; however, the distribution of work between the two can be markedly different from job to job. For example, the work of a food server in a fast food restaurant or an assembly line worker or that file clerk mentioned earlier is marked by a lot of canned procedures and is significantly different from the work of a design engineer, a software programmer or that research scientist mentioned earlier, which consists mostly of crafted responses.

The Mix of Work



The diagram above on the right illustrates the mix of work being discussed. On the left side of the diagram the bulk of the work consists of canned procedures. On the right side most of the work consists of crafted responses. These two kinds of work – *canned procedures* and *crafted responses* – pose very different management requirements and challenges.

There are four aspects to the requirements and challenges posed by these two kinds of working activities:

1. The main measure of performance.
2. The focus of control.
3. The location of control over working.

4. The role of the worker.

The appropriate management practice for these four dimensions takes a very different form depending on which of the two kinds of working activities is being managed. These are discussed next.

The Main Measure of Performance: Compliance or Results?

The main measure of worker performance when the work consists of canned procedures is compliance with or adherence to those procedures. But, by their very nature, crafted responses cannot rely on compliance as the chief measure of performance; instead of doing what someone else has figured out, the worker must figure out what to do. Consequently, the main measure of performance with respect to non-routine work or crafted responses is the extent to which required results are realized.

The Focus of Control: the Worker or the Work?

Because compliance with procedure is the chief measure of performance regarding routine working activities, the focus of control naturally centers on the worker. Control relies on supervisors ensuring that workers follow established procedures. But because compliance is neither feasible nor the aim with respect to crafted responses, the focus of control shifts from the worker to the work itself; more specifically, to the results required. The work of the manager shifts from ensuring compliance through supervision to supporting the attainment of results.

The Location of Control over Working Activity: Management or the Worker?

When compliance is the measure of performance and the focus of control is on the worker, the location of control over working activity rests with management, often with the direct supervisors of the workers in question. But because crafted responses are at the initiative of and under the control of the worker, the location of control over working activity shifts from management to the worker. This is a hard pill for some managers to swallow.

The Role of the Worker: Instrument or Agent?

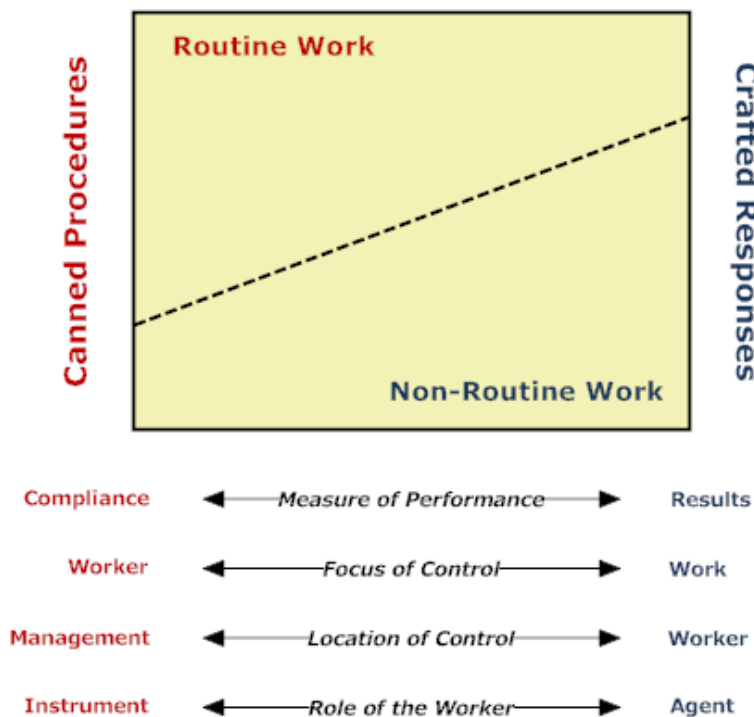
With respect to canned routines, the role of the worker is viewed as an instrument or extension of managerial will. This is because the chief measure of performance is compliance, the location of control rests with management, and the focus of control is the worker. With respect to crafted responses, the role of the worker shifts to one of being an agent acting on behalf of and in the best interests of the employer. This is because the main measure of performance is results, the focus of control is the work itself, in particular, results, and the locus of control rests with the worker.

Implications

Clearly, the two different kinds of work present very different challenges for management, not the least of which is figuring out how to fashion an approach to management that will accommodate both kinds of work.

Many current management practices have their origins in times when most of the work of most people consisted primarily of canned routines. Automation, mechanization, and the shift to knowledge work have changed all that. Many workers, if not the majority of them, are in jobs where the bulk of their working activities requires them to figure out what to do. Yet, the workers and not the work itself are still the main focus of control; management remains the location of control (even if only as an illusion) and management insists on exercising control over the workers in the mistaken belief that doing so will give them control over the work and its results; workers are still viewed as instruments of managerial will instead of as agents acting on their employer's behalf and in their employer's best interests; and, worst of all, managers still act as though they can demand and obtain compliance from people whose work demands of them that they craft their responses instead of carrying out canned routines. If ever there was a "disconnect," it is between management practices that rely on exacting compliance with canned procedures intended to produce uniform results under highly standardized conditions and work that requires workers to craft their responses so as to satisfy what are often varying expectations of results under widely varying conditions.

The Mix of Work



So what's to be done? It would be awkward and inconvenient not to mention impractical to expect managers to use one approach for canned procedures and another for crafted responses. Yet, it seems doubtful that using compliance-based approaches will work with people whose work requires them to craft their responses. Fortunately, the approach that works with crafted responses will also work with people who are expected to follow canned procedures. Only one management approach is required; unfortunately, it's not the one that is in place today. The challenge facing management is to overhaul its own practices, to shift from controlling people and exacting compliance to supporting people and eliciting contributions; to shift

from directing and demanding to supporting and enabling; to shift from viewing workers as instruments of managerial will to seeing them as agents acting on behalf of their employers; to focus not on the worker but on the work, in particular, on results.

The diagram above serves to recap and summarize the preceding discussion.

***About the Author:** My name is [Fred Nickols](mailto:fred@nickols.us). I am a writer, an independent consultant and a former executive. Visual aids of one kind or another have played a central role in my work for many years. My goals in writing for SmartDraw's Working Smarter blog are to: (1) provide you with some first-rate content you can't get anywhere else, (2) illustrate how important good visuals can be in communicating such content and (3) illustrate also the critical role visuals can play in solving the kinds of problems we encounter in the workplace. I encourage you to comment on my posts and to contact me directly if you want to pursue a more in-depth discussion. I can be reached via email at fred@nickols.us.*

