

# Why Carrot and Stick Management Can't Work

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For a long time now, I have been trying to get management to be interested in, to understand, to appreciate and to adopt a view of human behavior and performance based on Perceptual Control Theory (PCT) as developed and articulated by William T. Powers. I haven't met with much success. Then one day it dawned on me that before I can get management to adopt something new, they must relinquish the old. Management is never interested in something new, even if it is much better, if they believe what they already have works. In my case, what is it to which they cling? As succinctly as I can put it, it is "carrot-and-stick" management. I believe management believes they can control (or at least shape and direct) human behavior through the use of carrots (rewards) and sticks (punishments or the threats of it). They are mistaken. Carrot-and-stick management doesn't work, it can't work. It's an illusion. So why does management cling so fiercely to what is demonstrably non-functional and more than a little dysfunctional? A better question still is why do they want to control the behavior of others? That, too, is a mistake. I don't know if I can disabuse them of that notion. Still, it's worth a try. So here is my explanation of why carrot and stick management can't work. Hopefully, it will have some effect.

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*Imagine if you will a gathering of senior managers and executives, along with several management gurus, all there to discuss ways and means of motivating employees, managing their performance and, in general, getting the most out of them, "The best they have to offer" as one speaker put it. The last speaker, selected to represent employees in general, had been challenged by the organizers to sit in on the session, take notes and then tell the attendees what he heard and what he thought. His remarks begin below.*

## ***You Still Don't Get It!***

I've listened carefully to the presenters and the discussions. What seems clear to me is that if you strip all those ideas and recommendations of their psychological and management speak finery, they boil down to carrot-and-stick management practices. You are clearly focused on controlling employee behavior and you rely on carrots and sticks to do it. That's a big mistake and here's what I have to say on that score.

After all these years you still don't get it! Carrot and stick doesn't and can't work. Truth is it never did. It was all an illusion. You wanted so badly to believe it worked that you deceived yourself into believing that it did. It didn't. What has been going on is what has been going on for thousands of years; namely, the folks in charge use carrots and sticks to try and get the rest of us to go along with their program, to do what they say and behave in ways they want. And so the rest of us have played along for thousands of years, making it look like were going along with the program when in fact we were gaming the system. We got what we wanted, and we made it look like you were getting what you wanted. To be honest, sometimes you did. But we adopted protective coloration; we walked, talked, looked and acted like the compliant little pawns you seemed to want. Sad to say many of you still want compliant little pawns and so many of the rest of us continue to game the system, *your* system.

What you don't seem to get is that you and the rest of us are a whole lot more alike than you want to admit. You have purposes; so do we. You are a "living control system;" so are we. We all have goals and we all pursue them. Our chief means of doing this is our behavior. We all behave in

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ways that are meant to bring what we see into alignment with what we want to see. When you start messing around with my behavior you are interfering with my means for obtaining what I want. You probably don't care about that but you should know this as well: When you interfere with my behavior you are also interfering with the chief means I have at my disposal for delivering what you want from me. You need to back off and let me do my job. I'm perfectly willing to bust my buns getting you what you want, providing you pay me a decent amount, support me in doing it, don't ask me to do something that I believe is illegal, immoral or unethical, and say "Thanks" when I deliver.

There was a time not so long ago when you were primarily interested in my overt, observable behavior. My working activities consisted of interactions between me, my tools and the materials on which I worked; I made things, I produced a product. You could see what I was doing and how I was doing it. You could even pay an industrial engineer to figure out the best way of doing it and then pay me to do what the engineer had figured out. What you wanted from me was compliance and I gave it to you. On occasion, you wanted me to do something stupid. At first, I tried to explain why that was a dumb thing to do but you told me to shut up and do as I was told. I shrugged and did what you asked. I was right, you were wrong. Sorry about that but you wanted compliance, and I gave it to you. In any case, because you could see what I was doing and if what I was doing was what you wanted me to do you came to believe that your carrots and sticks worked. You could see that for yourself – or so you thought.

Today, my working activities consist primarily of interactions between me and information, and between me and other people. My tools have changed; instead of hammers and saws and wrenches and lathes and drills, I now rely on language, mathematics, concepts, models and other information-processing tools (and, yes, that includes the computer). You can't see what's going on in my head and, often enough, you can't tell me what to do. It falls to me to figure out what to do and how to do it. Gone are the good old days of prefigured working activities; now, those activities have to be configured in response to the circumstances at hand and I have to do the configuring. Whether you realize it or not you are no longer paying me to comply with your wishes or dictates or commands; instead, you are (or should be) paying me to produce results of value. To do that I require no small amount of discretion regarding the what, how, when and why of my work. In a word, I require "autonomy." I also require support, cooperation, the right tools and help coping with various obstacles and barriers when they crop up. You require my understanding, commitment and skill set. I can't do it alone and you can't do it without me. We need each other.

Yet, you cling to those cursed carrots and sticks, and I find that very puzzling. Why? Because I know you know they don't work with you so why do you think they work with me? You and I are both human beings. You and I are both "living control systems." Why do you cling so tenaciously to those carrots and sticks? Is facing up to the fact that we are more alike than different too much for you? Is it perhaps that you can't relinquish the illusion of control? Or is it perhaps that you're just a mean S.O.B. who doesn't care about people? I certainly hope not but I have run into a few of those in my time. I will tell you this: We can accomplish a whole lot more working together than we can if we're at odds with one another. Think about that. Think about what we might be able to achieve if you had an army of committed, dedicated, competent, autonomous employees, all of whom were communicating, cooperating and collaborating in pursuit of goals and objectives that all of us valued. Nothing could stop us.

If you think all of this is just an empty rant on the part of a disgruntled worker let me assure you that is not the case. I opened with "after all these years" which was my way of referring to the shift to knowledge work which knocked carrot and stick approaches into the dust bin of history. So let

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me tell you a little story, a “sea story” from my Navy days, one that took place way, way back in 1957, in the early days of the shift to knowledge work. It’s a story about compliance and I’ve titled it “Aye-Aye, Sir.” To spare my then division officer any further embarrassment I have changed his name. The rest is as true as can be.

## Aye-Aye, Sir

The year was 1957. The ship was the *USS Gregory (DD-802)*, an old WW II Fletcher-class, 2100-ton destroyer. We were in Subic Bay in the Philippines, taking a break from our assignment of patrolling the Formosa Straits.

Tommy Lee Crabtree, a Gunner’s Mate second class (GM2), was working on Mount 53, one of the ship’s five, five-inch gun mounts, trying to repair an as yet unidentified malfunction. I was new on board – a Fire Control Technician (FT) with the rank of seaman (FTSN) – and I was working on Tommy Lee, trying to persuade him to invite me to join the armory coffee mess. The armory coffee mess was, in my mind, the most prestigious coffee mess on board the *Gregory* and I badly wanted an invitation to join. The invitation had to come from Tommy Lee; he was the Gunner’s Mate in charge of the armory. Short-term, my hopes weren’t high, but I was prepared to hang in there for the long haul.

Tommy Lee and I were taking a break, hunkered down on our haunches next to the gun mount, sipping coffee and chatting in a way calculated to help him take my measure, when we spotted our division officer approaching.

Our division officer was a Lieutenant Junior Grade (LTJG) whose last name was Larue. A bit of a martinet, he had been nicknamed “Lash,” an appellation borrowed from a star of western movies of the 1940s.

“What are you two doing?” he demanded.

“Drinkin’ coffee and shootin’ the breeze,” replied Tommy Lee.

“What are *you* doing here?” Lash asked of me.

As a Fire Control Technician, my work required close coordination with the Gunners Mates, so I had a convenient and true cover story. Standing up, I said,

“I came down to find out when Tommy Lee thinks we’ll be able to include the gun mount in the daily workouts and if he thinks we’ll have to realign it with the rest of the gun battery.”

“Well,” demanded Mr. Larue, turning to Tommy Lee who was still squatting, “when will it be fixed?”

“I dunno. I’m workin’ on it. Probably sometime today.”

“That’s not good enough! Get off your ass and get back to work! I want that gun mount back in working order A.S.A.P.!”

Tommy Lee looked up at Mr. Larue, studying him much the way he might contemplate a cockroach he was thinking about stepping on. Then, rising slowly to his feet, Tommy Lee grinned wickedly and asked,

“Are you *ordering* me to fix this here gun mount, Mr. Larue?”

“You’re damn right, I am,” snapped Mr. Larue.

Shifting his coffee cup to his left hand, Tommy Lee saluted smartly, and said,

“Aye-aye, Sir. What would you like me to do first?”

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The reactions played across Mr. Larue's face like moving scenery: first puzzlement, then comprehension, followed in quick order by surprise, shock, humiliation and, finally, red-faced, apoplectic anger.

"Lash" Larue had been hoisted with his own authoritarian petard by a master of the game. Tommy Lee had done what all those who must submit to authority have been doing for thousands of years, he submitted. He went passive. He asked Mr. Larue to tell him what to do and he would do it. The problem for Mr. Larue was that he couldn't issue the necessary orders. Tommy Lee knew that all along. "Lash" Larue was just now finding that out.

Furious, Mr. Larue glared at Tommy Lee, then turned and stomped off without a word.

Tommy Lee watched him go, and then turned to me, doubtless feeling expansive as a result of besting Larue, and said,

"Nick, you can hang your cup in the mess when you're finished."

Witness to Tommy Lee's triumph, the potential value of my testimony at future gatherings outside the armory had earned me the invitation I sought. I was in.

So, ladies and gentlemen, let me ask you,

***"Do you get it now?"***

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## **About the Author**

Fred Nickols is an independent writer and consultant, the managing partner of Distance Consulting LLC, a consulting firm he has headed since 2001. His career includes 20 years in the United States Navy and 40 years in the private sector, including two executive-level positions. For many years he has been concerned with what the late Peter Drucker called "the shift to knowledge work," especially the different view of work and worker it calls for. Chief among those differences is a view of human beings as "living control systems," a view rooted in the late William T. Power's Perceptual Control Theory (PCT). Fred's website ([www.nickols.us](http://www.nickols.us)) contains more than 200 articles, book chapters and papers that are available at no charge. Many deal with human behavior and performance in the workplace and with Perceptual Control Theory.