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Looking Back at Taylor

In the sections above on this website, we have referenced some ideas around Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Group Emotional Intelligence, and Social Intelligence. This time I'd like to go backward in time to an earlier topic.

For many years, I used to talk on the first day of our leadership programs about Frederick Winslow Taylor, the "father of Scientific Management". Taylor was an engineer who saw everything from the point of view of efficiency: the "one best way" to do things on the job. Taylorism (even sometimes written now with a small t) has become synonymous with, at best, time- and motion-studies and, at worst, with dehumanizing and robotizing the work force. You can read about Taylor in his 1911 book *Principles of Scientific Management*, or for a more palatable version see Robert Kanigel's biography, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency* (1997).

In my presentation of Taylor, I contrasted his ideas with those who followed and who had a more "humanistic" approach, much kinder to HR practice and to leadership development. But much of his philosophy has survived this contrast, and even thrived over the years – such contemporary business practices as total quality management, benchmarking, systematic employee selection, and even performance appraisal are still a part of the taylorist landscape. Recently I've begun to wonder if he didn't get some things very right after all.

Through his emphasis on efficiency, Taylor advocated higher wages and shorter hours for workers. And for decades the average number of working hours per week dropped for the average American. However, today we are seeing the reverse, particularly for managers and executives: the number of work hours has increased significantly for many of us, and the average American work week is up 3 full days since 1990. Today the new mantra is "24 – 7". What could be more dehumanizing than this trend? Whatever happened to the 4-day work week predicted in the 1970s?

So the argument comes full circle: we're now back to a taylorist emphasis on efficiency and productivity – how to get more out of the time available to ourselves. In 1993, Juliet Schor wrote a book called *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, predicting the reversal of the historical process of work reduction, foreshadowing a loss of free time in America.

Actually, a battle of sorts for leisure time had already been waged and lost. One of our good customers is the W.W. Kellogg Co., headquartered in Battle Creek, MI (no pun intended). As early as 1930, Dr. Kellogg reduced the work day to 6 hours, and his workers, many of them women, rejoiced in the extra 2 hours and the additional meaning and purpose they could put into their lives during this free time. (For details on this plan, see Benjamin Hunnicutt's *Kellogg's Six-Hour Day* (1996).)

All this began to come unraveled after World War II, when the U.S. was caught up in a growing frenzy of mass production and consumption. Taylorism came back in an upward spiral of increased productivity and higher wages. Finally, the battle at Battle Creek ended when the company threatened to move elsewhere unless workers returned to 8-hour shifts.

When begun in 1973, the Leadership Development Program which we ran with the Center for Creative Leadership was a 2-week program, and people actually took 14 days off work to become better leaders. Can you imagine that today? Nowadays it is extremely difficult to convince executives that they can take even 5 days off from the workplace, and even harder during the program to keep their cell phones on off. Hunnicutt's book concludes ominously: "Now the dominion of work stands virtually unchallenged and seemingly impregnable..." During of our recent leadership programs, more and more executives cite the increasing challenge of balance in their lives, as work responsibilities continue to shoot upwards for them.

The ultimate Taylorist irony: Kellogg Co., once the champion of more leisure time for its workers, now produces cereal bars for people too busy to add milk to their own breakfast bowls.

What's new is old, what's old is new. Welcome back to center stage, Frederick Winslow...