

# The Limits of Systems

*Their growth threatens our welfare.*



by Peter Block and John McKnight

**I**N A CONSUMER SOCIETY, WE HAVE COME to believe that *the good life* depends on more schooling, better service from the government, more medical care for our health, and the centrality of the corporation as the driver and deliverer of satisfaction. This belief that *we can purchase what we need from institutions* has reached its limit. Schools do not raise children, police do not keep us safe, doctors do not keep us healthy and more products do not satisfy us. These all just increase the appetite for more and carry the message that what we have is never enough.

The reason systems have reached their limit is in their nature. Systems are designed to create *scale*. Scale requires *consistency, control and predictability*. Control and predictability do not satisfy—they simply make life predictable. This has its value, but also its limits.

## Role of Management

A central task of management and systems is to *maintain control by taking uncertainty out of the future*. This is what is attractive about systems: they seem to make the world *safe, predictable, and under control*. In adopting system life, people choose to yield sovereignty in exchange for *the promise of predictability*. Even families and communities turn over their sovereignty for the *promise of a safe and predictable future*.

Management has also become a way of thinking about life, family, and community—that these can and need to be managed. As systems and their management occupy more cultural space, they expand the message that *prosperity and peace of mind can and must be purchased*. This fuels the growth of powerful systems.

While we benefit greatly from predictable products or services, they also take much of the joy of diversity

and variation out of our lives.

*Systems can't provide satisfaction in domains that require a unique and personal human solution.* The consumer economy is sustained by providing *answers* that always have a *system quality*. Any time you speak of *answers*, you're making a false promise. *The more important dimensions of being human have no clear answer.* This means that *system answers applied to human concerns are counterfeit*. Owning five pairs of shoes does not make a person successful. Owning the latest car does not provide an identity—that is not *who you are*. Love can't be purchased, power not bought. To sustain the volume and predictability that systems require, they are forced to market and sell more than they can deliver. And this *counterfeit promise* is not just to customers, but to system members—and this *dark side* leaves us unsatisfied. In system life, *we become the system that we inhabit. We become replicable. We are interchangeable parts.* It is the industrialization of the person.

*A strength of systems and institutions is the ability to suppress the personal and commodify through replication.* When something becomes personal, it becomes unique and unpredictable. *The need for the system to disdain what is personal has its side effects on who we become and how we associate.* Institutionalization is to *take the personal out of a structure in order to maintain continuity*. To *institutionalize* means to *depersonalize* (code for "We don't need the *unique you* any more.") But *no two people are the same*. Management too often attempts to *overcome their uniqueness and help them align with what the system needs* by insuring that every person is replaceable. This is why the long-term movement to standardize work processes, automate human functions and outsource as much as we can to low-cost strangers.

*Automated human functions affect relationships and our capacity to associate closely with others.* There is no incentive for us to build relationships, because we are only here to produce

together. *What is most personal only lives in the world of family and community.* Systems and management believe that *personal relationships will distort what is good for the business*: "Don't get too close to people; you may have to fire them. Intimacy affects judgment."

*Systems are designed to make relationships instrumental*—not affectionate, caring, or intimate—we are just here for the utility of being together. In our desire for the benefits of system life, *we commercialize our relationships*. We become only interested in a relationship as a form of barter. *We now sign up friends on social-networking sites.*

*Systems do make an effort to compensate for their utilitarian nature.* Progressive management often invests in *training and development* to bring human qualities into its culture. It uses



training as a way of getting people *on board, aligned, on the same page, headed in the same direction*—to create more community in its culture, to put a human face on the system for its members and customers. Training gives the appearance of hospitality, kindness, and

community. Yet, most system training is packaged to enforce the mindset that *what you are is not enough and someone else knows what is best for you*. Moreover, a *system development program* is not a path to freedom and self-expression but a process that *transforms unique people into the system way*.

This combination of *the system way of standardizing and the market way of promising* sustains the consumer economy. *What we've done with our shoes, we've done with our soul, our consciousness and culture.* This is not an argument against systems, only to speak to their limits and bring some humility to their promises. We have a choice about this. We can accept systems for what they are good at and move our attention to helping neighborhoods and families find satisfaction created by their own gifts and capacities. We need to rebuild the capacity of a neighborhood to raise a child, maintain our health, keep the street safe and provide local work. This means turning some of our attention away from a consumer culture and towards more of a citizen culture. LE

Peter Block is founder of Designed Learning. John McKnight is author of The Careless Society. They are coauthors of Abundant Community (Berrett-Koehler). Visit [www.AbundantCommunity.com](http://www.AbundantCommunity.com).

**ACTION:** Support community building.