

The Tools of Control

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A while ago, a President of a union had a very difficult decision to make. They had to figure out how to prevent the plunge of their Union into a deeper divide over what it meant to be a worker in a time where the concept of work was not only being challenged from an economic lens, but of a cultural, political and social lens as well. This President had to take in the opinion of a few people who had a lot of money and time as well as a lot of people with barely any money and no time at all, in respect to the President's time to hear everyone, of course. There were also people who didn't have any money or a voice but their impact was made clear through the message they lifted up to the larger conversation. There were a lot of people involved!

Which president could I be talking about? Nixon? Lincoln? Johnson or maybe even Obama? I think of this flux a lot - of *which one was it really* - during my short time at Code for America. I'm involved in the union's first collective bargaining agreement, as is the rest of the unit members who contribute their thoughts, fears, energies and time. However, there's something not lost on me about once getting organization-wide emails around the impact that America has had on its people while said e-mail authors sit at a table making it difficult for workers to actualize said impact. There's a word for it, but I can't place it at the moment. Hence my thinking about this flux – am I misremembering how this went down?

The first tool of control that employers have is over **what a worker sees as their ability to communicate about work at work**. It's impressed on workers during company-wide meetings, internal communications and overlaid with how the organization speaks externally. It can also be used as a chilling tool – a “gentle warning”, a “stern reminder”, things like that. The strength of this tool is tested when collective action is taken by workers. Collective action is a bit contagious – once you see it work well the first time, you begin to think of new ways to uplift messages and communicate to your workers that also demonstrate that it's a shared intent each time. It breaks the ability of this narrative from leadership be the *sole* narrative of how things can happen at work. This kind of action also helps to break another tool that's locked in before you even apply: **the narrative of meritocracy**, a big tell of the tech industry's thought leaders and its justification for tech

wages, difficult interviews and toxic workplace environments. Coming from the Silicon Valley side of startups, over time, my perspective on compensation and pay became less important and the benefits more so. What could my employer provide to convince me to keep coming back to work – outside of pay? *That privilege* is one of the sneakiest; the space in where your pay is good enough to exceed your needs and give you space for wants. It creates a space that employers can leverage in bargaining around what the company *already does* for you and to depict pushing against *that grace* would be pushing against the collective, again, according to the company. This gets tighter if the pay is higher for workers in relation to prior roles (and still below standards for the industry). However, this narrative does break down in relation to the amount of trust and data your unit has with one another.

This dance, **the codependent capture of control by means of pay, the in-built leash of control by meritocracy and the self-policing control of work conversation**, it's something that's very hard to combat – especially because it creates a level of apathy towards demanding more. Why would you, if this is good enough? This trifecta of control is one that's surrendered by workers to their employers but it doesn't start *at work*. We learn this culturally – as part of the (newer) American work ethic that our bosses know best and without them, we would have nothing. The fact is we know this to be false (on varying levels, you might have had a more interactive boss, most of mine over my life have been more of the type to just check if I was doing my job). This is beginning to leak into another topic that's out of scope but I want to remind us that there are many other options as to how we can organize labor: that's why you're here!

This sense of realizing of the falseness of that idea of the divine right of bosses – to shorten the prior – is what I came to see in a lot of unit members at Code for America: extremely talented people who came to that organization to make a difference. Instead, they were constantly being reminded of the nature of work and how attempts at integrating democracy with it, something embedded into the history of this country, came at odds. And I wasn't even there when bargaining began! To see this energy still held, to this day, is something that demonstrates how workers have the power to shape the culture of work and help reclaim the tools of control, they've been a big inspiration to discerning them!

It's not all roses, as many of you might already know. People cling to convention or even anti-union sentiments for many reasons. It could be part of the narrative complex from management, history about racial tension in unions (which has changed, mind you) or gender identity (changing too, to be clear) or other forms of identity-based oppression. The latter most is a bit easier to tackle with research - a lot has been conducted and we see the landscape to be constantly evolving. The former, though - these folks who, when asked if they'd ratchet up in some form of collective action, may respond with empathy for management. One thing that sprouts up in reaction for me is the path to reasoning behind people who don't ask "what could management have done to merit such a response" in favor of expressing immediate empathy for them. It might come off as apathy to you! It might not be that in this case. However, the thing that apathy conditions us to do is to sink into fear. And as with pay, once this is something that can be controlled (through the ability to find work and the like), it's clear how important it is for workers to have a way to be able to articulate that fear and translate it into safeguards to prevent things from even happening (or at the very least, maintaining what people have today). Even that, the want to maintain status quo versus pushing for more can create tension, but the control of it is now in the hands of the workers. This is the ideal path and it can be the common path!

This is different, though, from hoping that a company handbook will one day have your suggestion in it. Now workers can communicate with one another about how their idea for a change of work can help others. People are given a taste of what it means to truly design their place of work. This is a very powerful form of control reclamation because it's not locked to a fixed set of people whose job is to direct labor but *directly related to the people who are laboring*. This is the kind of work that makes you not just feel like a line item, a EIN for tax purposes - an asset! It buoys you in what you do (whether or not it's something that's fulfilling - that's a whole different conversation) and protects the job from harming you (and your loved ones - a better balance of work and life helps everyone).

How do you move people to want to reclaim control? The answer to this is almost *different for each person* you engage. I don't say that to overwhelm but I want to reinforce that everyone's reasoning to want to break from this control is going to be different. To wax a bit poetically, we each have lives with experiences, trauma, joy and pressures that'll change how we respond to that question but it's important to hear people. Without this, you won't be able to understand where people *can* go nor will you be able to help people move. Hold

space for people to understand that you're here to understand them and follow the lead of the unit; as an organizer, this is a stance that requires you to be vulnerable as well.

If it isn't possible to move them then, the act of making moves can help motivate folks like this with regular check-ins, demonstrating that change is possible here. On a broader scale, releasing the control held by management comes in getting as many people involved as possible and flattening what it means to make choices – this comes to actions, communications even running meetings.

Giving everyone a chance to involve themselves can help demonstrate that this is a *collective* effort, that no one person can dictate things and that everyone's input is not only welcomed but desired. If this kind of organizing sounds familiar, come find me after. Sometimes, it's not the conversation that moves people but seeing multiple people get involved and new people also joining the effort. Some people need to feel the confidence of others to begin reclaiming that control.

These are only some of the kinds of control, tools for management or the workers like pay control, narrative of meritocracy/social capital, and the ability to humanize coworkers, that I was able to generalize enough to share today. Unions provide us with the ability to ratchet these in favor of not only improving the quality of life for workers, but even putting truth to power around the mission of inclusion and equity of the last decade. Employee resource groups could have another means of making more changes in the organizations as well as affinity groups by having a union formalize things around pay, discrimination and the like. Retention could be maintained by allowing workers design how they want their career to progress in an adaptive and open way, fixing the leaky attrition hole of the DEI pipelines. We could even make organizational shifts in the work that's done versus moving on arbitrary business decision. Even work to undo damage caused by business! These are fights possibly for the next decade. These are the things I want people to imagine when they're communicating a means of reclaiming the tools of control.