"Traditional" Command and Control?

It has been said that on the eve of the 1815 Battle of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington was asked what he thought its prospects would be. Pointing to an obscure British Rifleman, the Iron Duke replied "See that fellow over there. He will decide."

That was a remarkable statement from someone who was used to the highly disciplined formations, intricate manoeuvring, and possessing the ability to throw in Brigade-size forces at a moment's notice, so common in that period. Tight, virtually unquestioned Command and Control systems were the order of the day. Yet, like Sir John Moore before him, the Iron Duke knew that, for all its intricate construction and great reliability, any Command and Control System would only work as well as the Men in its mechanism and as well as the Men the system purported to command and to control. The Man was, and remains, the ultimate deciding factor. All Command and Control systems existed in order to give as much advantage as possible to the obscure Man doing the actual fighting.

The world of business borrows much from the world of warfighting. However, in general, the levels of leadership competency in the business world don't seem to match those in the warfighting world. If they did, things like specious calls for the abolition of "traditional" Command and Control systems wouldn't even be heard. "New" models of leadership exalting the leadership of each and every person in the business are actually nothing new. They were already being practiced in the world of warfighting for ages. There is an aspect of the world of warfighting that contributes to this. Nowadays it is fashionable for people to quote idiocies like "I always win. If I don't win I lose learn." That's fine if all you lose when you do lose is a couple of million bucks. It works in the world of warfighting also, except that whatever you learn when you lose in the world of warfighting isn't going to be of much help when you're dead.

In the world of warfighting, "best practices" will very often kill you. The only way to work around this is to use "best practices" for what they are: **case law**. Case law are examples of how principles are manifested in practice. What worked? What didn't work? Why did it work or not work? What were the characteristics of the operating environment of the time? Were any principles violated, and what were the results? How can we apply what we have observed today? How do we see ourselves applying what we have learned five years down the road? Modern-day battlefield detectives have asked whether Wellington was actually a surveyor, based on how he used terrain to his advantage so often. In today's context, how is the principle of using terrain, in this instance, taking advantage of the reverse slope, applicable? Of course, it depends on who has access to satellite information and has the ability to shoot based on that information, for one thing. In business, how does it apply? Well, one thing for sure is the principle that others may decide to copy your system to a "t", but they will have a very tough time copying your very-well-established culture, of which excellent strategy formulation is aready a part!

Therefore, it is not that "traditional" Command and Control systems are archaic, outdated, obsolete or whatever other fancy name one might like to ascribe to it. It does not mean that things like "holacracy" are the new world order either. In fact, "holacracy" is also Command and Control that is predicated on the assumption that individuals and teams are wise, virtuous, possesed of sufficient boldness and initiative and mature enough to make Board-level-type decisions because they already know, or will take the trouble to discover, what is the best decision to make for the company or organization! If this is true for your business or organization, then I say to you "*Hola!*" If it isn't, I would be extremely wary of treading that path. Remember that readily-available information, even digested, analyzed, collated and reorganized information, does not automatically make for wise and mature individuals in organizations. Quite the contrary. If you feed such easily-digestible and easily-usable information to your staff all the time, you will not get mature people making mature decisions for the good of the company and stakeholders; you will get fast-food junkies. You will get staff who seem like they can make good business decisions on their own, but take away the stuff you feed them and they will be as helpless as newborn kangaroos.

In conclusion, Command and Control is not outdated and certainly not archaic. Just observe how your own body works. If your culture is able to emulate the human body, then even a "Top-down" system will work very effectively, because, in effect, what happens is that the "Top-down" structure being manifested throughout the body is actually the "Holacracy" people talk and dream about!

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