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Controls and Constraints

Steven S. Taylor

Editor-in-Chief

We teach managers to seek control and eliminate constraints. In contrast artists often create constraints and lose control. That may be something of an exaggeration, but it also has a ring of truth. As a manager I saw constraints as something generally negative and control as something generally positive – lack of control was a sin when pointed out by auditors. In contrast as an artist I often intentionally construct complex constraints for my work and scoff at control, saying something like, “control is an illusion”. As a scholar I wonder about the implications of this difference.

It would be unfair to say that all managers are control freaks, but it not unreasonable to suggest that management is fundamentally about control. We create organizational structures, processes, and rules in order to control what would otherwise be a chaotic an unpredictable mess of people trying to work together to achieve something that they cannot achieve alone. Taylor’s *Scientific Management* was all about managers controlling how workers worked. In its most negative, management practices are built on Theory X in which people are assumed to be inherently lazy and that they will do what they can to avoid doing work. Control systems allow us to detect when people aren’t doing what they are supposed to be doing and take corrective action – to control the situation. Critical management is full of analysis that critiques management systems as panopticons that control employees’ behavior. In a more positive light, management may take a more Theory Y approach where managers may believe people are ambitious and motivated if given the chance and the manager’s job is to remove any constraints that get in the way, but the manager’s job is still to control the situation. When things in an organization don’t go as planned, the manager can be fired for their failure to control the situation and produce the desired outcomes.

Contrast this with the art world. As a young playwright, we did “finger exercises” in playwriting classes. Each exercise was a set of constraints, for example “write a scene with three characters in which one character reveals a secret to one, but not both, of the other characters”. I have given myself constraints – when writing “Blasphemy & Doubt” (Taylor, 2007) I set myself the constraint of not using any pronouns. Poetic forms are sets of constraints, a Shakespearean sonnet is written in iambic pentameter and rhymes ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. A Haiku has seventeen syllables, includes two contrasting images and a synthesis. Artists seem to know that constraints make you more creative, up until a point when they don’t. As a playwright I gave up on control pretty early on. I can write whatever words I want, but the actor will say them in their way, not in the way I heard them in my head. And stage directions – the first thing I learned in my first playwriting class was that directors feel free to ignore stage directions. I can write what I want, but they will do what they need to in order to make the play work on stage. The performed play may come from the script I have written, but I don’t have control over the performance. And that’s a good thing. In every production I have ever been involved in, the other artists (directors, designers, and actors) have all made artistic contributions to

the performance that I could not have imagined and made the performance better. It's not just that I don't believe in control as a playwright, I don't want it.

Control is based a belief that you know where you're headed, that you can tightly specify the desired outcomes of what you're doing in advance. And I think there are many environments where control is a good thing. I really want the pilot of the airplane I'm on to be in control and to get us to our destination as planned. I want that pilot to be able to manage that airplane when things go wrong and bring back it back under control. But when I direct a play, I don't want to control the actors, I want to constrain them and encourage their own artistic processes so something wonderful, something collaborative, something that is more than I or any single one of us could have imagined on our own, can emerge. For me the point of making art – in any form – is the voyage of discovery, not the end product.

And there is perhaps the real difference. Control is important for producing known results and creating repeatable processes that do the exact same thing time after time. I want the bottle of my favorite beer to taste exactly like the last bottle I had. But there are also times and places when you don't want to beat the variance out of the process. The variance in the process is the thing that allows for artistic emergence and exceptional and surprising new results. These processes can be managed, in the way that theatrical rehearsal processes are managed (Austin & Devin, 2003). However, that sort of management is not about control in the way that management is so often conceptualized and taught. My contention is that managing those processes is about managing constraints. And perhaps counter-intuitively, managing those processes is not about removing constraints, but rather setting constraints.

The idea of managing a process by setting constraints is common practice in the world of design studios (Sawyer, 2012). Constraints are used to focus the learning, prevent students from relying upon familiar solution patterns, to force students to challenge their own misconceptions, and to slow down their process. In contrast, the *Theory of Constraints* (Goldratt, 1997) in management focuses on how to (in the best case) break or remove those constraints, a theory that seems to me to be about controlling processes.

This raises the question, what would a theory of setting constraints look like? A theory – if indeed theory is even the right word, perhaps a set of heuristics would better capture what I am thinking of – that doesn't believe control is desirable (if it is possible at all). I think that I would start by admitting that setting good constraints is hard, there probably aren't generic constraints that can be applied across situations, and that setting constraints is always contextually bound. I would go farther to say that simple instrumental constraints on the outcome such as cost and schedule constraints are probably not good constraints in the sense that good constraints encourage greater creativity. I suspect that somewhat like poetry, constraints are an "outlaw girl" (Hilberry, 2012) and you cannot attack your desired outcomes directly. As the design teachers know, good constraints force you to challenge your own misconceptions, they make you fail early, and eventually they point you towards someplace genuinely new and interesting, someplace none of us knew existed when we started.

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