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The Moral Life of Cubicles

The Utopian Origins of Dilbert's Workspace

Few arenas can match the business office for its combination of humdrummery and world-shaping influence. Sociologist C. Wright Mills wrote of office workers, "Whatever history they have had is a history without events." The history of office technology seems especially uninspiring: the invention of double-entry bookkeeping, calculators, and spreadsheets are unlikely material for a captivating History Channel feature, to be sure. Yet the importance of the business office and its techniques is undeniable. Max Weber saw the office's methods of organization, its rationality, and its disciplines as hallmarks of modern capitalism, making possible dramatic gains in efficiency and forever altering the economic and cultural landscape. Perhaps even more significant in our time, when millions of American workers spend most of their waking day in an office, is the sense that the organizational technologies of office life provide a kind of moral education, that offices shape character, that they create a certain kind of person. And perhaps no aspect of today's office is more symbolic of office life and office lives than the cubicle.

Mills, in his 1951 attack on corporate bureaucracy, *White Collar*, imagined each office as "a segment of the enormous file." Honeycombed floors of skyscrapers organized the "billion slips of paper that gear modern society into its daily shape." Mills's book was soon joined by *The Organization Man* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* in the decade's series of attempts to assess the damage office life inflicted upon the worker. The composite picture that emerged was of a character driven by petty desires: for a slightly bigger office at work, a slightly bigger yard at home, and modest respectability everywhere. The man of the office was a middling figure without passion or creativity. These images of the office and its inhabitants were joined in the 1960s and 1970s with the counterculture's critique of the stifling bureaucracies of the state, the corporation, the university. Standing on the steps of Berkeley's Sproul Hall, Free Speech Movement leader Mario Savio echoed Mills's condemnation of the great bureaucratic filing machine, now symbolized by IBM punch cards, and suggested to his fellow protesters that they put their "bodies on the gears and wheels" to stop it.

For many, this soullessness of office life is now most aptly represented by the cubicle—that open, wall-less, subdivision of office space. Beginning in the late 1960s, the cubicle spread quickly across the white-collar landscape. A market research firm estimated that by 1974 cubicles accounted for 20 percent of new office-furniture expenditures. In 1980, another study showed that half of new office furniture was placed in cubicled offices. According to Steelcase, one of the largest cubicle manufacturers,

nearly 70 percent of office work now happens in cubicles.

The rise of the cubicle is surely due in part to its economics. Partitions are simply a very efficient way of organizing office space. Construction for cubicle offices is standard and cheap, made and assembled in large quantities and with minimal skilled labor. The building shell, lighting, and air conditioning can be set up with little consideration of interior walls, allowing contractors to build economical big white boxes to be filled in later with "office furniture systems." Perhaps most importantly, cubicles maximize floor space, granting workers only the necessary square footage—a number that is shrinking all the time. According to brokerage surveys cited in *National Real Estate Investor*, the average office space per worker in the United States dropped from 250 square feet in 2000 to 190 square feet in 2005. Some observers expect this number to drop another 20 percent by 2010. This shrinkage not only saves space, but time as well—time wasted walking to restrooms, the coffee pot, and the marketing department, for example. Supervision is made more efficient too: with no walls to hide behind, slackers have to work or at least to *imitate* work in a convincing way.

The cubicle is the very essence of efficiency—the kind of office only a spreadsheet could love, one is tempted to say. But not quite: alongside the economic arguments that brought the cubicle into ascendancy, there were also moral arguments. Offices in the 1970s and 1980s seemed to their critics burdensome remnants of an older age, symbolic shackles of bureaucracy—a system as inhuman as it was ineffective. Cubicles, by contrast, seemed to lack the fixity, and the constraints of bureaucracy of the old office. Moreover, cubicles eliminated the hierarchical distinctions between managers and workers; every cubicle had an open door, everyone was equally a worker. Empowering and humane, cubicles seemed to create a workplace with a soul.

The cubicle has its roots in the cybernetic school of thought that arose in the middle of the last century. The meaning of "cybernetics" has largely been swept up in the exuberant imagery of movies and commercials with their glowing rivers of ones and zeros flowing through the air. However, cybernetics has an older and deeper history, predating both the personal computer and the cubicle. Fred Turner's recent book, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, shows how the cybernetic idea of seeing the world in terms of information flows grew out of government-sponsored World War II military research and into the information technology industry of Silicon Valley. In the 1960s and 1970s, cybernetic ideas brought groups of military-funded computer researchers together with Deadheads, radical environmentalists, and art communards in the San Francisco Bay area. This collection of long-haired eccentrics began to think of everything from bee behavior to dance parties to computer programming as information processes. In doing so, they liberated the images

of information and the computer from the clutches of the military-industrial complex, joining them instead to a new cybernetic-counterculture vision of egalitarianism, communal networks, and democratic "people power."

Architecture textbooks and journals in the 1960s and 1970s began to talk about a new "cybernetic" idea of the office. Starting with the assumption that offices were fundamentally places for the exchange of information, advocates of the cybernetic office aimed to eliminate walls that stop the "free flow of ideas," replacing them with cubicle workstations. If the pictures in cubicle advertisements of the time are any indication, cubicles helped ideas flow quite freely indeed. Employees in these ads lack computers, to say nothing of e-mail and the Internet, yet they always seem caught in moments of frenzied, often low-tech, information exchange: pointing to each other across the room, handing papers over and around the burnt orange ("aesthetically pleasing and humanly satisfying") partitions, all while talking on the phone and jotting down notes.

As California computer companies grew into large businesses, then, cubicles were their natural office form. It was through these companies that cubicles first entered the public imagination. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, business sections of newspapers and magazines described the radical work arrangements of Silicon Valley with curiosity and often breathless enthusiasm. Intel served as the chief example of the creative and egalitarian cubicle workplace. The company had no time cards, no dress codes, no assigned parking spots, no special cafeterias for executives, and above all, no offices, just a sea of half-wall partitions. The long, low buildings of Intel were fields of shared labor, like the communal farms that had so recently dotted the hills around Intel's campus. CEO Andrew Grove, hip and casual in an open-necked wide-collar shirt and gold chains, was an unpretentious man of the people. He moved among the workers of Intel "empowering" them to do their jobs, and sat at a cubicle at one side of the vast work floor ready to help. Most incredible of all (and unlike the communal farms) this social experiment was economically viable. In a time when the great industrial giants were falling to Japanese competition, Intel was making money hand over fist. For some observers of American business, the Intel office model seemed like a savior. In *The Atlantic*, James Fallows asked the question on the minds of so many who dared to hope for the future of American industry, "Could the tire companies, the machine tool makers, the color TV industry, learn to work this way?"

This taste for fluid, egalitarian organization was elevated to a general philosophy by a new group of popular management writers. In the early 1980s, precisely at the moment of the cubicle's introduction to the mainstream of American culture, management consultants, business professors, and CEOs all found a public hungry for management wisdom. Publishers

and bookstores quickly seized upon this new market and suddenly management books, previously relegated to obscurity as business school texts, joined diet manuals and self-help books as best-sellers. *The Art of Japanese Management* and *Theory Z* (also about the art of Japanese management) were bestsellers in 1981, followed closely by *In Search of Excellence*, which argued that some Americans were still pretty good managers. These books and those that followed instructed Americans in the subtleties of international business, quality control, and other practical matters. More than this, however, they declared the beginning of a new era in which bureaucratic hierarchy would be obsolete and equality, creativity, and collaboration would rule the day. Separate offices, like formal business attire and human resources departments, were suffused with the musty smell of the old bureaucratic order—what one book called "the barnacle" of the status quo. The new office, with its minimal architectural and bureaucratic structure, would allow for new ideas to move more quickly and naturally through the company. Work would not be guided by policies and procedures, but the "shared values" of a "corporate culture." One popular book even suggested a future of "boss-less companies" ruled only by a cultural canopy of shared understanding and inspiration. Tom Peters was the most prominent voice of this group, calling throughout the 1980s and 1990s for a "management revolution" and advocating such "anti-bureaucratic" management techniques as "management by walking around," systematically "defying rules and regulations" and eliminating the barriers between departments. Peters suggested breaking down the figurative and literal walls between departments to encourage "disruptive innovation." This kind of management thinking drew its lessons from the California technology boom and placed expectations of workplace equality in the idiom of the counterculture and political radicalism. Peters even wrote a book called *Liberation Management.*

But the moral philosophy of cubicle life was not limited to the sushi-and-Zen crowd of Northern California. Max De Pree, one of the most important figures of both the cubicle revolution and its theories of management, hails from a place far from California in almost every possible way. The little community of Zeeland, Michigan is home to the Herman Miller office furniture company, about 5,000 people, and more than a dozen Dutch Reformed churches. De Pree spent most of his career as an executive at Herman Miller, the company his father founded. Under the leadership of Max and his brother Hugh, Herman Miller sold the first office cubicle, the Action Office, in 1968. De Pree remained active in the cubicle revolution, overseeing various elaborations and improvements on the original design, including snap-in colored panels and new openings for aquariums and ant farms, until he retired from his position as CEO in 1987.

While most of the company's

employees worked in factories rather than offices, De Pree wanted to make Herman Miller an example of the kind of fun, egalitarian workplace that cubicle systems were supposed to encourage. The walls and ceilings of Herman Miller factories were decorated with colorful, life-size papier-mâché sculptures of workers. Employees were encouraged to find ways to use their "gifts" at work. One supervisor wrote poems for the factory newsletter, which were later printed on signs around the factory. De Pree dreamed of a time when the joys of work and the company spirit would make supervision itself unnecessary: "When they go home at night, they don't actually need a supervisor to tell them how to be a good parent. And being a good parent is a lot tougher than making chairs." If the California version of equality and freedom at work took its inspiration from communal farms and the remnants of hippie spirituality, De Pree's version was straight Midwestern Protestantism. A member of the Reformed Church in America, De Pree told a reporter in 1986, "Each of us is made in the image of God. And if that's true, then you cannot make the assumption that some of us are uncommon, and some of us are common.... We are all uncommon." This "uncommonness" had two important implications for De Pree. First, it implied a fundamental equality. Second, it meant that individuals are different and must be handled with sensitivity and discernment. Both of these themes would be important in De Pree's writings.

De Pree achieved a great deal more fame in his second career of leadership writer, speaker, and consultant than he did as an executive. His books, *Leadership is an Art*, *Leadership Jazz*, and *Leading Without Power*, have all sold well and made his name synonymous with "servant leadership" in business and leadership circles. While his writings do not suggest eliminating the category of leadership entirely, he does ask leaders to take a rather self-effacing view of their role. "Leadership is a posture of debt; it is a forfeiture of rights." What leaders owe their followers is the opportunity "to fulfill their potential." Organizational life, for De Pree, is a profoundly personal, even spiritual enterprise of self-improvement. He takes "finding voice" and connecting "voice and touch" to be central managerial tasks. De Pree's description of a good leader is a humble, gentle soul who is "vulnerable," "discerning," and "aware of the human spirit."

Those with moral aspirations for the cubicle—from countercultural Californians like Tom Peters to Midwestern Protestants like Max De Pree—sought to defend some idea of "humanity" against the inhumanity of bureaucracy. Yet, to say that bureaucracy is inhuman has not always been an objection to it. As defined by Max Weber a century ago, bureaucracy makes its great contribution to the world precisely by ignoring the human spirit. Operating according to fixed rules, policies, and positions, bureaucracy in its purest form functions, as Weber wrote, "without regard for persons." As

bureaucracy "develops more perfectly, the more the bureaucracy is 'dehumanized,' the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation." The central impulse of bureaucracy is to fashion a world in conformity to the impersonal abstraction and precise relationships of an organizational chart.

Peters and the Californians saw bureaucracy imposing arbitrary restrictions on the natural flow of creativity and information. Separate offices encouraged self-importance and unproductive groveling before the lordly egos of bosses. They created insular silos of knowledge and turf battles between them. Paperwork gummed up tasks that would better be handled with a little common sense and informal conversation. Good ideas were stalled in the system of procedures. In short, bureaucracy hindered human agency. For De Pree, the inadequacies of bureaucracy lay in its effort to cordon off into the private sphere both the emotion and the practice of unique "gifts." Genuine leadership, for De Pree, is inescapably emotional and personal. Leadership involves nothing less than helping people become who they were meant to be. Such a task could not rest on impersonal procedures and systems alone.

While these humanistic sentiments remain common in writing about management and leadership, the cubicle has been detached from them entirely. In *Dilbert*, *The Office*, *Office Space*, and many other popular satires of contemporary work, cubicles are a symbol of all that is uninspiring about office life, and on this point, cubicles seem utterly without defenders. *Fortune* recently ran an article called "Cubicles: The Great Mistake," complete with a public apology from one of the first cubicle designers. Twenty years after his *Atlantic* article extolling the virtues of the cubicled office, James Fallows wrote another on how he changed his mind. The promises of a cubicle utopia now seem curious, to say the least. In fact, the companies that make cubicles increasingly offer up apologies of their own. Steelcase, in its "State of the Cubicle" report, addresses the "Dilbert-type issues" that surround them, turning to head of design James Ludwig for a response. "Our goal in design would be to unfold the cubicle in ways that might make it unrecognizable." The cubicle, once a cutting edge statement of corporate identity, has become an embarrassment, even for its makers.

What explains this change in meaning? Cubicle utopianism was probably a victim of its own success. The idea that cubicles formed a more exciting, humane workplace became less plausible to those who had the experience of working in one. As partitions and the space allotted to each worker shrunk, few things seemed to matter to office dwellers more than privacy. From the very beginning, workers reacted to cubicles by blocking up the openings of the "open office." Newspaper reports of early cubicle offices tell of

employees raiding supply closets for cardboard and extra panels to extend partitions. Some workers went so far as to push large filing cabinets into the space created by their cubicle's missing fourth wall. While the beige rat-maze aesthetics of partition living attract all the jokes, the basic geometric facts of cubicles—their doorlessness and 360-degree visibility—are probably more central to the experience of cubicle work. Private conversations, whether in person or by phone, take on the character of an intrigue, a fact exploited endlessly in office sitcoms where ordinarily private matters of romance, betrayal, and personal failure are made public in the open office to the dismay of those involved. In an odd twist, privacy often requires venturing out into some more *public* space, one that is either anonymous (like a sidewalk) or relatively soundproof (like a central conference room).

The utopian visions of the cubicle have been crushed by reality. However, while the cubicled office no longer seems brave or new, an aspect of its original moral impulse remains. Indeed, the experiential facts of cubicle life are not so much in contradiction with the ambition to humanize the office as the revelation of the dark side of this effort. The ideals of office equality, fluidity, and collaboration in all their forms—including servant leadership, worker empowerment, and flattened organizations—required a kind of control more diffuse and amorphous, but also more personal than the old hierarchical bureaucracy. As Tom Peters and the other management theorists of "corporate culture" saw (albeit in a more positive light) the real managerial possibility contained in the cubicle was not lower costs or even the ability of managers to watch workers more closely. It was rather the creation of a culture in which workers would feel obliged to manage themselves. With everyone visible to everyone else, managerial obligation could spread itself throughout the entire office, becoming more personal and intense at the same time. Cubicles are not alone in this trend. The advent of 360-degree evaluations (filled out by those above, below, and beside an employee in the organizational hierarchy), the creation of company mission statements followed inevitably (and sometimes preceded) by facilitator-led meetings designed to get "buy-in," and corporate campuses (which, by containing everything from grocery stores to fitness clubs eliminate reasons to leave), all tend to blur distinctions between personal and professional.

The ideal of the cultural workplace and its embodiment in cubicles also moves against another longstanding distinction of office work—the distinction between managers and workers. The ideal of a boss-less company has not been realized on anything like the large scale the management writers dreamed of, if it has in fact been realized anywhere. However, the impulse to equality and management through culture has led to something like the opposite of the boss-less company with bosses everywhere. As the managerial

role is increasingly shorn of "authoritarian" tendencies and managers adopt the stance of a servant and facilitator, the scope of demands upon ordinary workers has risen. Observation, evaluation, encouraging the proper attitude and habits in other employees—these are all managerial tasks that are supposed to be shared. Such is the nature of being a team member. Cubicles may not be inspiring, but they have clearly contributed to new obligations.

These obligations go beyond the management of work to the management of self. The teamwork and collaboration of the open office elevate the importance of relational dexterity and a sunny (but not *too* sunny) disposition at work. Books promising work success through "emotional intelligence" and pharmaceutical advertisements portraying the difficulties faced by office workers with anxiety and attention disorders are both responding to the emotional demands of a work environment that puts a premium on self-presentation.

It would, in a way, be comforting if the rise of cubicles were simply the result of a bad decision to grant spreadsheets and their budgeteer masters imperial dominion over office space, but that's just not how it happened. The cubicle revolution, in fact, was above all ideological. The clichés hurled at cubicles were woven into their sound-dampening fabric board from the beginning. Any discerning criticism of office life will have to take this moral history into account. Indeed, it is precisely the axioms of what makes for a good company and a good person buried within the cubicle that most need to be uncovered and held to critical attention.

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