

The McDonaldisation of management

Processes are all very well but without original thought accompanying them they are useless, says Dr Leandro Herrero

It is 7am at the front desk of an exclusive hotel in the US. She is tall, wearing a name badge, immaculately dressed, extremely polite, and, fundamentally, very unlucky to have me in front of her. I am an angry customer checking out after a three-day stay when everything that could go wrong went wrong. The shower went from volcanic to polar temperatures with no warning, room service took an average of 70 minutes, the housekeeper thought that the room was empty and stormed in during my post-jetlag early bedtime, the TV screen told me I would be charged for movies that I had not watched, one of the telephones in the room did not work, and next door neighbours had a 24-hour party which the thin walls broadcast to the world. And the price of the room was astronomical.

I looked in her eyes and described the litany of problems, frustrations and near-suicidal feelings. I was furious. I looked and sounded furious. She

took some notes on a little yellow pad while nodding at my list of problems. She even looked sympathetic for a fraction of a second.

"Obviously, sir, I will let the manager know."

OK, great! Then she hands me the bill.

"Did you have a good stay, sir?"

I couldn't believe it at first, but it was something in her automatic pilot look that gave me the clue. The handing out of the bill must come, I thought, in their automatic pilot Customer Happiness, Care and Services Training sort of way together with a "did you have a good day, sir". The fact that the customer has just given an apocalyptic account of the hotel does not figure in the manual.

"No, I didn't have a good stay, as a matter of fact, I have just explained to you for the last ten minutes that I've been on the verge of a nervous breakdown and those sort of states usually are mutually exclusive with a good stay."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir. Next time we will make sure that things are better."

"There isn't a next time, my friend."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, forget it."

Then she looks puzzled. I have the bill in my hands and haven't put it away or gone yet. I am in the process of exhibiting the strangest of behaviours, apparently, that is, reading it.

"OK, all set," she sort of insists.

"No, it's not all set," I pronounce with a heavy accent on the 'all'.

"May I read it and see if I agree?"

"Yes, sure, but it's all on your American Express already."

"Tell me, is it common practice here to ignore the content of bills?"

"No sir, of course sir, you are welcome to do it... but usually people here come on business."

I'll spare you my comments on the incredible inference that people in business are not expected to care about bills; they are all expenses after all and usually somebody else's money.

That lady at the front desk had a very precise mental (and physical) algorithm on what to do and what to say. It was all in the training manual, I suppose, and in some sort of Standard Operating Procedure where deviations are not allowed, judgement not needed. A robot from Silicon Valley could have done a similar or even better job.

Management can be very similar to front desks at 7am in exclusive business hotels. In some organisations things must happen in a standard way and deviations are a sin. Many managers are trapped in semi-religious attitudes towards 'the process'.

A 'process' is a pathway that usually takes you to places. The more people follow that particular path, the higher the probability of reaching that particular destination. When the process is king, no spontaneous efforts are needed to reach the destination – this is why we have a process, we say. But the process runs the risk of creating an automatic pilot culture where people don't question things any more and where work has been 'McDonaldised'.

McDonaldisation of work has been described as a way of ensuring consistency and continuity well outside the fast food industry. How many times do we use the word 'consistency' in our daily management? Probably as many as we use the word 'objective'. When was the last time you wanted to hire a manager who was inconsistent and subjective (yes, like your teenager daughter)?

Many management practices in organisations are there as a given, unquestioned, as part of a supposed 'body of good practice'. The problem with semi-obsessive process-driven organisation is that progressively it generates less and less need for

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Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

McDonaldised managers do their thinking 'within the box'.

judgement. Total McDonaldisation equals end of judgement. It works for McDonalds.

If in doubt, next time you take your kids there try to ask for a 'medium rare' for you and a 'rare' for them, two kinds of fries, overcooked and normal, double-size bread for you and to swap the inclusive soft drink for another liquid. They'll call the men in white coats.

Judgement is in short supply. It requires exercise of the cortex in the brain. McDonaldised management is mainly under paleoencephalic, subcortical control. Management spends an enormous amount of time creating, designing, redesigning and changing processes. It's all a matter of having lots of well-defined pipes connected to each other to push things through. Managers who believe that management is basically a plumbing system will make sure that the right things (ideas, money, time, products, molecules, memos, checklists and teleconferences) enter the system through the right input pipe. Then they'll go home and back several times until at some point things start to appear at the end. Helas, here it comes: the project team minutes, the new hires, the amended SOP or the decision to proceed (to the next set of pipes).

Henry Ford epitomised the McDonaldised manager when he wondered, "why is it that each time I ask for a pair of hands, they come attached to a brain?" He also produced the famous "you can have any colour of car you want as long as it's black".

It would be easy to see the caricature in all this, the surface, the tip of the iceberg in these lines, and pretend that I am praising a lack of processes. Far from it. We need processes, and, dare I say, strong and solid ones. But they have to come with an equal dose of judgement, sometimes based on values and beliefs, that may force you to bypass the process. We are rich in pipes and poor in new ideas to flow through them. We can create enormous, fabulous, pristine and elegant plumbing sys-

tems that may push rubbish through. Add to that process a 'time to market programme' and you will deliver rubbish faster. Not bad. And sad.

Management needs to be aware of the potential danger of McDonaldisation of work itself and management practices in general. There are no esoteric tricks here to fix it. Ask yourself as many times as you can the most important management question: "what is the question we are trying to answer" and its equivalent: "why are we doing this?" "is this the only way?" "what are the alternatives?" Kids go through a period of personal development when they ask 'why' every other second. Management could do with some regression to childhood.

Supermarket checkout at 4.30pm. I have reached the checkout with the same pride as a climber planting the flag on the summit. I carry about 100 items in a basket designed to hold half a dozen little packets. I look overwhelmed, exhausted and am praying for a magic trick that will automatically allocate my groceries and the rest to the right plastic bags. I have bought more things that I can carry.

"Will that be all, sir?"

I thought of the girl at the front desk in the US hotel. Somewhere in her subcortical system, the word 'bill' (or was it the noise of the printer) triggered the 'did-you-have-a-nice-stay' thing.

"No, it's not all, I just happen to be in the checkout proximity and thought, hey, let's unload the stuff in bits and pieces; I am going to leave all this here with you, I promise I'll be back. Tell the other 20 in the queue to wait."

I did not say that of course. I behaved myself. I am getting increasingly intolerant of automatic behaviours. The supermarket assistant would ask the same question of everybody regardless of the number of items, size of the basket, or any other variable. There is something somewhere in the SOP part of the brain that makes people in supermarket checkouts ask that question. Invariably, 100 out of 100 customers say, "yes, that's all" (at least in my random sample experimental conditions).

Next week, same time, same place, same assistant. Before he could say a word, I said "That's all today". He looked at me. "Funny you should say that! I was going to ask you."

My natural inquisitive nature, or my frustrated anthropologist within, led me to ask the question: "Why do you all say this all the time?"

"You'd be surprised, sir, some customers ask for a pack of cigarettes once we've finished the transaction, that's why we ask if they're sure that it will be all, you see?"

"But, you don't sell cigarettes here at this checkout!"

"You have a point, sir, you have a point." 

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