

Taylorism and lean management – the internal ILO recipe: Feedback from the Union on the BPR

Like other international organizations, the ILO is not immune to clinical trials of human resource management. The latest, the "lean management" that was introduced with the "Business Process Review", is far from keeping its promises. In the end, it is the staff who pay the costs of this controversial method. I'll explain...

Before, in terms of organizational structure in a company, things were relatively clear, far from perfect, but clear. Everyone was in his place in the pyramid: the chiefs above, the others below, in a more or less regular strata. Taylorism in its pure splendour, which has given rise to many workers' movements.



But that, as they say, was before. It was without counting decades of theories in human resource management, all more inventive than the others in order to improve the well-being of the worker. Our Organization, over the past 25 years, has served as a laboratory to test these lovely theories, a lucrative field of experience for the dozens of companies sharing the global market of "organizational health". Everything has happened there: horizontal management, participative management, etc. etc.

Five years ago, as the winds of change once again blew over the ILO, it could not miss out on THE method – very much in fashion – that McKinsey is the fervent advocate of: "lean management".

Woo hoo!!

But what on earth is this??

Flash course in popularization:



“Lean management” is a way of continuously improving the organization of work, by the workers themselves. The improvements therefore all come from the workers with the discreet support of the managers. This type of organizational management is essentially focused on respect for the customer and the employee and has often been used as an example in companies such as Toyota.

This is the schema of the inverted pyramid:



The success brought about by this new organizational model – perhaps proven in a private industrial sector in which profit is the primary objective and where any improvement in manufacturing processes becomes critical in terms of productivity gains and reduction costs – was quick to encourage ‘merchants of professional happiness’, i.e. the big companies of corporate consultancy. The lucrative market has led these companies to want to adapt this new form of management in all kinds of service companies and especially those of the public service – or how to fit a square peg in a round hole.

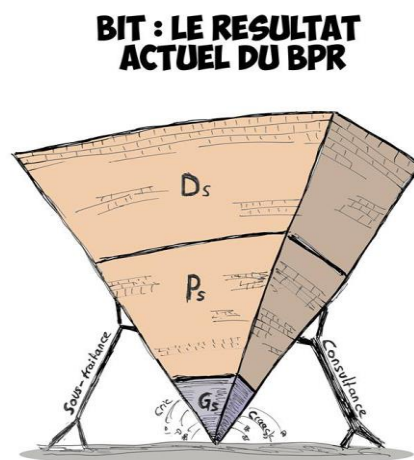
In itself, wanting the happiness of its employees is not reprehensible, and it could even be the best reason to want to set up this type of system. However, the perversity of the system is hidden in the use and presentation of business or organizations leaders. In fact, they will only retain from this commendable initiative the "productivity gains" and "cost reduction" components, which they will hide inside Trojan horses (simplification of the administrative processes, organizational health) and will wrap up in a vague speech about listening to employees through regular satisfaction surveys and daily dashboards (the famous "huddles").

After swimming for more than three years in lean management, where are we at in the ILO in terms of simplifying administrative processes?

One always fills out one's health insurance reimbursement form by hand or electronically before printing, the travel authorizations are still a nightmare for those going on mission, there is still no central repository of ILO officials to link operations such as recruitment and career and mobility aspirations, forms for ordering furniture, a telephone or a PC are still obscure, and the interface of the new IGDS system is no longer capable of offering the possibility to search in the three official languages of the organization. Half of the staff can no longer expect to get any service before 10 a.m., since the other half – all the administrative departments responsible for offering these services, that have been through the BPR – are in a meeting to find out what they will do with their day – again the "huddles".

This is certainly not the first time that the ILO, with hundreds of thousands of dollars, has tried to improve its bureaucracy without real tangible and measurable success. But what is much more worrying is the results in terms of reduction and transformation of the Organization's workforce, despite the imperturbable assurance of senior management that this would not be the case.

The only concrete result that the Union has been able to identify so far, is this:



The Staff Union wants proof of the recent restructuring of two important administrative departments which has constituted an inspiring experimental laboratory, showing the perversity of this type of management. In terms of posts, not of individuals, a drastic reduction has been made in the General Service category, taking advantage of the retirement of the incumbents of these posts ("natural attrition") in favour of the professionalization of certain functions, which could have been the subject of a much larger conversion of existing staff, with resources to train them. In addition, some intermediate **P** positions have clearly been downgraded to perform, without a doubt, exactly the same functions as the existing initial posts. In addition, it has been clearly stated –without hesitation – that

the resources of these **G** posts will be used to finance **D** posts. Indeed, the "complexity and the scale of the tasks", we were told, now requires an increase in positions of responsibility (oh really? I thought that the BPR would help to simplify them).

So, we are no further forward. Do we want to simplify or complicate the system??

It turns out that the life of the company is an eternal beginning and that some lessons of the past have not yet been learned. Even Frederick Winslow Taylor, already ironically in 1911 in his "**Principles of Scientific Management**", warned of the dangers of his own method: *"When, however, the elements of this mechanism, such as time study, functional foremanship, etc., are used without being accompanied by the true philosophy of management, the results are in many cases disastrous. And, unfortunately, even when men who are thoroughly in sympathy with the principles of scientific management undertake to change too rapidly from the old type to the new, without heeding the warnings of those who have had years of experience in making this change, they frequently meet with serious troubles, and sometimes with strikes, followed by failure."*

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