



Classical Foundations of General Management

(Keep an Eye Out for 2024 and 2025 Dates in New York and Jackson, Wyoming)

Overview

This class is based on a handful of ideas:

- Capitalism is the economic engine of civilization;
- General management builds, runs, maintains, and repairs the engine;
- You own your upward mobility;
- History teaches lessons that help you raise your game.

In the last three centuries, the Industrial Revolution transformed civilization completely and for the better. Industrial capitalism pays the bills for every good thing you might enjoy including personal wealth, art, science, medicine, education, social safety nets, political causes, military spending, philanthropy, all of it.

Capitalism's spark plug is entrepreneurship but general management scales the sparks into functioning businesses. That's why the "Creative Destruction" of the Industrial Revolution depends on general management to operate. The Industrial Revolution wants to consume your best work. Not in a grateful or emotionally sensitive way; it has no feelings and is indifferent to you personally.

People like you demonstrate exceptional cognitive ability, conscientiousness, and productivity. So you're put into useful, powerful positions in business before you are ready and ahead of your contemporaries. Since you own your life and no one is coming to your rescue, you need to write a playbook to get where you want to go. History can help.

Most of you won't go to business school to study general management or enjoy long apprenticeships with a terrific mentor. Thankfully, hard-working business people came before us. Some left stories and ideas in the historical record. In this class we borrow those lessons from the past to be better at our jobs today.

Using case studies and group discussion we will tackle: defining general management; managing performance; cognitive distortions at work; financial plumbing of business; executive communication; and fiduciary and spiritual duty.

Our code of conduct is simple: treat colleagues with respect as human beings. Some obligations that come from this code include:

- show up early or on time, stay until the end of class;
- do all the homework and participate in the discussion;
- support professional, open inquiry and free speech.

The rest of this syllabus explains what we will cover, how, and when.

Readings

“Creative Destruction: GDP per Capita (1000 - 2015),” Jackson: Harrison Metal, 2015 - 2024.

“Daniel McCallum’s ‘Superintendent’s Report’ (1855),” Jackson: Harrison Metal, 2019 - 2024.

Grove, Andrew S. *High Output Management*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. ([amazon.com](#))

In Re: Mindbody Stockholder Litigation, “Memorandum of Opinion.” Wilmington, Delaware: Chancellor McCormick, Delaware Court of Chancery, 2023.

Larson, Kate Clifford. *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero*. New York: Ballantine, 2004.

MacKenzie, Gordon. *Orbiting the Giant Hairball - A Corporate Fool’s Guide to Surviving with Grace*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1998. ([amazon.com](#))

Minto, Barbara. *The Minto Pyramid Principle - Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving*. London: Minto International, 1996.

Mokyr, Joel. “Progress Isn’t Natural.” The Atlantic. November 17, 2016.

“Thomas Affleck’s the Duties of an Overseer (1854),” Jackson: Harrison Metal, 2019 - 2024.

Webster, Henry Kitchell and Samuel Merwin. *Calumet K*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1919.

“Whaling Ventures,” Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2012 - 2024.

Session Summaries

DAY ONE: Session 1 + Session 2 (back to back with meal in between)

Session 1: Defining General Management. We will examine the early days of American Capitalism looking for a definition of “management.” We’ll try to identify where a new practice of coordinating and directing the work of others came from. We’ll visit a New England whaling ship, a transcontinental railroad, and a pre-Civil War cotton plantation of the Southern United States.

Assignment (<-- whenever you see this in the syllabus, it means please complete the items below as preparation before the class begins)

1. “Creative Destruction: GDP per Capita,” [Link](#).
2. “Daniel McCallum’s ‘Superintendent’s Report,’” [Link](#).
3. “Thomas Affleck’s Duties of an Overseer,” [Link](#).
4. Grove, Introduction and chapters 1, 2, and 3.
5. Prepare to discuss the following:
 - What do you make of the GDP per Capita graph?
 - What is McCallum’s definition of Management? Grove’s? Affleck’s?
 - Where did “management” come from?

Session 2: Managing Performance in an Unequal World. Colleagues differ. People exhibit a broad range of interests, abilities, and ambitions. To run companies, general managers set goals for these folks, judge their output, and make hard choices about hiring, firing, and advancement. We’ll practice using tools to make this work effective.

Assignment

1. Grove, chapters 6 and 13.
2. Webster, *Calumet K*, chapters 1, 2, and 3.
3. Prepare to discuss the following:
 - Think of someone you work with who is incompetent or unqualified for their role. How did that happen?
 - Think of someone who is in a role well below their capabilities. How did that happen?

DAY TWO: Session 3 + Session 4 (back to back with meal in between)

Session 3: Cognitive Distortions at Work. Cognitive behavior theory says people's self-image, future expectations, and worldview shape their thoughts. And those thoughts are the basis of their actions. Let's figure out which "cognitive distortions" make people more likely to succeed and which ones do the opposite.

Assignment

1. "Cognitive Distortions of Founders," video on harrisonmetal.com. [Link](#).
2. "Factory vs. Studio" video on harrisonmetal.com. [Link](#).
3. "Drake's Equation" video on harrisonmetal.com. [Link](#).
4. Larson, K., chapter 10, "It Was Raining Blood: Harriet Tubman's Civil War."
5. MacKenzie, chapters 1, 2, and 3.
6. Prepare to discuss the following:
 - What goggles are you wearing at work?
 - What goggles do you notice among people who struggle with work? Those who thrive?

Session 4: Financial Plumbing of Business. You improve your odds of success if you understand the basics of finance. Sales, income, assets, liabilities, and capital structure are visible in financial statements. This module requires ZERO accounting knowledge. Whether or not you know accounting, these materials arm you with frameworks to improve your sense-making and your judgment in any business.

Assignment

1. Go to www.sec.gov/edgar. Find the filings for Walmart. Print out the income statement and balance sheet for the year ending January 31, 2024. Review it for no more than 15 minutes and write down five "first impressions."
2. "Harrison Metal's Basics of Finance" video collection on vimeo.com.
3. "Whaling Ventures."
4. Prepare to discuss the following:
 - What would the balance sheet for a whaling voyage look like?
 - What would the income statement for a whaling voyage look like?

DAY THREE: Session 5 + Session 6 (back to back with meal in between)

Session 5: Executive Communication. Your ability to manage depends on your ability to communicate. Whether writing, storytelling, or speaking, great general managers communicate the right content in a way that influences other people. Great communication skills amplify your talents and poor communication skills stunt your growth. It's that simple.

Assignment

1. Minto, chapters 1 through 4. (Minto's book will be handed out on Day One of class.)
2. "[Thank You, Barbara Minto](#)," video on harrisonmetal.com.
3. Bring a sample of *either* excellent or terrible CEO communication to class. Be ready to present your selection and evaluate it live.

Session 6: Fiduciary and Spiritual Duties. To wrap up, we'll discuss the nature of duty to others and to ourselves. As business leaders, we accept a duty as fiduciaries to protect others' assets and work to increase their value. Alongside that duty to others, as human beings we have a duty to ourselves: to sustain our "spiritual gas tank" for a long and productive life.

Assignment

1. Mindbody, all. [Link](#).
2. MacKenzie, chapters 16, 18, and 24.
3. Mokyr, all. [Link](#).
4. Prepare to discuss:
 - Why does the law treat fiduciary duty so seriously?
 - How is your spiritual gas tank doing? How can you fill and refill it?
