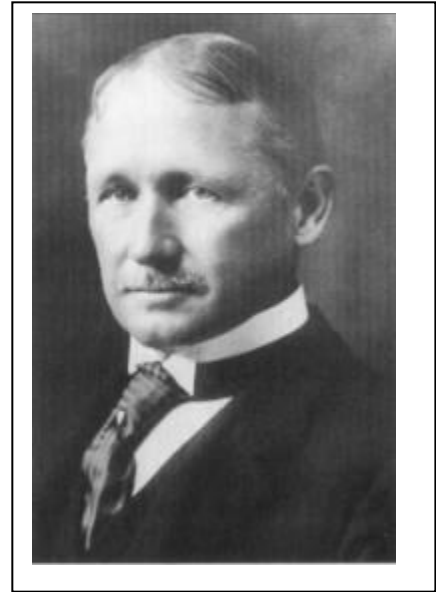


## Mitchell's Musings 6-9-14: Tinkering with Taylor

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In the early 1990s, soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a group of Russian factory managers from the chemical industry came to the UCLA Anderson School of Management for lessons in western business practices. They were managers of state-owned companies in the chemical sector and had been in that role for some time. So they were raised and trained under the former communist system but were now beginning to face the problems of operating in markets.

Back in those days, we still used overhead transparency projectors and I put a slide on the screen with the face of the man you see in the photo, but without his name. Interestingly, they seemed all to know who he was, just from the nameless photo. In fact, they all had a title for him. It was something like "the father of scientific production."



*You* might not recognize American efficiency expert Frederick W. Taylor just from his photo above. But *they* did. Under communist/Marxist theory, history – if left to its own devices – would evolve from capitalism to socialism to "pure" communism inevitably. But once understood the process could be speeded up according to the doctrines of Soviet communists. Capitalism would develop major scientific advances but would inexorably collapse from various "contradictions." Thus, after the Russian revolution which was intended to speed up history, the place to look for modern production techniques was in the capitalist world. In the 1920s in particular, ideas and technologies from western countries were sought. Taylorism from the U.S. was one of those imports.

Taylor's theory of "scientific management" fit into the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' awe of the wonders of modern science. Such innovations as the telephone, the light bulb, the phonograph, and the airplane were appearing. The question became whether "science" – a word back then which had all the positive connotations of "technology" today – could be applied to human endeavors. Management of firms could not be left to amateur trial-and-error learning on the job. The best way of managing should be studied and learned. Of course, business schools began to develop in that era.

Similarly, cities should not be allowed just to develop. Urban planning should be studied and taught. Crime control should be in the hands of trained criminologists. School curriculums should be divided into age-related grades and a central authority of education experts should determine what should be appropriately taught in each grade. Government itself should be run by non-partisan experts – city managers - not politicians who were amateurs and potentially corrupt. City managers could be trained

and put in charge. Ultimately, higher education was the beneficiary of such “progressive” thinking as programs and degrees were established to teach what was once learned on the job.<sup>1</sup>

Taylorism – essentially a kind of industrial engineering typically linked to time-and-motion studies – tended to be derided later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as inhumane and as treating workers as cogs in a machine. But if you stand back look at what its essence was, Taylorism amounted to developing systems of required behaviors. As such, virtually all organizations of any size today are Tayloristic. Work is assigned; measurements of performance are developed, etc. In its strict form, Taylorism was very hierarchical along a command-and-control model. Nowadays, however, employees might be given more discretion than under the original Taylor model. We **tinker with Taylor’s approach** and soften its edges. But Taylorism is still very much with us even if – unlike those Soviet executives – most managers today would not know who Taylor was - much less be able to identify him from a photograph.<sup>2</sup>

At one time, Taylorism was seen as a doctrine of management in factory settings. Henry Ford’s system of management and control was often seen as an outgrowth of Taylorism with the addition of assembly lines.<sup>3</sup> Ford Motor Company came to be seen by the 1920s as the world’s most advanced manufacturing firm and was emulated – not just in the nascent Soviet Union – but in other countries as well.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Taylorism spread outside manufacturing. I can recall my mother – a social worker who had earned an MSW – describe coursework she took as part of her degree in the late 1940s on management of a social work agency. Taylorism was alive and well at that time, both inside and outside the factory setting.

But you don’t have to look backwards in time to see Taylorism at work in the general sense of application of systems and standards. I had an “opportunity” recently to reflect on all of this after three hospitalizations to deal with a heart defect and then various complications. When you are in a hospital, you don’t have much to do. But you soon realize that you are the object of many systems that can be seen as modified Taylorism. At the lowest level, there were workers who entered the room on a regular basis to empty trash and clean the floors. It was a clockwork system with a schedule and a quota of tasks to be accomplished. But nurses had standardized routines, too. Procedures were set forth and followed including such simple steps as hand washing and the use of rubber gloves. And there were definite hierarchies within nursing and among the physicians.

The use of systems today seems so natural that it may seem odd to attribute their use to anyone in particular. Surely, these things just happen naturally. Of course, there were systems before Taylor came along. Ideas rarely start from just one person. Still, the spread of ideas is often linked to particular persons. Doing what appears to come naturally in organizations, if you want to put a name on it, is more linked to Taylor than to anyone else.

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<sup>1</sup> Such thinking led some progressives to be attracted by pseudo-science such as eugenics.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slfFJXVAepE>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvbG9Sjp97o> and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFsBCO\\_Uglg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFsBCO_Uglg).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnEJvuvfBQo>.