



Managers Anonymous

By Roger Evered and Jim Selman

“We are in increasing danger of acting as if we knew what we were doing, when we don’t; and then not being able to bear the consequences of having erred.”

—Robert Biller, 1969



American managers aren’t going to shake their bad habits until they quit denying that they’re addicted to the old management.

American managers in the late 1980s have a certain way of interpreting the job of managing, a way so ingrained and habitual that on the whole we don’t realize it’s an interpretation—not until we look at the practice of American managers in, say, the 1930s, or at the turn of the century. A comparison with Japanese, Mexican, or Swedish managers exposes even more telling differences. In fact, it’s only by noticing how “unusual” their practices are that we can define our own. Like fish, we have difficulty seeing that we are “swimming” in a management pond made up of unexamined assumptions and beliefs.

We believe that as American managers we can be far more effective than we are at present. But to do that, we have to change the way we think about management. And to change, we first have to be aware of our current habits, of the culture-bound and largely unconscious assumptions that determine the way we see the world.

The consequences of acting from habit rather than conscious thought are that we are not really responsible either for our actions or for the results those actions produce. In effect, we are addicted to our own view of the world, and to the patterns of thought and action permitted by that view



We do not use the word “addicted” for effect or as a metaphor. We actually mean addicted. The problems managers work on are a function of interpretation, and we, as managers, are addicted to our interpretations. If we can break our addiction, we can break the condition that underlies and perpetuates our corporate problems.

When we think of addiction, we normally think of addiction to substances, although sometimes we think of addiction to some particular behavior. Only rarely do we notice that people can be powerfully addicted to an idea, or a belief, or a worldview constituted primarily of a set of beliefs and assumptions. The problems of America’s declining productivity and competitiveness could be the product of a national addiction to a particular way of viewing the world.

A Paradox

Most of us have known people we would describe as unmistakably addicted—addicted to alcohol, or work, or sex, or gambling, or something else. Addicted people appear irresponsible. They have been unable to stop doing whatever it is they are addicted to, even when it obviously harms them and those around them. They function with considerable difficulty and behave weirdly on occasion. They are often defensive and unable to listen, have memory lapses, rationalize their behavior, blame others, and are likely to become belligerent when confronted by the seemingly obvious.

Above all, they deny the problem and seem completely unaware of their role in generating the problem. They just do not see themselves as causing the difficulties they must cope with. They refuse—or abuse—help you offer, and at some point become untrustworthy. You might say they were their own worst enemies.

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The Principles of Addiction

The first principle of any addiction is that “it” has power over the person’s behavior. That’s what distinguishes a habit from an addiction. Addicts think they can choose to stop, but actually “it” plays the tune to which they dance. The ability to choose is only recovered when the addiction is acknowledged and dealt with as such.

But addicts must maintain a façade of control. They must protect themselves from knowing that their addiction is out of control, that their behavior is generating destructive consequences, and that their addiction is the source of the difficulties in their lives. They must keep their relationship to “the problem” totally outside their awareness.

To do this, they must rely on four defensive mechanisms:

- **Denial:** what problem?
- **Rationalization:** reasons, explanations, and justifications for what happened;
- **Projection:** others are unreliable, unfair, troublemaking; and
- **Memory Distortions:** euphoric recall and selective forgetting.

As long as these mechanisms are operating, it is nearly impossible for addicts to recognize their disease and the need for recovery.

Does this description fit anyone you have encountered in organizational settings? That is, does the description of an addict fit the



managerial behavior of any managers you have known at work?

Problems in the organization usually surface as crises, and upper management's response is something like, "Find the cause of the problem and fix it!"

Is This Your Organization?

Let's illustrate the point. We know a large, well-known, traditional organization that's a gold mine of managerial and organizational problems. The organization is compliance-driven and places a high value on authority as the key to its effectiveness. Most people in the organization know that the organization could be much more productive and effective, as well as a more satisfying place to work. Almost everyone has an explanation of what's wrong with the place and who ought to do what to put it right. Gossip abounds in the hallways, cafeterias, and carpools. Denial is rampant. Some things that need to be said are never said, and some crucial questions are never asked, such as why certain meaningless activities are perpetuated.

The organization promotes the façade that it's well run, but everyone knows it's a joke. Nobody is really responsible.

Problems in this organization usually surface as crises, and upper management's response is something like, "Find the cause of the problem and fix it!" Task forces are frequently assembled, although their recommendations are rarely implemented. More often, someone is appointed to carry out yet another study of the people at the lower levels, since the theory is that the lower levels are what the upper levels are supposed to manage. Conversely, those at the lower levels are certain that upper management is the

source of the productivity problems and organizational difficulties. Nobody takes responsibility for the state of affairs. It is not apparent to anyone that the entire scenario is perpetuated by a set of assumptions about people, organizations, work, and management.

In the contemporary culture of management, managers are addicted to a set of assumptions about people and how to manage them.

Addiction to Assumptions

These assumptions, most of them long forgotten, comprise everyday truths and conventional wisdom. For example, when an employee's job performance doesn't meet the boss's expectations, the boss has an immediate interpretation of the employee's performance, frequently formed without consulting the employee or anyone else. Only rarely will he consider an alternative interpretation of the event.

Or consider the common practice of keeping certain information, such as salary increases, secret.

Even when these everyday managerial 'truths' and conventional organizational 'wisdom' don't produce the desired outcomes (better employee job performance, for example), managers continue to operate within them.

Managers can't stop the unproductive behavior because—given the underlying assumptions—it appears that they're doing the right thing.



Hitting Bottom

One of the distinguishing characteristics of addicts is that denial of the addiction often continues until they hit bottom. It is nearly impossible for addicts to recognize their disease—and the need for treatment—until they hit bottom. When the alcoholic hits bottom, he may lose his spouse, job, house, friends. When a manager hits bottom, he may lose his staff, reputation, customers, profits, organization, career, self-esteem, and ethical integrity.

Many American managers seem well on their way to hitting bottom. Some are fortunate enough to have already hit bottom (as any recovered addict knows, hitting bottom is often the gateway to recovery).

Managerism and Its Symptoms

The name we've given to this particular addiction is "managerism". Managerism has many faces; low productivity and poor profitability, excessive rules and regulations, confusion and crises, job stress and workaholism, gossip and gamesmanship, dishonesty and disinformation, absenteeism and turnover, alienation and apathy.

Managerism is an addictive disease in which the person believes himself to be in charge of his actions, while in fact his actions derive from the background of unnoticed assumptions.

What probably best characterizes American managerism is the unspoken belief that **everything in the organization can and should be controlled.**

What are the other unspoken principles that American managers live by? As far as we know, no systematic work has attempted to identify them, but we can make a pretty good guess based upon our experience with American managers and our reading of the business press.

The following list offers some examples of the unspoken rules, or background principles, of American managerism. They should be sufficiently recognizable as "pollutants" of the managerial pond in which we are swimming.

Some of the more readily observable symptoms of managerism are presented below. There seems to be a growing recognition of the unacceptability of these symptoms, which, as we have argued, derive from managerism—an addiction truly detrimental to the health of organizations and the economy. The bottom line is that managers and organizations increasingly dedicate themselves to maintaining their current operations, to surviving the immediate crises, to perpetuating themselves, to justifying their existence. They lose the capacity to see possibilities that might generate a different future from the one that would automatically occur from the drift of events.



UNSPOKEN RULES UNDERLYING THE DISEASE OF AMERICAN MANAGERISM

- ✓ Take care of #1.
- ✓ Get turf, mark it and build strong alliances to keep it.
- ✓ Keep winning in the short run.
- ✓ Every problem has a cause: find it and fix it.
- ✓ Justify everything.
- ✓ Be careful, minimize risk, hedge your bets, don't rock the boat.
- ✓ People are only useful if they do what you want them to do.
- ✓ Cover your ass, take credit, avoid blame (and always know who to blame).
- ✓ Cheap quick fixes are better than costly solutions.
- ✓ People have got to be motivated, whether by a carrot or stick.
- ✓ Rank has its privileges.
- ✓ Don't lose control. Act as if you know what you're doing, especially if you suspect you don't.
- ✓ People are cost factors. Everyone is expendable except me—and maybe you.
- ✓ Develop allies in powerful places, stay ahead of your peers at all costs, and don't get too close to the people you work with.
- ✓ Never admit you screwed up. Punish errors in others.
- ✓ Don't trust. Keep the important stuff secret.
- ✓ Always look good.

ManAnon

How can we prevent managers/addicts from further damaging themselves, their friends, their organizations, and the economy? What can be done to minimize the suffering and ineffectiveness of people at work?

Consider, if you will, a nationwide network of recovery treatment centers to deal with the disease of managerism. Now that more and more managers are hitting bottom, there's a need for readily accessible recovery centers, located in or near the major corporate zones, which can provide self-help treatment for this addiction. We propose to call the organization Managers Anonymous, or ManAnon.

The only requirement for membership is an acknowledgement of one's addiction to managerism and a clear intention to recover from it.

ManAnon would operate with the well-known Twelve Step Program that has been so successful in treating a variety of other addictions, beginning with alcoholism. Our version of AA's first three steps for managerism is:

1. We admitted we were powerless over our assumptions about organization, management and work, and that our organizations had become unworkable.
2. We came to see that a managerial Context larger than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to commit our will and our work lives to a worthy organizational Vision.

(A copy of the complete twelve steps is available upon request.)



Owning the disease makes it possible for new opportunities to emerge.

The Choice

The choice for any manager is essentially this:

- Deny the addiction, and thereby give it continuing power. That means staying hooked on a particular way of managerial thinking and continue doing what doesn't work, or
- Acknowledge the power of managerism in our daily work life and recover our freedom to act. That means acknowledging that our managerial actions have been largely running on automatic. While *we* thought we were choosing, *it* was choosing. When *we* thought we were controlling it, *it* was controlling.

By taking even the first step of the Twelve Step Program, new questions open up to take the place of complaining, resignation, and perhaps cynicism. For example, ***is it possible to actually make a difference in my own organization, rather than merely pretend I make a difference? Is it possible to be responsible for my actions, rather than merely reactive to circumstances? Is it possible to be empowered and to empower others in the work setting? Is it possible to transform organizational vision into reality?***

We hold that asking such questions begins the process toward recovery. When confronting addiction, we've learned that questions are more empowering than answers.

Commitment to Recovery

If we have given the impression that being an addict is a bad thing, we have fallen short of our intention. Being an addict can be a good thing when there's a commitment to get to the other side of it, to recover one's ability to choose. Only denial makes it a bad thing, because denial destroys freedom and possibilities and perpetuates the array of undesirable consequences for everyone involved. Denial keeps the disease in place. "Owning the disease" makes it possible for new opportunities to emerge.

Anybody who has ever been addicted to anything and has gotten through it is always empowered by the addiction.

Getting through the addiction gives us access to ourselves and the possibility of satisfying and productive living that is beyond anything that could be imagined in the denial stage.

It also alters our relationship to time. Instead of dreading an inevitable future with no possibility for change, the recovered addict realizes that the future is based upon actions accomplished one day at a time.

Once a manager gets beyond his own addiction to managerism, he becomes personally effective in making it possible for others to acknowledge their addiction. New management and leadership is expressed by releasing the entire organization from its collective addiction to managerism. What is necessary is a breakthrough in our traditional practices and culture of management. This is possible whenever we get ourselves unhooked from our addictions.



The Acid Test

Please re-read the description of an addict at the beginning of this article. As you read, ask yourself whether those with whom you work might describe *your* management in similar terms.

Now check one of these boxes.

- Yep! I got a glimpse of myself.
- Nope! You've got to be kidding. (But it certainly describes my boss!)
- Maybe, maybe not. I'm not sure. But I'll think about it.

Managers are very special people. Whether in corporations or in government, they occupy positions of great power and influence. They are arguably the most powerful segment of society, since most of our societal problems are fundamentally problems of human organization and management. And all of these problems require management for their resolution. The quality of our society, both now and in the emerging future, depends critically upon the quality of managerial practice.

The crucial question is whether we are willing to break out of our current managerial culture which is hooked in a particular, reactive, automatic way of relating to the world. If the answer is 'Yes', there's a great possibility for creating a genuinely new management.

SOME MAJOR ORGANIZATIONAL SYMPTOMS OF MANAGERISM

- ✓ Nobody is responsible.
- ✓ People focus on controlling others and avoiding being controlled.
- ✓ Personal accountability for problems is denied at all levels.
- ✓ Reasonable explanations and justifications abound.
- ✓ Blaming others and gossiping are the norm.
- ✓ Individuals, including management, experience emptiness, futility, alienation, hopelessness, powerlessness, and resignation.
- ✓ Work has lost its meaning.
- ✓ Systems don't work and are increasingly unworkable.
- ✓ The conditions are generated for many other addictions.
- ✓ Productivity and competitiveness decline.
- ✓ Managerial actions derive from habit and past procedures in an attempt to maintain the present.
- ✓ Managerial action is reduced to operating a program.
- ✓ Freedom is lost.