

Doug Kirkpatrick wants to give people in the workplace “their brains back.”

While the statement may sound bold, Kirkpatrick, a corporate environment expert, makes a strong argument against traditional work settings and highlights the damages of blind conformity in his new book “Beyond Empowerment: The Age of Self Managed Organizations.”

Self management, the respected author and speaker explained, is the pathway to more productive and positive companies. The era of hierarchical management’s reign is coming to a close.

As a long-time member and leader within the business industry, Kirkpatrick’s perspective is one that has developed over decades.

However, despite a multitude of office influences, he vividly remembers his first day of first grade, an experience he now considers the catalyst for his advocacy of self management.

“Our teacher...asked us to look at an outline drawing of a buffalo and color it with a brown crayon” he shared. “I felt creative. I felt independent. And I knew the buffalo had an elongated toe, so I used a black crayon as well as a brown.”

Unfortunately, his use of prior knowledge and application of skill didn’t earn six-year-old Kirkpatrick extra credit or praise. In fact, he failed the assignment.

“I remember thinking ‘I don’t understand. I’m just supposed to color this brown just because someone said to do it,’” he recalled. “‘I’m supposed to abandon my own experience and creativity and just follow the instructions no matter what?’ I found that sort of troubling, and I never forgot it.”

After growing up in Montana, Kirkpatrick pursued a college degree in economics and fell in love with the dynamic nature of business. He joined a food-processing startup after graduation, and while the company flourished financially, it struggled organizationally.

“We had to put a lot of effort into defining and redefining our organizational structure, so we defaulted to the traditional command and control pyramid structure,” Kirkpatrick shared.

Over time, it became clear this concept was not the best solution either.

“We had an open-door policy...every problem always went to the top of the pyramid, which was very frustrating for everyone in the various layers of management,” he recounted. “We also found that our time was not well utilized.”

From there, Kirkpatrick describes epiphanies he and fellow leadership began to have. Realizing management is something that everyone does all the time in their personal lives and that many excel at complex and life-altering decision in that context, the group shifted more toward the idea of independence.

“They were deciding who to date...where to live, whether to buy a car...whether to have children,” he said. “They were able to make these decisions without a boss.”

When Kirkpatrick moved on with a friend Chris Reaper to begin a new company, Morning Star, the opportunity arose to apply what they’d learned in a fresh environment.

In the early days of Morning Star, Reaper presented his team with ideas about organizational structure, and they

carefully discussed. Everything changed that day.

“When we walked out into the night air we were a self managed organization,” Kirkpatrick said.

A self-managed company, he explained, acknowledges that everyone is already a manager and to the degree individuals are knowledgeable about what to do and how to do it, they should be able to manage themselves.

“We all do this all the time in our own personal lives but when we get to the typical, proto-typical workplace, we find that most organizations want to have a designated layer of managers to do those things for other people.”

While this concept sounds ideal theoretically, if it fails in application, it’s void. Fortunately, the success Kirkpatrick’s self-managed company has seen is expansive, international.

“Our self-managed governance system allowed us to be extremely agile...and embrace quick changes in strategy,” he explained. “It allowed us to grow in a very coherent manner... and it reduced the cost and overhead of a typical bureaucratic management.”

Additionally, the culture self-management created was one was mutual respect and dignity.

“We don't call people employees,” he said.

This is because the world employee is defined as one who works for another for pay. Morning Star using the term colleagues.

“We consider everyone to be a professional at what he or she does and that's regardless of whether they're tending to ranches, cleaning bathrooms or sorting tomatoes” he said. “They have the freedom and autonomy to do their best work, to acquire resources, to build relationships, to innovate, to lead. We find that the people are happier.”

Immensely inspired by Morning Star’s results, Kirkpatrick decided to author a book about the experience and effectiveness of self management.

“I consider the book to be for business leaders who are looking for a better way to define their organizations and to create higher levels of engagement, better business performance and shrink their passive business bureaucracy and just to do the right thing and give people their brains back and do the right things in the workplace.”

University of Phoenix leader Stephanie Glady and well-known online company Zappos have already purchased the book in bulk, and University of Phoenix even transformed a section of their institution.

“There were a lot of challenges and opportunities along the way but after the 12-month effort, she was able to successfully transform her particular business all the way from command and control to self management and her workers were very proud of the work,” he said.

University of Phoenix’s example, along with his own experience, supports Kirkpatrick’s claim: Self-Management isn’t the type of change that happens overnight.

It won’t be the predominant way of working in the next few years, but Kirkpatrick believes it is the future.

“If we look at a hundred years from now, it could be perhaps the only way of working,” he speculated. “But it’s going to take time, cultures change slowly.”

