

Daniel M. Cable: *Alive at Work: The Neuroscience of Helping Your People Love What They Do*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2018. 203 pp. \$30.00, hardcover.

Since the first stirrings of the industrial revolution, there have been repeated warnings concerning the destructive effects of routinized, fractionated work on the well-being and motivation of workers. Take this example from Adam Smith (1976: 302–303), originally published in 1776:

The man whose whole life is spent performing a few simple operations of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.

Smith's observations have been echoed by social scientists and researchers on task design again and again (e.g., Walker and Guest, 1952; Marx, 1977, chapter 15). The most recent influential approach to task design (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, 1976) emphasized the importance of a set of five task characteristics (variety, autonomy, task identity, feedback, and significance) if people were to be motivated at work. More recent research (e.g., Morgeson and Humphrey, 2006) has added a relational aspect to these characteristics, given that people do not work in isolation from each other.

It might be thought, therefore, that the argument was over and that organizational scholarship completely understood the importance of designing jobs to include a variety of tasks, decision-making autonomy, feedback on performance, and the other important elements highlighted over the centuries. But there seems to be an eternal opposition between such enlightened views and a strain of organizational scholarship that focuses on organizational control over every aspect of

the employee's life. This control perspective is captured in March and Simon's 1958 classic entitled *Organizations* in which employees are depicted as programmable computing machines: programs can either be "built into machines or acquired by humans" (p. 158). The tasks of leadership in this dystopian world include having to "neutralize or eliminate the dysfunctional consequences of subgroup organization" and "forcing lower-echelon leaders to conform to the demands of the hierarchy" (p. 22). This control perspective is a recurring presence in organizational scholarship (Perrow, 1973) irrespective of the losses to productivity and innovation that derive from the overemphasis on metrics, compliance, and regimen (see the case study of factory organization in Bernstein, 2012). In this context, Cable's book offers a new take on the perennial struggle for humans to fulfill their potential through work. The book is targeted at organizational leaders as well as the rest of us who have to suffer or appreciate the setups that these leaders enforce.

Cable's book articulates the connection between job design and the neuropsychology of the individual employee. The emphasis throughout the book is on what Cable describes as the seeking system, a cognitive process that releases dopamine when curiosity is acted on and that leads to exploration, self-expression, and focused experimentation. These behaviors, in a reinforcing loop, further activate the seeking system. What is striking in his book, therefore, is the link between job design and the individual's biology. This is something new—the claim, backed up by compelling evidence, that organizations of the kind depicted in and recommended by March and Simon (1958) are designed to suppress our natural impulses, to turn off employee engagement, and to thereby lose the advantages of innovation and motivation that can be released if the seeking system is incorporated into organizational life.

The book is divided into four parts, each of which has two or three chapters. The first part outlines the neuroscience of the seeking system, setting up the ideas for how the organization should be designed if human potential is to be optimized. Cable locates exploration, a prominent topic in the strategy literature, at the individual level as an inherent human tendency too often repressed by fear of authority, adherence to metrics, and ignorance of human potential. The second part of the book builds on the work by Cable and others on how enabling self-expression at work allows individuals to flourish within a framework of understood goals and values. Part 3 explores the importance of playfulness at work and the role of humble leaders in enabling learning to flow upward from employees to leaders. And the fourth part relates all of the foregoing to the ways in which people find purpose in their jobs—however apparently menial these jobs might be. The key is in the self-narratives that connect work with the recipients of the work. Thus the hospital cleaner is mindful of the patients whose lives are saved, and the university fundraising team is in touch with the students whose scholarships are life-changing.

Throughout the book, Cable illustrates his points with vivid stories of people and companies from his personal engagements. If I have one quibble it is with the somewhat uncritical acceptance of organizations as in the business of saving souls. The book begins with some graffiti that Cable noticed in London: “I wonder what my soul does all day when I’m at work.” At the very end of the book, Cable suggests that organizational leaders have duties that are “similar to religious figures” (p. 173). Elsewhere, he champions the idea of leader authenticity. Certain leaders are more authentic than others, we are told, and therefore are able to engage their employees’ best selves, provide them with purpose, fire up employees’ seeking systems. Alas for

those leaders who suffer from inauthenticity. They are depicted as fakes who seek to manipulate employees' emotions. But this whole idea of authenticity has been criticized by one of the very people whose research the book relies on (Grant, 2016). The idea that there is some kind of true self does not bear scrutiny (Wetzel, 2015). What is true is that some people—like skilled actors—are able to portray themselves in ways that appear convincing and compelling (Snyder, 1987), whereas other people struggle to articulate thoughts and ideas that are deeply and sincerely held. Who is most authentic—the actor on the stage who brings tears to the eyes in a depiction of a grieving parent, or an actual grieving parent who appears wooden and cold because he or she cannot muster the words to express inconsolable emotions?

Thus I have reservations about the idea that authentic leaders who humble themselves will rescue our souls and take on the mantle of religious leaders in the new Jerusalem of organizational behavior. This aside, the book is a moving and compelling call to arms that is built on solid research findings and provides a series of relevant recommendations for all of us involved with teaching, administration, and research.

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