

# Postmodern Program Management

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The Modernist worldview took root during the so-called Scientific Age of the late 19th century, which was marked by a belief that the newly industrial and mechanized world had reached a permanent apex. Even the name “Modernism” conveys a sense of having arrived at a goal and having achieved a sort of optimal understanding of the way the universe works, particularly as compared with the “primitives” who came before. Modernist thought was a key contributor to 20th century industrialization worldwide and continues to influence organizational behavior up to the present day, though not always with positive results.

Among other interesting characteristics, Moderns believe in the discoverability of universal principles, the virtue of standardization to an optimized standard, and the long-term value and viability of absolute certainties. While the Modernist influence on architecture, politics, art, and religion might be interesting topics for discussion in other places, this article focuses instead on Modern expressions in management and organizational dynamics.

## Modernist Management: The Machine with No Soul

Let's start with the father of scientific management, Frederick Winslow Taylor—occasionally referred to as Darth Taylor by certain irreverent authors. His scientific ap-

proach to management is a clear expression of a Modernist worldview. Along with Henry Ford, Taylor encouraged companies to focus on discovering the One Best Way to accomplish tasks. This led to vastly improved efficiencies for American manufacturing, among other benefits. It also led to the dehumanization of work and to institutional arteriosclerosis, among other, less desirable side effects. Whether or not it was a net gain is open to debate.

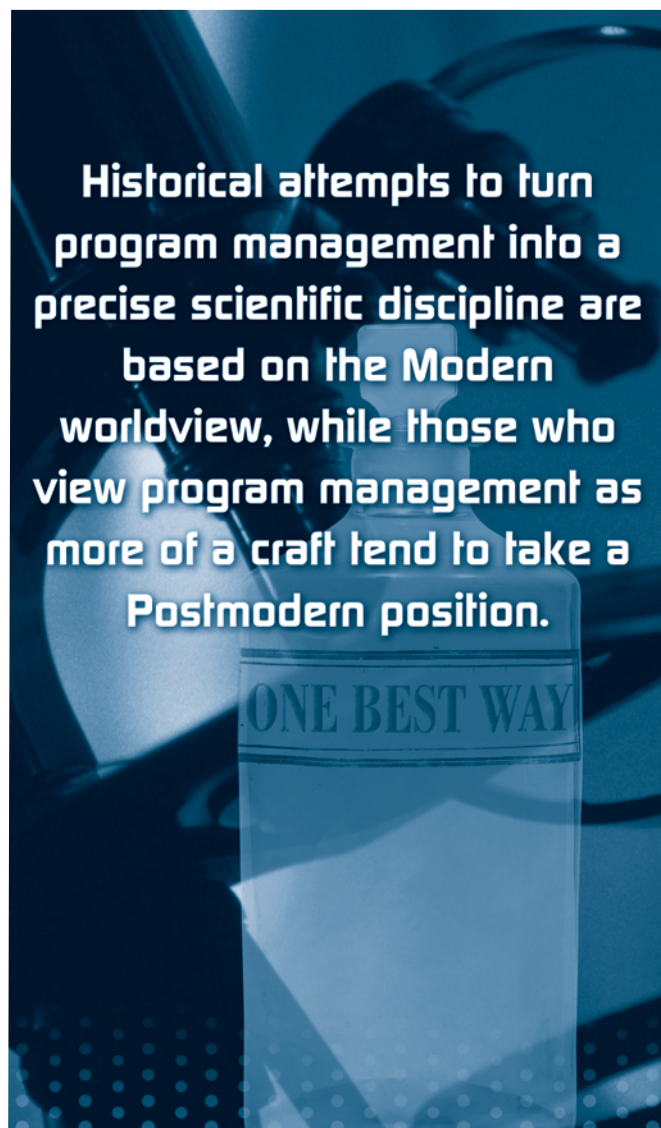
Early critics described Modernism as soulless and mechanistic, a criticism Modernism has certainly lived up to in many ways. One of the earliest assessments of this type can be found in the pages of *Scientific American* and actually predates Taylor's work by more than half a century. In 1856, 55 years before Taylor wrote his seminal *Principles of Scientific Management*, *Scientific American* published a chilling prophecy of the negative impact brought about by the division of labor, scientific or otherwise:

The division of labor, though it may bring to perfection the production of a country up to a certain point, is most deleterious in its effects upon the producers. To make pins to the best advantage, it may answer for a time to divide the operation into 20 parts. Let each man concentrate the whole of his attention on the one simple work, for instance, of learning to make

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pin heads, and on this ever let his time be consumed. It is astonishing the perfection and rapidity which he will acquire in performing the operation. But what is the result on the man? His powers of mind will dwindle, and his head becomes, for all practical purposes, after a number of generations, no larger than that of one of the pins he makes. He ceases to be a man, and becomes a mere tool.

Naturally, these human tools do not need to use intuition or initiative. They simply need to execute their assigned tasks according to the scientifically established One Best Way. Thus, they become pinheads. Sadly, this view of people as tools was precisely and scientifically accepted by Henry Ford as he began designing his assembly line. After observing that workers tend to perform repetitive tasks at the slowest rate that goes unpunished, he concluded the problem lay not with leadership or motivation, but with the inefficient design of the task. Let's be generous and describe his conclusion as "interesting."



Building on this dubious—ahem, interesting—conclusion, in true Modern style, Ford set about designing optimized processes to maximize efficiency. The result was remarkably efficient assembly lines, which ultimately led Charlie Chaplin, in 1936, to make the aptly titled film *Modern Times*. Watch the movie to see what we mean.

### Postmodernism: The Humanist Reaction

Along comes Postmodernism (sometimes called Pomo), a humanist reaction to Modernism's cold calculations. Definitions of Postmodernism vary widely, but it is often described as fundamentally being driven by "incredulity toward metanarratives," whatever that means. For us normal folks, Pomo can be understood as a worldview that is skeptical of Modernism's certainties. Postmodernism doesn't necessarily deny Modern certainties—it just questions, examines, and deconstructs them, investigating the underlying assumptions, particularly when those assumptions are flawed, hidden, ignored, or otherwise not made explicit.

For the sake of argument (and who doesn't like a good argument?), let's draw some of the battle lines in this philosophical—perhaps even religious—conflict, acknowledging, of course, that the drawing of lines is a Modernist construct and that Postmodernists tend to see boundaries as more fluid and flexible. Nevertheless, perhaps the following comparisons will help illustrate some of the differences between these two worldviews.

#### On Success

**Mod:** Thorough planning is critical to success, so we don't need to rely on improvisation or individual judgment. It is OK to be precisely incorrect, so long as we execute the method properly. The best success is repeatable success.

**Pomo:** Flexibility and individual judgment are critical to success, so we don't need to rely on perfect planning and foreknowledge. It is OK to be imprecisely correct, even if it means a deviation from the method. The best success is unique success.

#### On Waivers

**Mod:** The default answer to a waiver request is "No." The burden of proof is on the person requesting the waiver. This assumes the standard operating procedure is optimal and the requestor is trying to get away with something.

**Pomo:** The default answer to a waiver request is "Yes." The burden of proof is on the person rejecting the waiver. This assumes the standard operating procedure is incomplete and the requestor is a professional who knows what he or she is doing.

#### On Control

**Mod:** Leaders establish specific rules and boundaries to dictate and constrain behavior. Followers are expected to accept the leader's judgment.

**Pomo:** Leaders establish general principles and vectors to guide and influence behavior. Followers are expected to use their own judgment.

### On Facts and Models

**Mod:** Facts are universal proof. We know things, and we are right. We use facts to build models that are correct, precise, and accurate to four decimal places. Mathematical models are preferred, particularly if they are rigorous.

**Pomo:** Facts are situational evidence. We think we know things, and we may be right. All models we build are wrong, but some are useful. Narrative models are preferred, particularly if they are funny.

### On Boundaries

**Mod:** Boundaries are firm, impermeable, and clearly defined. Moderns see a world of boxes, lines, and either/or situations.

**Pomo:** Boundaries are flexible, changeable, fuzzy, and hard to nail down. Postmoderns see a world of connections, clouds, and both/and situations.

### On Each Other

**Mod:** Postmodernism is chaotic and risky, unreliable, and out of control. Its relativistic perspective leads it to inappropriately deny absolute truths that clearly exist. It is absurd.

**Pomo:** Modernism is arrogant, risk-averse, and ill-suited to a dynamic environment. Its tunnel vision inappropriately disregards inconvenient data and asserts the discovery of absolute truths where they do not exist. It is absurd.

### Modernist PM, Pomo PM

We hope the relevance to program management is clear from these brief examples. Program management is fundamentally an exercise in judgment and an expression of philosophical values and worldviews, such as whether or not boundaries are firm, models are correct, or exceptions are permissible. These differences matter because, for example, a Modern PM will implement a very different kind of waiver request process from that of a Postmodern PM—and end up with very different outcomes.

Historical attempts to turn program management into a precise, scientific discipline are based on the Modern worldview, while those who take a Postmodern position tend to view program management as more of a craft. Let us be quite clear: We emphatically advocate a Postmodern approach to program management. In fact, we recently realized that Postmodernism is the underlying philosophical foundation of nearly all our previous articles.

### Why the Pomo Worldview Works

Let's consider some advantages of the Postmodern worldview. One advantage a Pomo PM enjoys over a Modern one is simply that Postmodernism comes after Modernism. It therefore has the benefit of both hindsight and,

to a certain degree, the last word (like a defense attorney delivering a closing argument after the prosecution has finished making his or her case). Because it comes after, Postmodernism has the opportunity to address and correct flaws in Modernism—an opportunity not shared by Modernism.

However, the advantage goes further than simply holding the chronological high ground. Postmodernism is also inherently more flexible and responsive to a dynamic environment than Modernism because it rejects the Modernist belief in the One Best Way. Thus, while Pomo PMs *can* repeat past behaviors when faced with a familiar situation, they are not *required* to do so. Similarly, Pomo PMs can and do make plans, just like their Modern counterparts, but they can more easily deviate from the plans when the situation requires it. This provides, at least theoretically, a Pomo PM with all the advantages of a Modern PM, plus more.


Further, because Pomo PMs do not insist on standardization to the degree Modern PMs do, they spend much less time producing the voluminous, detailed documentation that Modern PMs require to ensure precise repeatability, and much more time on actually doing things (perhaps recognizing that documentation and user guides are historically ignored and unread). By acknowledging the possibility of variation and focusing more on results than on process, a Pomo PM can be more efficient—a value that Modern PMs should appreciate.

The previous comment about efficiency notwithstanding, we must be careful not to judge the effectiveness of a Pomo PM by the metrics and values of Modernism. Postmodernism is not simply more efficient or accurate at hitting the same targets Modernism aimed at. Properly expressed, Postmodernism deconstructs everything, *including* the targets. Pomo PMs therefore have different (dare we say better) goals and objectives than their Modern counterparts. Rather than simply increasing production rates at the expense of the humans doing the production, Postmodernism asks if there is a way to produce a sufficient quantity of needed objects at an acceptable cost without turning us all into pinheads.

### Modern to Postmodern in DoD

Thankfully, there are signs that DoD is moving away from its Modern roots and embracing some Pomo principles, at least in some areas. Until 1994, DoD-STD-2167 mandated that PMs use the waterfall development process—a Modern, rational, five-step approach to program management that, in actual practice, failed to produce positive results 87 percent of the time. The new DoDI 5000.2 (released May 12, 2002) establishes a simplified and flexible management framework for translating mission needs and technology opportunities. It authorized Milestone Decision Authorities to tailor procedures to achieve cost, schedule,





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and performance goals. It explicitly acknowledges that one size does not fit all, and if One Best Way exists, we haven't found it.

In true Pomo fashion, DoDI 5000.2 states: "There is no one way to structure an acquisition program to accomplish the objective of the Defense Acquisition System. MDAs and PMs shall tailor..." Similarly, the National Security Space acquisition guidance (NSS 03-01) states: "The 'model' acquisition process outlined in this document should be tailored to properly fit the circumstances of each NSS program." DoD policy wasn't always like this, and the rejection of the One Best Way approach represents a significant departure from DoD's Modernist roots.

And yet Modernism persists within the program management discipline, both inside DoD and in industry. Michael Hammer's popular process enterprise framework is clearly a Modern approach, and his legions of "Hammerheads" are not difficult to find. Hammer's approach explicitly seeks to drive out chaos, establish predictability, and develop careful plans to dictate "exactly what work is to be done by whom, when, and where." This is obviously the product of a Modern worldview.

The Capability Maturity Model Integration, a process improvement approach whose latest release (version 1.2) came out in 2006, is also quite Modern and focuses heavily on standardizing outputs and removing process variation. Full analyses of process re-engineering or CMMI are beyond the scope of this article; we mention them now simply to point out that Darth Taylor's intellectual grandchildren are alive and well.

This is not to say process re-engineering and the CMMI aren't useful, just that they are built on certain underlying (often unspoken) Modern assumptions that might be worth closer examination—and they are more useful in certain situations than others. Postmodern alternatives to these approaches are not hard to find: Tom Peters' Professional Service Firm model; Dee Hock's chaordic leadership concept, which combines characteristics of chaos and order; or Dr. David Boje's 1995 book *Postmodern Management and Organization Theory*.

Modernism is indeed an effective approach for a rational, static world where surprises are rare, measurements are precise, humans are tools, and our understanding of the system dynamics is very nearly complete. If the PM's world was linear and predictable, then Modernism would work just fine. But the reality is, reality is messier than that. Things change unexpectedly, surprises surprise us, people are people, and the system dynamics are both unstable and nonlinear. In this sort of environment, Modernism breaks down.

### Is an Apple Round?

As G. K. Chesterton pointed out in his 1908 book *Orthodoxy*, "Life is not an illogicality; yet it is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden. ... It is this silent swerving from accuracy by an inch that is the uncanny element in everything. An apple or an orange is round enough to get itself called round, and yet is not round after all. ... Everywhere in things there is this element of the quiet and incalculable."

Chesterton's uncanny element, this quiet incalculable inexactitude, is generally ignored by Moderns and acknowledged by Postmoderns. Postmodernism does not deny the apple's roundness, just the exactitude of that roundness, and it questions the wisdom of acting on the assumption that apples are round.

In the final analysis, Moderns may be surprised to discover that apples are not really circles, no matter what the model might say.

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