

Montessori management

The backlash against running firms like progressive schools has begun



“The Internship”, a film about two middle-aged no-hopers who land work experience at Google, is a dire offering even by the standards of Hollywood summer comedies. But it does get one thing right: that it is rather absurd for a technology firm to provide slides for staff to play on, and to let them wear silly propeller-hats. Google is not alone in its juvenile tastes. Box, a Silicon Valley company, has installed swings in its headquarters. Red Bull, an energy-drinks firm, has a reception desk in the shape of a giant skateboard in its London office. Businesses of all types have moved towards sitting workers in groups in open-plan rooms, just like at nursery school. Time was when firms modelled themselves on the armed forces, with officers (who thought about strategy) and chains of command. Now many model themselves on learning-through-play “Montessori” schools.

Montessori management has plenty of supporters in the higher reaches of business. The bosses of Google (Larry Page and Sergey Brin), Amazon (Jeff Bezos) and Wikipedia (Jimmy Wales) were all educated in Montessori schools. So was Will Wright, a video-game pioneer. Messrs Page and Brin credit their Montessori education with their enthusiasm for thinking differently. Mr Bezos thanks it for his enthusiasm for experimentation—for “planting seeds” and “going down blind alleys” as he puts it. Mr Wright says SimCity “comes right out of Montessori”.

The nostrums of some management gurus sound remarkably like those of the “progressive” educationalists of the 1960s. For example Gary Hamel, of London Business School, and Jeffrey Pfeffer, of Stanford Business School, praise companies that dismantle hierarchies and encourage experimentation. It is not just rich-world businesses that are buying into this philosophy: HCL Technologies, an Indian software company, invites workers to write assessments of their bosses—and publishes them.

But it would be wrong to conclude that the success of Google and Amazon vindicates Montessori management. Both companies have pragmatically mixed progressive ideas with more traditional ones such as encouraging internal competition and measuring performance. Mr Bezos is also an enthusiastic employer of ex-military personnel. As in education, where traditionalists have staged a counter-revolution against the progressives, some academics are now questioning Montessori management’s basic assumptions—particularly its faith in free-flowing creativity, endless collaboration and all things open-plan.

For example, Morten Hansen of the University of California, Berkeley studied 182 teams who were trying to win a contract on behalf of a professional-services firm. He found that the more time they spent consulting others, the less likely they were to win a deal. This shows, he says, that collaboration has costs as well as benefits. These need to be weighed against each other, instead of simply assuming that the more teamwork the better.

Mark de Rond, a Cambridge academic who once rowed for the university, argues that the most successful teams are marked by internal competition and clashing egos as well as “Kum Bay Yah”-style togetherness. “A focus on interpersonal harmony can actually hurt team performance,” he suggests. Jake Breeden, a management thinker at Duke Corporate Education, worries that too much reliance on teamwork can create a culture of “learned helplessness” in which managers are terrified to take decisions without yet another round of consultations.

Excessive collaboration can lead to the very opposite of creativity: groupthink, conformity and mediocrity. It is especially damaging at the top of an organisation. BlackBerry, a smartphone-maker, believed that having two CEOs with complementary skills would produce the best of both worlds: Jim Balsillie was a professional manager and Mike Lazaridis was a technician. The company soon discovered the truth of Napoleon’s dictum that “one bad general is worth two good ones”.

According to one survey around 70% of all offices in America have gone open-plan. Yet evidence is mounting that this is a bad idea. Over the past five years Gensler, a design firm, has asked more than 90,000 people in 155 companies in ten industries what they think of this way of working. It has found an astonishing amount of antipathy. Workers say that open-plan offices make it more difficult to concentrate, because the hubbub of human and electronic noise is so distracting. What they really value is the ability to focus on their jobs with as few distractions as possible. Ironically, going open-plan defeats another of Montessori management’s main objectives: workers say it prevents them from collaborating, because they cannot talk without disturbing others or inviting an audience. Other studies show that people who work in open-plan offices are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, stress and airborne infections such as flu.

Time for some discipline—and separate offices

It was the unthinking and indiscriminate application of child-centred education techniques, with little attention paid to outcomes, that eventually brought about a backlash. The more thoughtful critics did not wish to turn the clock back entirely and return to rote learning and tyrannical teachers; they simply said that structure and order have their place too. The same seems to be happening now in business. Mr Breeden argues, sensibly, that managers should treat collaboration and creativity as techniques rather than dogmas. Diane Hoskins of Gensler speculates that her company’s findings about open-plan offices are so striking that they may mark “the beginning of a new era in workplace organisation”. When workers start being moved back into separate booths, and the office slide is replaced with a noticeboard bearing a list of staff instructions, you will know that the counter-revolution is well under way.

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