

Managers must tinker to transcend

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From Mr Alan Rohrbach.

Sir, With so many fancy models in disrepute there is a desire to rediscover first principles. Stefan Stern certainly makes a case for believing a big idea whose time has come is worth pursuing (“[That old unavoidable question: what’s the big idea?](#)”, December 9.) However, while big ideas are fine, they always run up against the need to think small.

Western Electric’s Hawthorne Works in Cicero, Illinois, was indeed a crucible for experiments just as controversial at the time as they are now. I have first-hand knowledge of this because my grandfather was one of the people gathering information and implementing the experiments.

The changes to “working conditions” to which Mr Stern refers were obviously more than just the odd poster on the wall or better lighting. They included aspects of the assembly line process and specific task execution. Those are known today as “work rules” that are so vigorously negotiated in labour contracts. Which is why he is right to note: “Easy to put into effect? Absolutely not.”

Workers in that era also understood that micro-analysing their work practices was likely to force changes on what had been an apprenticeship “craft” system. While benefits to both company and clients from more efficient production might have been clear, workers did not necessarily like the far-reaching adjustments necessary to optimise the assembly line.

As my grandfather told me years later, he and his cohorts were not the most popular folks at Western Electric. As those fledgling efforts included testing practices that seemed silly to workers (rightly some of the time), there was no small measure of derision and distrust.

All of which reinforces what modern management theory acknowledges: big changes need to be implemented in small increments, and with the clear intention of garnering useful feedback from front-line workers to sustain their support. Small early shifts that bring tangible improvements are the only reasonable way to begin. Managers must first tinker to transcend.

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