

Knowledge Worker

Collective Control

(October 2020)

A Quote from Drucker

Let's begin this month's column with a quote from the late Peter Drucker (1973):

"Finally, there is the knowledge worker, and especially the advanced knowledge worker. He has to be a 'knowledge professional' . . . This means that no one can motivate him. He has to motivate himself. No one can direct him. Above all, no one can supervise him. He is the guardian of his own standards, of his own performance, and of his own objectives. He can be productive only if he is responsible for his own job" (p. 279).

Autonomy, Self-Control & Collective Control

Drucker's writings about the transition from manual work to knowledge work and knowledge workers, beginning in 1959 and continuing to his death in 2005, steadfastly and unequivocally pointed to the need for self-management, for autonomy, for self-control. Owing in large measure to Drucker's commentary, but also to the writings of Douglas McGregor, there has for many years been a growing interest in what has variously been called "participative management," "self-governing teams," "hands-off management," "corporate democracy" and other terms suggesting an alternative to a tightly-controlled, hierarchically-structured, top-down authoritarian approach to managing the performance of people and organizations. In my view, the alternative is "collective control."

Perhaps the best-known instance of collective control is Brazilian Ricardo Semler's organization, SEMCO. Semler, famed for his hands-off style (and the tremendous success of SEMCO) and noted for his best-selling 1993 book, *Maverick*, is perhaps the chief advocate of the idea that people are most productive and happiest when they are able to control all aspects of their working life, including hiring their bosses, setting their own pay levels, and working the hours and times they want. Despite what many would term Semler's managerial heresy, his company has been an exemplar of sustainability, showing double-digit growth for 14 consecutive years¹ despite the complete absence of conventional management structures, offices, five-year plans, vision and values statements, and the other trappings of management as we know it.

Semler, a frequent guest lecturer at the Harvard Business School and MIT's Sloan Management School, is not optimistic that the notion of letting people run the show will spread throughout the world of work, organizations and management. He accounts for this pessimistic view by asserting that 80 percent of business people don't want to give up control and the other 20 percent doesn't believe that left to their own devices human beings will do their best.

¹ See "Ricardo Semler Won't Take Control" in **strategy+business**. © PwC 2005. Available on the web at <http://www.strategy-business.com/article/05408?gko=3291c>

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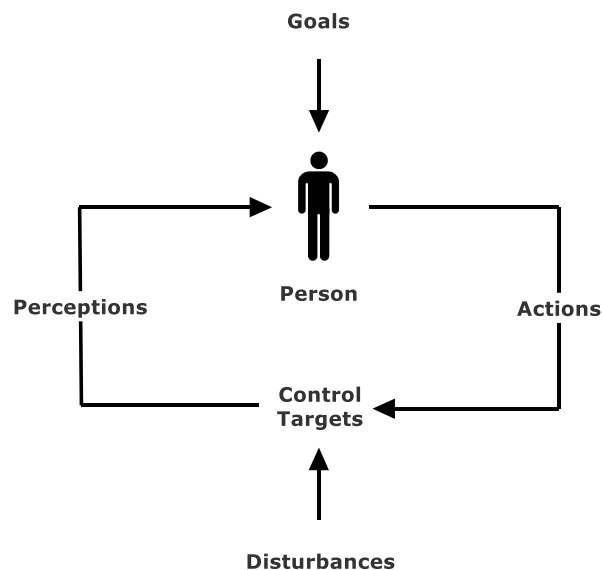
Clashing Perspectives

For the purposes of this month's column, I wish to focus on another factor lurking in all this: a fundamental clash between currently dominant views of human beings and a view of human beings that is consistent with collective control. For the most part, people are generally viewed as (1) stimulus-response organisms whose behavior, like that of Pavlov's dogs and Skinner's pigeons, can be controlled via schedules of rewards and punishment or (2) computer-like organisms whose brains perform calculations that produce commands governing their behavior. In both cases, management sees a clear path for controlling employee behavior: the first is conditioning and the second is programming, more charitably known as indoctrination. Neither of these views is compatible with collective control, self-management or corporate democracy. More important, neither is particularly or reliably effective.

People as "Living Control Systems"

To make self-management or corporate democracy work, to let people run things and for them to succeed at it, a different view of people is needed, a view that is conducive to and congruent with the notion of collective control. I think such a view exists. It is a view of people as "living control systems," as organisms that act on their environment to achieve their purposes. There is also a theory behind this view of people. It is known as Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) and it was developed and articulated by the late William T. Powers, initially in his 1973 book, *Behavior: The Control of Perception* and in a second edition published in 2005. The essence of the PCT view of human behavior is depicted in the diagram below:

A PCT View of Behavior



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The basics of the PCT view of people are simple enough:

- We have goals, aims, objectives, purposes, which is to say there are various aspects of the world around us that we want to be a certain way. There are things we want to achieve and things we want to preserve. There are also things we want to avoid and some we want to eliminate.
- Those aspects of the world around us that we want to be a certain way become the targets for our control efforts.
- Informed by our perceptions, we compare the way we want things to be with the way we perceive them to be and, if there are unacceptable discrepancies between the two, we act to close any gaps.
- There are also other actors and factors in the world about us and these can affect the very same things we are trying to control. In the terminology of PCT, these other actors and factors are known as “disturbances,” a term that refers to their ability to disrupt or disturb our efforts to control the things we want to control. For the most part, we succeed in compensating for them; however, on occasion they can overwhelm our best efforts.

In organizations, accomplishments typically involve the coordinated, cooperative, collaborative efforts of many people, individually and collectively. Conventional management practices try to accomplish this using some variation of command-and-control, top-down management, an approach that hinges on communicating management’s requirements and imposing management’s will. The problems encountered using this approach are too numerous to mention.

Given a PCT view of people and their behavior, it becomes immediately obvious that the only viable approach to collective accomplishment is collective control and it is collective control that accounts for SEMCO’s success. Establishing collective control – a corporate democracy – is exactly what Ricardo Semler did. Semler figured out how to harness “living control systems” in a coordinated, cooperative, collaborative manner. The results of doing so have been dramatic and, so far, no one has managed to replicate what he has done because of what was mentioned earlier – a fundamental clash between the currently dominant views of people and what it takes to establish collective control.

In closing, it is time to start viewing people as “living control systems” and to start working toward the widespread, collective control of work, organizations and their performance.

Reference

Drucker, P.F., *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (1973). Harper & Row: New York.

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About the Author

Fred Nickols is a toolmaker, a knowledge worker, a solution engineer, a writer, a consultant, and a former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His web site is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Workers' Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred writes this column on a monthly basis. All previous Knowledge Worker columns are accessible by clicking [here](#).