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We Need Metacraftsmanship

By Steve David, Skymark CEO

When I think of craftsmanship, I always think of Harold Baker. He used to work in the gear pot assembly area in Joy Manufacturing's huge mining machinery plant in Franklin, Pennsylvania. His work was systematic, meticulous, quick and actually beautiful to watch. Joy machines are complex monsters, and their gears have to stand up to all sorts of abuse. Harold was just one of many contributors to the whole assembly process, but he made sure that the gear pots that left his area were perfect. He combined technical proficiency, hard work, and artistry.

If you look way back in human history, you see small groups of people living in simple societies. There was probably some specialization almost from the start: women took care of children and cooked, while men hunted. Some people would have particular talents for tool-making, or for medicine, or for leadership, and would become craftsmen in those roles.

For a couple of million years, there wasn't much specialization beyond that. Then something happened, and there was an agricultural revolution which meant that a smaller (though still substantial) fraction of

people could provide enough food to feed all the people. Towns grew up, and chiefs became kings, and, though many new crafts were now developing, each was growing narrower. Quite suddenly, really, society was getting very complex. Then, only a few thousand years later, the so-called industrial revolution followed, and complexity took another leap upward.

Nowadays, the solo craftsman is a rarity. Instead, we have organizations with thousands of employees, mass production, assembly lines, robot welders, and so on. There has been a tremendous rise in productivity, but there is a dark side. Whenever you add a person to a process, you get two potentials: 1) they provide a spark, a key element that raises group productivity, and 2) they increase the likelihood of a "failure to communicate." Too often, the latter is the bigger effect, and we get whopping organizational or social costs. In fact, Dr. Brian Joiner, one of management's leading lights, suggests that up to half of all work is wasted effort.

How do we get a whole bunch of people to act as if they were one big smart craftsman - a meta-craftsman? How do we



coordinate things so that we get the creative sparks, but not the breakdowns? That is the challenge for management today. There are a lot of ideas kicking around - in the next edition of this series we will try to make sense of some of them.

Principles of Metacraftsmanship

In some ways, the 20th century could be called the Age of Management. It started with Frederick Taylor's scientific management, and is ending with The Witch Doctors. There's been an explosion of publishing, training and consulting, and it shows no signs of abating. Why?

There is a demand for the stuff. Why?

People who are managing organizations are struggling. Why?

Because making a whole bunch of people, even well-adjusted people with noble motives, work as one is not trivial.

The various ideas for improving management, although they sometimes compete for acceptance, are not as disparate as they seem. If you boil them down, you can derive a set of fundamental principles for good work, rather like the famous "14 Points" of the late W. Edwards Deming. These principles, taken as a whole and put to work, produce what we call "metacraftsmanship."

The most basic set of these principles, eight in all, are briefly described in what follows.

Our ultimate ends must be to produce goods and services that serve the long-term needs of society.

It is possible to make money and keep economies going by producing things that add no real value and reinforce human frailties. In the big picture, these are not quality products no matter how well they work. Instead, we need to appreciate and strive to fulfill the long-term needs of human society. Significantly, stewardship of resources, both natural and human, is a concept of growing importance in management today.

We must focus on producing goods and services which are useful and delightful to our customers.

Henry Ford once wrote, "Success is based solely upon an ability to serve [the] customer to his liking." In order to foster this ability, we must spend as much time considering what we do, who we do it for, and why we do it as we spend fixing how it is done. What's more, we must both anticipate unexpressed customer needs and respond to expressed ones.

We must focus on specific ends that fit present and planned capabilities and align all work with those ends.

Constancy of purpose ultimately depends on shared values and goals within an organization, but sheer size can make this difficult to achieve. Metacraftsmanship adopts methods to help re-link the pieces of an organization. For example, the Japanese use a planning system called "catch-ball," where ideas are tossed back



and forth between groups until a workable consensus is reached. Organizations are also removing layers, creating self-directed work teams, and improving two-way communication.

We have to create and support those things that motivate people to do good work and remove things that discourage them.

Metacraftsmanship pulls together many ideas about human motivation. For example, Frederick Herzberg believed human needs exist on two planes. "Animal" needs - survival, safety - are on the plane of avoiding pain or unhappiness. "Human" needs of personal growth and fulfillment exist on the plane of creating happiness and satisfaction. Meeting animal needs through appropriate working conditions and job security avoids dissatisfaction, but happiness and motivation are derived only through achievement, recognition, learning, and creativity.

We produce goods and services through processes in which work is done to add value.

Metacraftsmanship recognizes that systems and processes, not individual workers, are responsible for the vast bulk of problems with work and quality. Through the use of systems thinking methods and an explicit focus on processes, organizations can improve quality and productivity. Essentially, metacraftsmanship resuscitates the idea that the accomplishment of quality work relies on

an appreciation for and understanding of the whole process and its context."

Knowledge about a process is diffused among the people who are part of it. These people can work together to gain the perspective needed to improve the process.

When you zoom in to get a close-up view of something, you trade off context for detail. In the world of work, we have been gradually zooming in for many decades, with each worker seeing more detail, gaining more specialized expertise, but losing perspective. With metacraftsmanship, we purposefully regain perspective by working in teams and studying systems, without sacrificing detail. Just like the craftsman of old, the team can master all aspects of the process and produce quality work.

We can continually improve work processes to provide better quality and reduce costs.

Metacraftsmanship is applied through the use of tools. These tools are built around the scientific method, articulated centuries ago by Francis Bacon, and the basis for Dr. Deming's well-known Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, in which ideas and experiments uncover reality.

- **Plan:** Recognize and analyze the problem. Formulate possible solutions.
- **Do:** Test the most likely or effective solution.
- **Check:** Audit results for real improvements.



- **Act:** Replace the old process with the successful solution.

The cycle is then repeated, striving for new levels of quality and customer satisfaction.

The tools and the PDCA cycle allow for both creative and analytic thinking. Creative or divergent thinking encourages many ideas and new possibilities, to break through paradigms and see beyond the current way of doing things. But creativity must be tempered by analysis or convergent thinking that brings ideas back together in a usable form.

Experts and corporations have added custom approaches to problem-solving onto the PDCA cycle. Some models highlight customer research or searching for opportunities or monitoring. Regardless, the PDCA cycle usually remains at the heart of these models, in spirit if not in name.

Making these principles the foundation of an organization requires strong visionary leadership.

Creating both the systems and culture for metacraftsmanship requires strong influence and support from the very top of any organization. The leadership necessary for success cannot be delegated or ignored. Inspiring others, listening, challenging fears, participating in the action - all are required of the CEO in the move to metacraftsmanship. The leader will fight apathy, skepticism, and resistance to

change. To win, he or she must lead by doing the work of improvement - both personal and systemic - with everyone else.

In Conclusion...

The goal of metacraftsmanship is, in its widest sense, to maximize the returns from human endeavor. The principles of metacraftsmanship can improve an organization in any industry by raising the quality of its output, making processes that produce its output more effective, and striving to satisfy customers. Essentially, metacraftsmanship can help reduce the costs of specialization by stepping back, considering the facts, and finding better ways of doing things that include only value-added activities.