

Tipping Point Commentaries

Change for Change's Sake

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Tipping points should be simple.

The 1920s and 1930s saw an era of psychology blooming in every corner. It emerged in the field of business as time and motion studies that sought to optimize work flow and patterns. The goal was to increase productivity without having to resort to the time-honored whip.

If we are to look for the negative connotations of this movement, they are found in Charlie Chaplin's movie *Modern Times*. This, in turn, is a repetition of an earlier equally dark movie, *Metropolis*, by the German director Fritz Lang. That repetition is literally found in the metaphor of the worker as a machine component. In each, the worker is a wheel or a lever, and is an integral part of the machine. Often, the field of time and motion studies were associated with turning workers into finely polished cogs to fit into the mesh of gears. On the other hand, time and motion studies achieved reducing tension and giving the worker a sense of accomplishment.

One such classic example rises from the lowly telephone operator's room. In large offices there were banks of switchboards operated by a multitude of operators. They received incoming calls and connected them on to destinations within the building's offices. Time and motion experts would necessarily desire to optimize and increase the efficiency of how many calls were successfully connected in an hour. Here we find the literal and obvious correlation to the field's name: time and motion. Experts with clipboards were a somewhat ominous and brooding cloud that hung over workers as the worker's every movement was measured and cataloged. This had to be done to establish a baseline – something to establish how what change in routine that followed actually improved or worsened productivity.

Bell Telephone's experts took their measurements, and established a performance baseline and then they carefully changed the operator's environment. Their experiment was to test the effect of the color of paint on the wall to the psychology of the worker. They painted the walls a bright green and stepped back with their clipboards to measure once again.

To their surprise productivity shot up. So remarkable was this increase that they stopped the project with the satisfaction of having obtained such good results the first time out of the gate. However, this is not to say that the experts went away with well deserved smugness. They kept in the background and continued to measure even when the bosses had been satisfied with the results.

Over the weeks and months, the productivity levels settled back to their former levels. This quickened the pulse of the experts. They would have to tinker with a color that was longer lasting on the worker's morale to keep them productive longer. They experimented further with a cooling blue and the numbers once again shot up! This time, the experts (still in the shadows) waited cautiously and anticipated that the trend might fall again. Here they were not surprised when over the course of several weeks, performance did fall to the old levels. It took several more colors before the experts finally figured it out. The performance boost

was not tied to any particular color. Yes, color changes did boost morale and productivity, but no color was special because the workers were actually responding to the attention being paid to their morale. It was enough that the company was looking to reduce their tense work through risking change.