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Face Time, Extrinsic Measures, and Contract Feudalism

Kevin Carson

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Atrios quotes Kevin Drum on Europeans' differing cultural attitudes toward work. Among other things, he warns the prospective American traveller:

Don't brag to other people about how hard you work. If you go up to someone in Europe and say "I work 10 hours a day, six days a week, 51 weeks a year. Look how much I achieve!" you'll get the same reaction you would in America if you said "I wash my hands exactly 169 times a day. Look how clean they are! Look! Look!!!"

Some of it may simply be more lax cultural attitudes. But some of the difference is an American tendency to create busy-work for the sake of maintaining the appearance of busyness, when nothing really needs to be done.

Don't expect anything to get done in August, don't expect a response to your email the same

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day. If you really need to get in touch with someone while they are on vacation, or on the weekend, you won't be able to. Which means not that they are being irresponsible. It means you don't really need to get in touch with them.

Atrios expands on this last theme:

During my summers doing temp office work I was always astounded by the culture of “face time” — the need to be at your desk early and stay late even when there was no work to be done and doing so in no way furthered and company goals. Doing your work and doing it adequately was entirely secondary to looking like you were working hard as demonstrated by your desire to stay at work longer than strictly necessary.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the growth of centralized hierarchies to the point that those running them have little understanding of the work being done, and no reliable way to measure the effectiveness of those doing it. As one commenter on this thread remarks,

If you are a manager who is too stupid to figure out that what you should actually measure is real output then the next best thing is to measure how much time people spend pretending to produce that output. Of course you really should know what the output you should measure really consists of. If you don't know that then you are sort of forced into using the time spent measurement.

I quoted Paul Goodman to similar effect in a recent post “On the Irrationality of Large Organizations.”

In my opinion, the salient cause of ineptitude in promotion and in all hiring practices is that, under centralized conditions, fewer and fewer know what is a good job of work. The appearance of competence may count for more than the reality, and it is a lifework to manufacture appearance or, more usually, to adapt to the common expectation. Just as there is reliance on extrinsic motives, there is heavy reliance on extrinsic earmarks of competence: testing, profiles, publications, hearsay among wives, flashy curricula vitae. Yet there is no alternative method of selection. In decentralized conditions, where a man knows what goes on and engages in the whole enterprise, an applicant can present a masterpiece for examination and he has functional peers who can decide whether they want him in the guild...

Now Dr. Chris Tame of the Libertarian Alliance, in a post to the LA's yahoogroup, passes along this brilliant quote from Dennis May:

I have noticed with increasing frequency — from direct experience and from contact with other companies — that common sense is going out the window in favor of easily quantifiable cost savings masking difficult to quantify losses. It amounts to cost shifting and hiding losses while claiming a savings. This has become more common as bean counters with no manufacturing knowledge or experience implement incorrect approaches to cost savings. The feedback process to correct the problem involves too much effort because the obvious losses are difficult to quantify and those in a position to point out the errors will not be

rewarded for informing their superiors of the error they have committed.

The reward mechanism for bean counters is disconnected from actual useful measures of savings.

Has anyone else seen this problem growing by leaps and bounds?

I suspect there's still more behind the "face time" issue besides the reasons we've already addressed, though. Besides being a reflection of the irrationality that comes with large size, it also probably has something to do with contract feudalism. The workplace atmosphere of the past thirty years is one of production-worker downsizing, speedups, stagnant real wages, and increasing stress; as a result, the average job is also the scene of increasing disgruntlement, and all sorts of expanding profiling and monitoring systems to keep the disgruntled workforce under internal surveillance.

Management labors under a paranoia similar in kind, if not in degree, to that of the planters of the deep South before the Civil War. The average planter family was surrounded not only by field-slaves, but by household slaves who were present throughout their daily routines, and silent witnesses to conversations and to all the other details of family life. To cope with this state of affairs, the planter class had to manufacture a myth of nescience on the part of the surrounding menials, to keep up the pretense that they were unthinking automatons. They sought constant reassurances that the slaves were really happy and carefree, even grateful, and that they weren't simmering with quiet resentment or hatred. When a slave let slip the mask of nescience, and the master perceived even for a moment that he was in the presence of a critical intelligence who had been constantly observing and evaluating his actions, the reprisals could be brutal.

Management today, similarly, desperately maintains the illusion that we've got our minds right, that we've got our noses

firmly implanted in the proper orifice. And when they occasionally get a glimpse of the reality behind the mask, their sense of betrayal can be enormous. That probably explains, in part, the harsh management reaction on discovering that an employee has been blogging about them. The sense of betrayal is the same as if a table or chair suddenly developed a voice. Or if a hitherto dumb brute opened his mouth and cried "Get your stinking paws off of me, you damned, dirty apes!"