

Who owns the process?

Class handout

[As class starts, Radu passes out a handout with the following case and asks the students to read it out loud as a group, each taking turns to read. Radu gives students some time to ponder and discuss among themselves in smaller groups.]

Case: The Playbook at Meridian Digital

Meridian Digital was a mid-sized software consultancy that built custom data dashboards for corporate clients. The work was specialized: each client had different data sources, reporting needs, and tolerances for complexity. The team's processes for scoping, building, and delivering these dashboards had never been written down anywhere. They lived, as one senior employee put it, "entirely in Derek's head."

Derek Saunders was the team lead. He is technically proficient, well-liked by clients, and the undisputed center of knowledge on the team. When a new analyst joined, Derek would train them personally, answering questions as they came up but rarely volunteering information in advance. "You'll know when you need to know," he would say.

Bessie joined the team in the spring as a junior analyst. Her onboarding consisted of a half-day orientation with HR, a tour of the office, and a brief meeting with Derek, who handed her a laptop and said, "Dive in. Ask me anything." And she did ask, often. Derek always answered, sometimes at length. He seemed to enjoy these questions.

What Derek did not notice was that Bessie was writing everything down. Not just the answers themselves, but the structure behind them: when to ask the client for data access versus when to work from exports, how to handle missing values in the revenue feed, which approval steps required sign-offs and by whom, what to do when a client's IT department was unresponsive. Over several months, she assembled these notes into what she called her "playbook", a document organized by task type, with what were the requirements, deliverables, concrete steps, and responsible parties clearly labeled.

The effect was gradual at first. She stopped asking Derek about routine data questions. Then she stopped needing him for help with client communication. By autumn, she was handling the entire projects without escalating. Bessie thought she was doing what she was supposed to do, what would be pleasing to Derek.

Then Derek invited her to a quarterly check-in. He asked how things were going. She told him, with some pride, about her "playbook". She pulled up the document on her laptop and walked him through it. She had even shared it with two newer analysts who had just joined the team.

Derek's expression shifted. He asked to see the full document. He read through it quietly with a serious face, and Bessie was waiting there, extremely uncomfortable and silent. When Derek finished reading, he asked her to delete the document and retrieve it from anyone she had given it

to.

Bessie was stunned. She asked why. He said only that some of the steps were “out of date” and that the document could “cause confusion.” He reiterated the request to delete at the end of the meeting and followed up by email the next morning.

Question for consideration:

Why would Derek ask Bessie to delete the playbook? Do you think his stated reasons were his real reasons?

Class discussion

RADU: So we have read the case. Before I ask for your reactions, let me check something. What kind of document did Bessie produce? What would we call it in this course?

CAMILA: Seems like a collection of process flow diagrams for different processes? Or at least something like one. She documented inputs, outputs, activities, resources, and something about their interrelationships.

RADU: Precisely. She did, more or less on her own, exactly what we have been practicing in this course. And what was the result?

BINESI: She got asked to destroy it.

RADU: Yes, exactly. [*Radu stops and notices Farah's body language was very uncomfortable.*] Farah, something on your mind?

FARAH: I find the case hard to believe, frankly. I understand it's meant to illustrate something, but I am not sure it illustrates anything real. Derek comes across as paranoid, maybe even irrational. In my experience, no competent manager would react this way. He should be thrilled. He has a junior analyst who has systematized her own onboarding and freed him from answering the same questions over and over. That is a win for everyone.

RADU: That is a reasonable interpretation. For what it's worth, this case is based on the real experiences of a former student of mine who joined one of the large firms in the city. But Ming, do you agree with Farah, did you find the case unrealistic?

MING: Not really. I think Derek's reaction is entirely rational, just not in the way he pretends. His stated reasons—the document is “out of date,” it will “cause confusion”—these are obviously pretexts. The document is clearly not the problem. What the document represents is the problem.

RADU: Say more. What do you think it represents?

MING: His value to the organization rests almost entirely on being the person who knows how things work. Everyone passes through him. As long as that is true, he is indispensable. The moment Bessie's playbook circulates, that indispensability greatly weakens. Almost anyone can do what Derek does once they have the knowledge. And Derek knows it.

FARAH: But that reasoning assumes Derek is primarily motivated by job security, which I think is uncharitable. He has been at Meridian for years. He is a team leader. Surely he has enough standing that one junior analyst's document doesn't threaten him.

CAMILA: I am not sure standing protects you the way you think it does. Organizations can be ruthless. If leadership looks at the team and realizes that Derek's institutional knowledge has been captured in a shareable document, they might start asking whether they need Derek at all. Or at least whether they need to pay him what they currently pay him.

BINESI: I want to agree with Farah on instinct, because I also want to believe people are better than this. But I have seen this pattern before, in social work. There were always people who held onto their caseloads very tightly, who kept information close, who were resistant to case management software, who had elaborate reasons why their particular clients required a personal touch that could not be systematized. Some of that was genuine care. But some of it was clearly self-preservation. It is hard to separate the two.

RADU: Can you elaborate on what you mean by "self-preservation" here, Binesi? In what sense is Derek preserving himself?

BINESI: Well, if I know something you don't, I have power over you. Not in a dramatic sense, but in a very practical, organizational sense. You need to come to me. That means I stay relevant. That means my position is secure. The moment what I know is written down and shared, I become less necessary. Maybe I am still necessary for judgment, for handling exceptions, for things that cannot be captured in a flow chart. But that is a smaller and less secure kind of necessity.

FARAH: I still think this reading is too cynical. Couldn't it genuinely be the case that Derek has good operational reasons? Maybe the document really does oversimplify. Maybe Bessie has encoded some of the processes in a way that will lead newer analysts to make mistakes.

RADU: That is worth taking seriously. What do others think? Is there a version of Derek's concern that is legitimate?

CAMILA: Sure. Process documentation can be dangerous if it creates false confidence. If someone reads Bessie's playbook and assumes they can handle something they actually cannot, that could be worse than having no playbook at all.

MING: But that is an argument for improving the document, not deleting it. If his concern were genuinely about accuracy, he would have said: "Let's go through it together and correct what is wrong." Instead, he asked her to delete it. That is not the behavior of someone worried about consistency and quality. That is the behavior of someone worried about his own position.

HAOYU: Can I complicate this? I think Ming is mostly right about Derek. But there is a real thing hiding underneath his excuse, even if he is using it dishonestly.

RADU: Go on.

HAOYU: When I train a new cook, I could write down the recipe: amounts, times, temperatures, the order of the steps. But there is always something left over. You cook the onions "until they are right." How long is that? What is the standard for "right"? I could not tell you. You establish that sense by standing at the pan a hundred nights. It never went on any card.

RADU: And you feel Bessie's playbook has the same gap?

HAOYU: It must. She wrote down Derek's answers. But the best part of what Derek knows might be the part he never says, because he does not know that he knows it.

CAMILA: That is fair, but it cuts against Derek, not for him. If the important part is the part that cannot be written down, then Bessie's playbook does not really threaten him. He still owns the unwritable part. So why panic?

HAOYU: Maybe he does not realize how much of it is unwritable. He looks at the document and sees his whole value sitting there on her laptop.

BINESI: Or he is afraid that the people above him cannot tell the difference. Leadership reads the playbook and thinks, "Good, now we have Derek in a file." They would not realize something unspeakable was missing until something went wrong.

RADU: So the danger is not that the document captures everything, but that people believe it does?

BINESI: Yes, I think so.

RADU: I want to pick up on a detail in the case, about sharing the playbook with two newer analysts. Is this detail significant?

BINESI: Yes, actually. If it were just Bessie's private notes, maybe Derek could tolerate it. But once it is circulating, it has a life of its own. It is no longer just Bessie who is less dependent on Derek, it is potentially the whole team. That is a different scale of threat to his position.

MING: Worse than that, handing this out to others could be viewed as a kind of subversion. I feel Bessie was pretty naïve to take this step without getting Derek's approval. I have known doctors I worked with who would literally have your head for this kind of thing.

RADU: And what about those two analysts? Bessie handed them the document. Where does that leave them?

CAMILA: In an awkward spot. They have seen it. You cannot un-see a process. Even if the file is deleted, they now know things Derek would rather they had learned slowly, through him.

MING: Which is why the deletion is almost beside the point. The knowledge has already leaked. Derek is trying to put water back into the glass.

BINESI: There is something sad in it, though. Bessie shared it because she was proud, and because she wanted to help the new people the way she wished someone had helped her. She thought she was being generous. She thought Derek would be pleased.

FARAH: Right, but I think I take umbrage with the characterization of Bessie as naïve. I think she did everything right. I would probably do the same thing if I were in her position.

MING: She misjudged the situation.

BINESI: She misjudged the *politics*. Her observation was sharp and her ability is strong. That is what stings. She did a kind thing and a competent thing, which she take pride in, but it made her less safe, not more.

CAMILA: And that is the lesson she will take from it. Next time she will keep her notes to herself. The organization has just taught its most conscientious junior person to hoard.

RADU: [*Pauses.*] What do you mean by "hoard"?

CAMILA: Derek's move, whatever his reasons, teaches everyone watching that documenting and sharing is dangerous. So the next time, Bessie probably does not write the playbook at all, or writes it and hides it.

RADU: Farah, where are you on all of this?

FARAH: [*Pauses.*] I think I can accept that Derek may have acted out of self-interest. But I want to resist the conclusion that this is typical or inevitable. Surely there are managers who would respond exactly as I described: who would say “this is terrific, let’s formalize it, let’s build on it.”

RADU: You are absolutely right that such managers exist. And we will meet some of them, in cases ahead. But that is precisely why this case is worth studying. The reaction Farah describes, embracing the playbook, is what you might expect from an ideal organization where the processes are all clear and people want to systematically improve them. But what Derek does is what can actually happen in organizations that are not ideally functioning. And, in my experience of talking with many of my former students, many organizations are not ideally functioning.

CAMILA: [*Waiting for Radu for finish.*] So what should Bessie do?

RADU: Good question, what would you do if you were in Bessie’s shoes, Camila?

CAMILA: Honestly, I would not delete the document. I would keep a private copy. I might also start wondering whether this is the right team for me.

[*Radu continues to look around, encouraging other answers.*]

MING: I would share it more widely before Derek could do anything about it. Make it impossible to suppress. Who is he after all?

FARAH: Bessie’s boss?

MING: A controlling one, he doesn’t deserve a go-getter like Bessie.

[*Some of the students are shocked by Ming’s answer and make a “wow” expression, while other students nod as if they were saying “Yeah! Let’s do this.” Radu smiled and looked around for more contributions; Binesi raises her hand.*]

BINESI: I would try to talk to Derek again. Not confrontationally. But I would want to understand whether there is something legitimate in his objection before assuming the worst. If he really is just protecting himself, that will become clear. And then I would make some decisions.

FARAH: [*Quietly.*] I would have shown Derek the playbook while I was still building it. Chapter by chapter. Not at the end, as a finished thing that makes him look replaceable, but as rough drafts I needed his help to fix.

RADU: Why this way?

FARAH: Because then it would have been *his* document, not hers. He would have felt like the author, not the subject.

MING: I don’t see it, what is his interest in this document ever existing? It is a threat to him whether he wrote it or not.

FARAH: [*Pauses.*] Yeah, I am being naïve again.

CAMILA: I agree with Ming. Though it is a little grim that Bessie should have to manage a grown man’s ego just to be allowed to do good work.

RADU: These are all reasonable responses, each reflecting a different set of priorities. What I want us to hold onto is the more general principle here. The act of making a process explicit, of drawing it, writing it down, putting it in a document, is not a neutral act. It changes things in the organization.

HAOYU: [*Interrupting*] I agree fully. I am thinking about the restaurant context. The head chef has power because he creates the recipes and the processes. Usually we only see these formalized and written down when a chef wants to give up power to others, say when they need to open a new restaurant and can't be around all the time.

FARAH: I am not fully satisfied here. What did we say Bessie should do? Or maybe what Derek should do? Isn't it always better to know what is happening, say via a process flow diagram, than not to know? Are you really advocating that politics should stop us from doing what is right?

RADU: But what is right here?

FARAH: Writing things down as a process flow, clearly.

RADU: Is it really so clear? [*Pauses and stares towards the back of the classroom.*] Can we leave it there? I will let you all think more on this. Next class we will return to some more details about studying process flows.

Email

Dear students, a rich discussion today. I want to spend some time in this email unpacking the historical and structural dimensions of what we looked at in class.

At first glance, the Meridian case seems like a story about one peculiar manager's insecurity. But the pattern it describes is old, much older than software consultancies. It recurs with enough regularity that it deserves a more careful examination.

Where this pattern comes from. Arguably, process flows are the most valuable thing you will learn in this course, maybe in the whole field of operations management in general. They have the power of providing transparency into what is going on: who is doing what, and when. Knowledge and understanding of the current reality is the only solid foundation for meaningful change and improvement. But just because process flows are among the first things you learn about in this course, you should not assume that creating and sharing them is a straightforward thing to do in practice.

Many consulting and process improvement projects fail at precisely the stage Bessie succeeded at: getting detailed, accurate clarity about what is currently happening. One reason for this is that it is not always in everyone's interest to reveal what they do in detail to outsiders or even to colleagues when that knowledge is the source of their standing in the organization. The Meridian case is a clean illustration. But this pattern has deep historical roots.

This idea goes back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the business consultant Frederick Winslow Taylor described in a series of papers how important it was for management to understand exactly what its workers were doing. His ideas were championed by several zealous acolytes, including the Gilbreths (whom I wrote about after our first class), who formalized and spread Taylor's agenda throughout the business elites of the United States and beyond.

A common arrangement in the early Industrial Revolution was that workers were hired on some kind of piece rate, with management oversight limited to the timeliness and quality of the final output. How the workers did the work was largely up to them. Taylor's "mental revolution" (as he called it) was to argue that management should understand exactly what labor was doing. Management should be the

keepers of the process, and workers should be the implementers of management's process. In Taylor's formulation, this would be a win for both sides: management could learn and improve the process, and share improved profits as higher wages for workers. Indeed, many "Taylorized" enterprises had both lower costs and higher wages than their competitors.

In Taylor's vision, management's more active role in understanding how a business actually operated laid the groundwork for the modern field of operations management that we know today. But the spread of these ideas was not without controversy. Taylor himself eventually faced a United States Congressional investigation into the ill effects of his methods. The era of fastest Taylorist expansion coincided with the dramatic and often violent rise of large-scale labor unions in the United States in the early to mid-twentieth century. These unions saw a threat to workers' livelihoods as management became the owners not only of capital and machinery but of the very knowledge of how things were to be done. Some unions actively encouraged their members not to cooperate with management efforts to reveal how work was completed. This worker's incentive to protect the process sometimes contributed to labor conflicts that ended in real harm.

This is not just ancient history. We should not assume that the struggle between management and labor over the ownership of processes belongs to the past. Derek and Bessie are acting out a version of it. On one side: the impulse to document, to systematize, to share, to improve. On the other: the impulse to protect, to retain, to control access to knowledge as a source of power.

Ongoing challenges in implementing modern operations management methods in health care are a case in point. In hospitals and clinics, professionals like doctors, nurses, and technicians, have maintained far more control over how and when they execute their work than their counterparts in manufacturing or retail. Efforts by administrators to map clinical workflows and impose standardized protocols are often met with resistance. Management will argue this leads to inefficiency. The professionals will defend their autonomy, often sincerely, on the grounds that it better serves patients. Both claims can be simultaneously true.

What Bessie actually did. It is worth pausing to appreciate what Bessie accomplished. In a few months, without formal authority or explicit instruction, she did something that many organizations spend enormous resources trying to do and often fail at: she documented a real process as it actually operated, from the inside, at a level of granularity useful for practice. She identified inputs, outputs, activities, and resources. She distinguished decision points from routine actions. She captured the informal routing rules that Derek had never articulated. This is genuinely difficult work, and she did it through patient observation and careful note-taking.

The irony is that this is precisely what Taylor was calling for a century ago. And just as Taylor's investigators were sometimes met with resistance by the workers whose practices they were studying, Bessie was met with resistance by the person whose practices she had studied. The parallel is almost perfect.

Is Derek wrong? In some narrow sense, Derek is not entirely irrational. There is a legitimate version of his concern. A process document, if treated as a complete and authoritative description of how things work, can create a false sense of certainty. To understand why, it helps to reach for a concept from the philosopher Michael Polanyi.

Polanyi, writing in the mid-twentieth century, drew a distinction between two kinds of knowledge.

The first is *explicit knowledge*: things that can be stated, written down, formalized, and transmitted. A recipe is explicit knowledge. So is a process flow diagram. The second is what Polanyi called *tacit knowledge*: things we know how to do but cannot fully articulate. His famous formulation was: “we can know more than we can tell.”

The skill of a driver cannot be replaced by a thorough schooling in the theory of the motor-car; the knowledge I have of my own body differs from the knowledge of its physiology.

—Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 1966, p. 20

A surgeon knows how tightly to pull a suture. A jazz musician knows when to break from the melody. An experienced consultant knows when a client meeting is going badly before anyone has said anything wrong. None of these things appear in any manual, and they resist capture not because no one has bothered to write them down, but because the knowledge itself is of a kind that writing cannot hold. It lives in the practitioner’s hands, ears, instincts, accumulated through years of practice and still not fully visible even to the person who possesses it.

This is not a trivial concern for process documentation. Bessie’s playbook captures what Derek said when she asked him questions. But it cannot capture what Derek did not say because he did not think to say it, because it seemed obvious, or because he genuinely could not have said it even if asked. The gap between Derek’s explicit answers and Derek’s full operational knowledge may be considerable. And if a junior analyst reads the playbook and assumes it is complete, they may handle an edge case with false confidence, in a way that a more experienced person would have recognized as requiring more caution.

Does this apply to Meridian? Quite possibly. Data consulting is a domain thick with tacit knowledge: Knowing when a client’s requirements are genuinely unclear versus when they think they are clear but aren’t; Sensing when a technical problem is actually a political one; Recognizing the difference between missing data that can be imputed and missing data that invalidates the whole analysis. Bessie may have captured the skeleton of Derek’s process, while the flesh, the judgment, the feel, for when the rules apply and when they don’t, remains inarticulate and unwritten.

But, as Ming pointed out in class, this is an argument for improving the document, not destroying it. A thoughtful response to Polanyi’s concern would be to annotate the playbook with warnings: *consult Derek before proceeding if...; this step requires judgment about...; exceptions include...* If Derek’s objections were purely about the limits of explicit knowledge, his response would have been to sit down with Bessie and work through what was missing. The request to delete, followed up in writing as a kind of instruction, signals something else.

What this means for you. Taking the most pessimistic view that Bessie’s diagram is actually correct and Derek’s response is entirely out of self-preservation, the case reveals that the role of Derek in Meridian might be easily automated. Maybe Derek fears this, and drives his current behavior. In an ideal world where Derek is super open-minded and thinking about the interest of the firm ahead of his, the move most beneficial to the organization might be to remove Derek’s position and release the playbook to the whole team. This would not only empower more workers, but also reduce hierarchy and save cost for the firm, at the cost of Derek losing his current position. This would be an example where technology and automation could improve the effectiveness of the firm.

However, as this case shows, such an outcome is unlikely to happen at Meridian. As you move into roles where you are asked to improve organizations, you will almost certainly encounter versions of this

situation. Processes do not exist in a vacuum. They are embedded in organizations. Organizations are composed of people. People have interests. Sometimes those interests align with the interests of the organization. Sometimes they do not. Operations management that ignores this is operations management that will often fail at implementation, even when it is technically correct. Business is, in the end, about people.

That is all for now. Warmest, Radu.

Extensions

[Posted as homework on the course's website for this class session.]

1. Describe a situation from your own experience at work, in school, or elsewhere, where the knowledge of a process was held closely by one person or group and not shared with others. What were the consequences? Do you think the knowledge-holder was aware of the effect this had?
2. Taylor argued that workers and management could both benefit when management took ownership of the process. Unions often disputed this. Construct the strongest possible argument for each side of this debate. Are there situations where you find one argument more compelling than the other?
3. Consider a professional field you know well: medicine, law, education, software development, or another. To what extent do practitioners in that field “own” their processes in the way Derek did? What are the consequences for quality, for efficiency, and for the wellbeing of the people the profession serves?
4. Suppose Bessie had approached the playbook project differently from the start: sharing drafts with Derek as she built it, framing it as a collaborative effort rather than a solo initiative. Do you think the outcome of the meeting would have been different? What does your answer reveal about the role of framing and process in knowledge-sharing?
5. Taylor believed that the act of making work transparent was, in the long run, good for everyone. Do you share this belief? Are there kinds of work, or kinds of organizations, where you think this belief is least likely to hold?
6. Haoyu said a cook learns to tell when the onions are “right” only after a hundred nights at the pan, and that this never goes on any card. Pick a task you do well that has a piece like this—a judgment you make by feel that you could not fully put into words. Try to write instructions complete enough for a stranger to do it as well as you. Where do the instructions fail, and what would the stranger still have to learn the hard way?
7. Binesi worried that leadership might read the playbook and believe they now “have Derek in a file”. Describe a real case, from any field, where a written procedure or model was trusted as if it were complete, and something went wrong in exactly the gap between the document and reality. Who

paid for the error? the person who wrote the document, the person who trusted it, or someone else?

8. Camila argued that Derek's move teaches the whole team that documenting and sharing is dangerous, so the next conscientious junior person learns to hoard. Suppose you were brought in to redesign Meridian so that a future "Bessie" would be rewarded rather than punished for building a playbook. What specifically would have to change—about pay, promotion, job security, or who owns a document once it is written? Then stress-test your design: what is the first way a self-interested "Derek" would find to defeat it?
9. The email traces a line from Taylor's "mental revolution": management coming to understand exactly what workers do, to the modern practice of process documentation. Extend that line one step further, to the present. Suppose Bessie's playbook were complete enough to feed to an AI system that could then do most of Derek's job. Does that possibility change your moral assessment of what Bessie did? Construct the strongest argument that, for a skilled worker, full transparency about one's own process is a trap, and then the strongest argument that resisting transparency is just rent-seeking dressed up as principle. Which do you find more convincing, and does your answer depend on who captures the gains?
10. Do you prefer working in an organization whose structure flatter or more hierarchical? Why?

Reflections

[Posted as a reflection exercise on the course's website for students to write about in a journal due at the end of semester.]

1. Have you ever been in Bessie's position, where something you did to make your work more efficient was received negatively by someone with more authority than you? What did you make of that response at the time? How do you make sense of it now?
2. Have you ever been in Derek's position, where someone else's initiative felt, at some level, like a threat to your standing, even if you could not quite articulate why? What did you do? What do you wish you had done?
3. Think about something you do well at work or in another area of your life: a skill, a practice, a way of handling a particular kind of problem. Could it be written down? If you wrote it down and shared it freely, what would change? Would anything be lost?
4. Derek's stock answer to new hires was "you'll know when you need to know." Have you ever been kept in deliberate ignorance by someone who seemed to enjoy being the one you had to ask? Did you notice at the time, or only later?
5. Camila said Bessie's punishment will teach her to keep her notes to herself. Recall a time you stopped sharing something—an idea, a shortcut, a way of doing things—because sharing it once went badly. What did you lose by holding it back, and did anyone else lose too?

6. Haoyu can cook the onions “until they are right” but cannot say how long that is. Think of something you know how to do but genuinely cannot explain, even to someone eager to learn. Does it bother you that you can’t hand it over, or is there something you quietly like about that?
7. Do you think current technology has the capacity to replace your job? If not, which part of your job makes it hard for technology to handle and why?