

Systems and Managers

Their growth threatens our welfare.



by Peter Block and John McKnight

THE EXPANDING DESIRE FOR UNIVERSAL education, the growing expectations of government support, the medicalization of health, and the dominance of the corporation as the driver and deliverer of *the good life*, creates the need for increasingly large institutions and systems, and the management to make them work.

Systems are designed to create *scale*. Scale requires *consistency, control* and *predictability* (as true for delivering services as it is for distributing products).

Management provides the structure required to produce consistency, control and predictability. *Management* is also a way of thinking about life, family, and community—that these can and need to be managed. As systems and their management occupy more cultural space, they expand the message that *prosperity and peace of mind can and must be purchased*. This fuels the growth of powerful systems.

A central task of management and systems is to *maintain control by taking uncertainty out of the future*. This is what is attractive about systems: they seem to make the world *safe, predictable, and under control*. In adopting system life, people choose to yield sovereignty in exchange for *the promise of predictability*. Even families and communities turn over their sovereignty for the promise of a safe and predictable future.

Control and predictability are also the promise of science and its action arm, engineering. They are about the language of standards, certification, solutions. All that is uncertain, organic, spontaneous, and flowing is viewed in management science to be a problem to be solved. Systems are built on the ability to reproduce the same thing *over and over*, whether services or goods. In the service professions, we give our desire for more of *the same*, certifiable standards. We take solace in that whatever they are producing or providing is *consistent*. Even customization has

been taken to scale—*mass customization*. It gives the illusion that *this is just for you*, even though the exact customized service or product is offered to millions.

While we benefit from a predictable product or service, it also takes the joy of diversity and variation out of our lives. *There is no reason to leave the country anymore*. Once a mall pops up, the world becomes more of the same.

Systems can't provide satisfaction in domains that require a unique and personal human solution. They can't provide satisfaction, prosperity, or peace of mind because of their very nature.

The consumer economy is sustained by providing *answers* that always have a *system quality*, because they offer *predictability*. Any time you speak of *answers*, you're making a false promise. *The more important dimensions of being human have no clear answer*. This means that *system answers are counterfeit*. Owning five pairs of shoes does not make a person successful. Owning the latest car does not provide an identity—that is *not who you are*. Love can't be purchased, power not bought. To sustain the volume and predictability that systems require, they are forced to market and sell more than they can deliver. And this *counterfeit promise* is not just to customers, but to system members—and this *dark side* leaves us unsatisfied. In system life, *we become the system that we inhabit*. We become replicable. We are interchangeable parts. It is the industrialization of the person.

A strength of systems and institutions is the ability to suppress the personal and commodify through replication. When something becomes personal, it becomes unique and unpredictable. *The need for the system to disdain what is personal has its side effects on who we become and how we associate*. Institutionalization is to *take the personal out of a structure in order to maintain continuity*. To *institutionalize* means to *depersonalize* (code for “We don't need the unique you any more.” The purpose of management is to create a world that is repeatable. But *no two people are the same*. Management's task then is to *overcome their uniqueness and help them align with what the system needs by*

insuring that every person is replaceable. They standardize work processes and automate human functions or outsource them to low-cost strangers.

Automated human functions affect relationships and our capacity to associate closely with others. There is no incentive for us to build relationships, because we are only here to produce together. In system life, we must betray what is unique and personal about us, that which is the sum and substance of what builds relationships. *What is most personal only lives in the world of family and community*. Systems and management believe that *personal relationships will distort what is good for the business*: “Don't get too close to people; you may have to fire them. Intimacy affects judgment.”

Systems are designed to make relationships instrumental—not affectionate, caring, or intimate—we are just here for the utility of being together. In our desire for the benefits of system life, *we commercialize our relationships*. We become only interested in a relationship as a form of barter. *We now sign up friends on social-networking sites*.

Systems do make an effort to compensate for their utilitarian nature. Progressive management often invests in *training and development* to bring human qualities into its culture. It uses training as a way of getting people *on board, aligned, on the same page, headed in the same direction*—to create more *community in its culture*, to put a human face on the system for its members and customers. Training gives the appearance of hospitality, kindness, and community. Yet, most system training is packaged to enforce the mindset that *what you are is not enough and someone else knows what is best for you*. Moreover, a system development program is not a path to freedom and self-expression but a process that *transforms unique people into the system way*.

This combination of *the system way of standardizing and the market way of promising* sustains the consumer economy and invades every aspect of our lives. *What we've done with our shoes, we've done with our soul, our consciousness and culture*. We have five pairs of shoes, four of which we don't need and none of which fit. Plus their discomfort creates demand for services: a chiropractor to adjust my body and a podiatrist to treat the pain. LE

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ACTION: Reevaluate your development program.