

Schools and Cars

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I have been thinking about the relationship between education and the automaker's bailout. In the debates over the federal rescue of the auto industry, many argued that "bad management" was one of several key factors causing the U.S. auto industry to be so unprofitable that the current economic crisis threatens its solvency. But what exactly do people mean by "bad management?" Certainly, making decisions based on short term quarterly profits, like buying off disgruntled workers with sweeter pension plans or by deciding to put car cabs on truck chassis, is certainly bad management. The problem, however, goes deeper.

Our management problem is so fundamental that it manifests in the nooks and crannies of our lives. A high school Latin teacher is afraid to take an op-ed piece (half of it written in Latin) into her class because she is not supposed to expose her students to opinions. A high school English teacher walked into school on November 5th shocked that there was no discussion or talk of the historic election results the night before. Something is terribly wrong with this picture.

What is wrong is that the decision-making process in the vast majority of our institutions—schools, businesses, government bureaucracies—is strictly top-down, while the political system (our so-called democracy) is still, in spite of Obama's historic "ground-game," a spectator sport that polarizes public debate. This is why car manufacturing and most schools are unproductive and highly dysfunctional places.

Let me try to offer some details. In the 1950's, Toyota's management decided to adopt a decision-making process called Total Quality Control (TQC). Simply put, this involved getting every employee in the company to participate in Quality Circles so as to become problem-solvers. Every Toyota employee was given real power to make decisions about design, production and sales. This resulted in less expensive, more reliable and more desired vehicles than made elsewhere. TQC made Japan the economic powerhouse of the 1980s and still explains Toyota's success today. U.S. auto company executives were attracted to the lean and efficient results of TQC but couldn't bring themselves to let go of the power they have in order to implement the process that produced the results. They would not put assembly line workers in the same room with designers, car salesmen and engineers to debate the best way to meet, efficiently, the transportation needs of car and truck buyers.

Instead, the CEOs turned their attention to the school system and decided that their economic woes were the result of bad education. And just as businessmen looked to schools in the 1840s and 1890s to train, sort and socialize the U.S. workforce, CEOs in the 1990s decided to impose their bastardized version of TQC on the K-16 education system, now known as high-stakes testing. Unlike authentic quality circles, where workers study and debate the range of data and issues, high-stakes testing is a top-down

policy-making process. Authentic TQC in the schools would have empowered school sites (that truly would have represented the school community), with real decision-making—power to decide the ends as well as the means of education.

Without real power to make real decisions, people do not have the desire to engage in the kind of problem-solving from which critical thinking develops. When confined to completing tasks (e.g, teaching Latin grammar and vocabulary or attaching a wheel to an axle), employees are discouraged from investing their full thought and energy in their work. When management decides that it doesn't need any input from workers, CEOs never learn how their decisions create poor products and mind-numbing education. This is not so surprising since they are products, themselves, of bad education.