

LESSON 7



“TAYLORIZING” BURGERS: A FANTASY

This unit concludes by drawing on the three previous lessons for a look at the present. Since working in a fast-food restaurant is a common high school job, students here reflect on “scientific management” with reference to their own experiences. **Paper Airplane** and **Free to Think, Talk, Listen, or Sing** explored reasons for the changes in workplaces. Students now may recognize that work could be organized differently than it presently is. That realization is an important aspect of not simply accepting their surroundings as natural or inevitable. The knowledge that things could be different is as crucial for understanding history as it is for feeling capable of taking meaningful action.

While students may find the work conditions described in this lesson desirable, they should be encouraged to be critical of these as well. Job rotation, for instance, may not be sufficient to solve the problems highlighted by the previous lessons. All of these arrangements, however, have been common in recent memory. Having one worker read aloud while the others worked, for example, was a contract provision won in the cigar-making industry.

Goals/Objectives

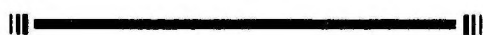
1. Students will demonstrate a working knowledge of the principles of “scientific management” and recognize that alternative principles can also be applied in a workplace.
2. Students will further develop abilities to work cooperatively in small group settings.

Materials Needed

- **Student Handout #7-A: “Taylorizing” Burgers: A Fantasy.**
- **Student Handout #7-B: Confessions of a French-Fry Champion.**

Time Required

- One and one-half class periods.



Procedure

1. Read aloud with students **Student Handout #7-A: “Taylorizing” Burgers: A Fantasy.**
2. Discuss with students the work organization in the All-American Deluxe Hamburger Shoppe:
 - Taylor calls this work process extremely “inefficient.” When he uses this word, he means that it is not efficient in accomplishing a particular goal. In what ways is the Hamburger Shoppe not “efficient”? Who benefits from Taylor’s brand of efficiency?
 - In what ways is this work process “efficient”? Is the workplace efficient in terms of producing a stimulating work environment for the employees? In terms of producing healthy food? etc.
3. Tell students that their task is to complete the advice Taylor might give to the owner. Have students refer to **Student Handout**

#4: Frederick W. Taylor: Taylorisms (from the **Paper Airplane** lesson). Review these as a class so that everyone will be prepared to come up with some “good” advice. You might also remind students of some of the ideas the class proposed for restructuring the process of making paper airplanes.

4. Divide the class into groups of three. Have these groups give advice to the owner in the four different categories indicated at the end of the story.
5. Bring students into a circle. Ask for volunteers to read advice to the owner. Be sure students relate their suggestions to Taylor’s principles of scientific management.

Compare the changes in their new restaurant with any others they might be familiar with, especially those such as Burger King, McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken, etc. Make efforts to draw out students’ work experiences at these types of restaurants.

Talk especially about how the changes students proposed would affect workers: their relationships with one another, the kinds of

skills they would or would not learn, how they would feel about their work, etc.

Note: This lesson might provide an opportunity for students to research different workplaces and how the structure of a workplace helps determine the skills and attitudes workers acquire. Students questioning the structure of their own and friends’ work situations will help them understand these environments as shaped by people with particular interests rather than as part of a natural order.

We’ve included an optional **Student Handout #7-B: Confessions of a French-Fry Champion**. This story describes the Taylorized work environment at a McDonald’s restaurant. It’s a humorous first-person account of one teenager’s job conditions, and can be used as a model to encourage students to write similar analyses of their workplaces. While **Confessions** is set in a fast-food restaurant, the writer’s attention to detail in recounting the highly specialized work procedures and how those affect the worker is a useful example for people examining any number of jobs.

STUDENT HANDOUT #7-A



“TAYLORIZING” BURGERS A Fantasy

It wasn't often that Frederick Winslow Taylor IV felt like eating hamburgers. Generally, he was fond of steak. But as it happened that evening, he found himself walking into the All-American Deluxe Hamburger Shoppe.

Choosing a seat by the window, Taylor sat down, picked up a menu, and began wondering whether he'd have a cheeseburger, a double hamburger, or a bacon and sprouts burger.

“Well, forget you! I don't care if you are chef, waiter, and cashier all rolled into one! I'm the owner here and what I say goes! Got that, pal? What I say goes!”

The man stormed out of the kitchen into the restaurant. When he discovered that all customers' eyes were upon him, he promptly turned a deep red. Still shaking, he stood fumbling with his tie and tried to recapture his lost dignity.

With the excitement over, the two dozen or so customers resumed chomping on their All-American Deluxe Burgers or slurping their All-American Deluxe Milkshakes or munching their All-American Deluxe French Fries.

But Taylor's curiosity was aroused. Of course, he was no *ordinary* customer. And as the still-red owner was trying to make his way out, Frederick caught hold of his arm.

“Problems with your workers, I see.”

The owner grunted.

“You know,” Taylor continued, “I just might be able to help you out. Ever heard of Frederick W. Taylor?”

“Who?”

“My great-great-grandfather—Frederick W. Taylor. You *have* heard of him, haven't you? He was *the* expert in dealing with workers, a true scientist of the work process, a master of management.” He beamed with pride.

“So?” snapped the owner.

“So, I too know a great deal about the problems we owners and managers face, and I'm offering you my scientific assistance. Please join me, won't you?”

The owner, having regained his composure, was just curious (and desperate) enough to agree. And sitting down asked, “Okay, Taylor, how can *you* help *me*?”

Well, first I need to know what's the problem. Any owner who has to remind his workers who's boss definitely has a problem,” he chuckled.

The owner, not amused, thought for a moment. “I guess I've just let the workers take advantage of me. You see, I used to believe that if my workers helped run the restaurant, they'd feel like it was *theirs* and things would go more smoothly.”

“Aha!” Taylor smiled knowingly. “As I suspected. You let the workers control the restaurant, and they fouled things up and now you're going broke. Right?”

“Wrong,” the owner shook his head. “No, the restaurant is making a profit.”

“It is?” Taylor looked puzzled. “So what's your problem?”

“The problem is that the workers want to decide everything themselves. They want to change the menu. They insist on offering what they claim are more nutritional foods. Well, that's fine. But you know these health foods take more time to prepare, and my profits aren't as high as they *could* be. I might even have to hire more workers! They also set their own schedules and sometimes don't come in if they're just barely not feeling well or even if they're tired of working! I don't have to pay them if they don't come in, of course, but it makes planning more difficult for me.”

Taylor nodded his head, “Well this *is* trou-

bling, though my great-great-grandfather faced much stickier problems.”

The owner ignored him. “I never should have started this decision-sharing. It’s just gotten totally out of hand. Imagine: all my workers are chefs, they all wait on tables, they all make up the recipes and order food, they’re all cashiers. They’re all everything.”

Frederick W. Taylor IV scratched his head and frowned. “How can all your employees be chefs if they’re all waiters?”

“Very simple. The workers got together and



“The Brains,” a cartoon by Thomas Nast

decided that it wasn’t fair for just one or two people to cook the food and others to be cashiers, etcetera, etcetera. They claimed they got bored doing just one job and that they weren’t learning anything new. So they decided to rotate all the jobs. Now all the workers do everything: they take turns thinking up the meals, ordering the food, cooking the food, waiting on tables, cleaning up. Why, they decided that one of them would get paid to read magazine articles to the others while the food is being fixed. They said they wanted to talk and learn as they worked.”

Taylor, so stunned that he forgot how hungry

he was, shouted, “That’s incredible! That is ridiculous! They expect to be paid for learning?! You’re running a hamburger joint, not a college!”

The owner nodded sheepishly. “I know. They have gone too far. They are always doing things without asking my permission. I’m ashamed to admit that I don’t even know how they make a hamburger—or a milkshake. Look, it’s my restaurant, I own it. I want to manage it. I mean, I *am* the boss.” The owner’s eyes were getting watery. He sat pouting.

“Look here,” Taylor said sternly. “Your troubles are at an end. Your little difficulties are nothing compared to what my great-great-grandfather faced. With his three-part scientific management system, I could get you back in control of your workers and your restaurant and keep your profits high. Of course, I must be paid for my services, but it will be worth it.”

“Well, at this point, anything is worth a try, Mr. Taylor.”

“Hah! That’s the fighting spirit! Now let’s get down to work.”

Taylor began implementing his three-part scientific management system (as he called it).

Stage one was “gathering together all of the traditional knowledge” that the workers had.

Here are the notes Taylor took while making his initial observations:

- In the production of hamburgers, the same person takes a large piece of meat out of a refrigerated room, grinds it up (cutting fat off!), makes it into patties, and cooks it, apparently using whatever spices are his/her favorites—very inefficient.
- Workers also get together to decide which different specials to offer and when to offer them. They determine the price.
- Same worker who makes hamburgers also makes milkshakes—and the ice cream to go into the milkshake (from scratch). (All the ice cream I tasted was good, but the flavor varied slightly depending on which worker made it.) When I asked why they all made hamburgers, ice cream, and milkshakes, workers said they enjoyed the variety.
- Different workers took different amounts of time to make burgers, shakes, etc. There is no

set standard. (Note: They weren't very cooperative when I arrived in the kitchen with my stop watch. I shan't repeat what one worker called me. One girl said they'd have to vote on whether or not I could be there. The nerve.)

- Owner was right: workers take turns reading newspaper and magazine articles to each other in the kitchen as work is going on. Sometimes they even stop work (!) to discuss a point or tell a story. (Things are worse than I thought.)
- Workers got together and raised the price of french fries and lowered the price of salads. (They told me they wanted to encourage healthier eating habits. Will wonders never cease?)
- Workers do their own bookkeeping to decide what prices to charge and what percentage profits to make. (Surprisingly, the operation is indeed profitable.)
- Workers change decor regularly.
- Workers determine their own hours—they talk out what their needs are and decide on this basis. They also have provided for one another to take maternity leaves and other personal time off (permission of owner not asked).
- Workers wear no uniforms—wear their own clothes—appear to be clean but dressed too much like customers.
- Workers hold their meetings on the premises (often on company time). They have begun talking about turning a back room into a neighborhood day-care center and having cultural events for the neighborhood in the restaurant—all without getting permission from the owner.

Taylor was nervous. What had he gotten himself into? "Sure," he thought, "great-great-grandfather Taylor had applied his scientific management system to making steel—even automobiles. But restaurant work? Goodness, what would F.W. have to say?"

Assignment

It's time for you to help out Taylor IV—even if you don't agree with what he wants to accomplish. He's made an effort to put stage one into practice: collecting all the information about the workplace and the process of producing food at the All-American Deluxe Hamburger Shoppe.

Now he needs to make some recommendations about how the owner can take charge of his restaurant—keeping all the *brainwork* for management and assigning specific tasks to the workers. Feel free to refer to **Student Handout #4: Frederick W. Taylor: Taylorisms**.

Here are some areas for you to consider in helping out Taylor IV:

- (1) How should you change the actual process of making food? If you need to learn more about this process, what more do you need to know and how will you go about finding out?
- (2) How should you change the way decisions are made? (Examples: pricing, work schedules, work assignments, kinds of food sold, etc.).
- (3) Should employees be forced to change the kinds of clothes they wear at work? What *should* employees wear?
- (4) How would you change the decor of the hamburger shop?

STUDENT HANDOUT #7-B



CONFESSIONS OF A FRENCH-FRY CHAMPION

by Jeff Edmundson

When I got a job at McDonald's, I thought, "Gee, I'm going to learn how to be a short-order cook." I was wrong. What I learned instead was to churn out large quantities of a few kinds of food by obeying the orders of machines. I might as well have been assembling cars.

I was a high school student, like most of the employees: unskilled, wanting some spending money, and not expecting to be treated any better than I was in school. I started at minimum wage (then, \$1.65). Few of us ever got far above that meager floor.

On my first day, I was promptly outfitted in the uniform—a blue smock with the logo and a paper hat. My first training was as a counter person. I was taught the strict six-step procedure, including the exact words with which to greet and leave the customer. I learned how to mark the order on the computer card, and ring up the sale by putting the card in the computer register, which did the rest of the work. (I couldn't be trusted to figure the change due.) I learned to assemble the food in a specified order (drinks, burgers, fries), being careful to put exactly 6–8 pieces of ice in the drinks. I learned to smile a lot, and always to look busy, even if that meant wiping the counter down for the tenth time. This instruction required about half an hour.

I saw quickly that the counter was "women's work." Most of the female employees worked here—where they began, with little hope of leaving. I didn't like all that smiling, and I wanted to be where the action was—on the grill. This was the most skilled position, and as such had the highest status (though not any higher pay). So I set out to climb the career ladder toward that lofty goal.

The first step was the french-fry station.

Now here was a man's job. Fries, as with all food at McDonald's, come preprocessed and frozen. So the first step was to unload a large box of fries by measuring them into metal cooking baskets. When a need for fries was anticipated, usually by a counter person saying, "Damn it, where are my fries?" I dropped a basket into the hot grease and pressed a button. When the buzzer rang, I pulled the basket out, let it drip for exactly thirty seconds, dumped the fries in the tray and shook exactly three shakes of salt onto the pile. Then I slipped a bag onto the specially designed scoop and dropped in the defined number of fries. The bags started looking rather skimpy, so I added a few more to plump them up. The next thing I knew, an angry manager had plopped a scale in front of me and demanded I weigh every bag until I got it right.

From fries it was a short step up to shakes. Once again, this job went to men—mainly to lift and dump the heavy containers of shake mix into the machine which froze the mix. I learned to feed the correct amount of mix into the cup, squirt two squirts of the desired flavor syrup, and stick the cup on the mixing machine, which automatically started when the cup went on.

It actually took me a week to become proficient at these stations—proficiency defined as keeping the machines fed during busy times. It took a week because I was only working two or three hours a night—though not so I could rush home to finish my homework. Rather, like most other employees, I was sent home soon after the dinner rush. This is one of the tricks that makes McDonald's so profitable—never have more workers than necessary. I was going all the way to work and earning the princely sum of \$3.30—before taxes.

Ambitious to succeed, I yearned for the chance to reach the peak: the grill. In the meantime, I strove to be the fastest fry-and-shake person around, and was proud to boast that I could run both stations by myself in the busiest hours, for which feat of self-exploitation I was of course richly rewarded with a five-cent raise.

Finally, I made it to the grill. This is the most complicated station, and it took a couple weeks to become good at it. "Good" means fast. At the grill I learned to lay out six frozen patties at a time, like dealing cards. The wide grill could accommodate forty-eight small patties and thirty-six large ones. Buzzers told me when to turn them and when to remove them. At turning, I would sprinkle a specified number of reconstituted onions on each patty.

Meanwhile, someone else put trays of twelve buns into the specially designed toaster, which crisped thirty-six buns every two minutes. The toasted buns were dressed with condiments in squirt guns much like grease guns. Four patties at a time would be laid onto the prepared bottoms, and the twelve tops were neatly dropped on to complete the batch. A good team could put twelve burgers up about every two minutes. (Of great annoyance to us was the customer who deigned to want his burger prepared differ-

ently—the guy who demanded his without mustard. This completely interrupted the timing of our production line, as we singled one patty out for special treatment.)

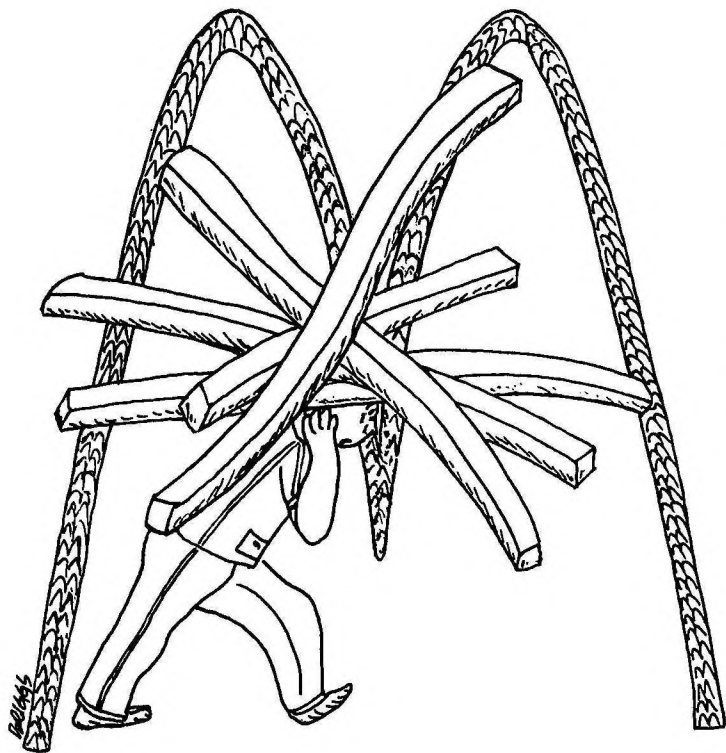
We passed the burgers over the top of the grill to the warming bin right behind the counter, where they were wrapped. The "bin person" would tell us how many of which kind of sandwich to make. Since this decision required some small measure of judgment, it was also a "high-status" position—and the only one regularly available to women. It was often performed by a manager, otherwise by a senior employee—that is, one who had been around for a few months.

The tremendously high turnover was not a problem for McDonald's, and I suspected managers were actually told to encourage it. New employees, often on their first jobs, were obedient, pliable, and willing to work for almost nothing. And there were certainly few training costs.

Older employees, once they reached the top of the status hierarchy at the grill, tended to become troublemakers. Some of us thought we knew how to run things better than the managers (after all, what kind of people made McDonald's a career?), and even had the arrogance to expect some pay raises. So among many other distractions, McDonald's came up with competitions between stores and workers. Stores competed with each other for cleanliness and friendliness awards, and every year we had competitions between "experts" at various stations. I stumbled happily into this trap, and as a fry whiz won a couple of competitions, entitling me to a cheap medallion and a free dinner.

In a year at McDonald's, my pay never rose above \$1.80 an hour. Yet there were only three or four other employees who made as much or more. McDonald's, nonetheless, was successful at creating a measure of employee loyalty. The competitions were a key part of the strategy. These allowed us a kind of "pride" in our work that was otherwise lacking.

Another important weapon was propaganda. Managers constantly "educated" workers in the assorted ways McDonald's was better than the competition, so we were always hearing about the quality of the beef McDonald's bought, or



the strict supervision of the shake mix. They even had a little filmstrip projector which showed “we’re the greatest” tapes. We believed most of it—we wanted to be proud of what we were doing.

The company also bought our cooperation with the occasional small perk. When we discovered that other McDonald’s stores had employee lounges and complained, they walled off a corner of the storeroom and put in a cheap tape player. They threw us a small party once a year. They allowed us to take home leftover food at closing time.

But there were other reasons few of us complained or quit. Most obvious, we were young and didn’t know any better. We also knew we weren’t going to be at McDonald’s forever, so we had little stake in fighting for change. But as important were the friendships we had developed. We knew this at the time and often said we would quit “if it weren’t for the people.”

While there was competition within the store, it usually remained friendly. Despite the status hierarchy they tried to create, most of us knew we were about the same (though we felt better than the short-time employees). And there we were, high school kids doing something real, working as an efficient team. It made for a pretty high degree of camaraderie.

It’s not surprising that unionizing never occurred to us. Not only were we content with the social situation, we were never taught in school that we could organize unions—unions were history, something they had in the 1930s.

McDonald’s was an important part of my education. I learned to arrive on time, do what I was told, be a slave to the machine. Looking back, I’m appalled. The job was low-paid, repetitive, and dead-end—and still I put up with it, even liked it. Could that happy robot have been me?