

Frederick Winslow Taylor

Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915) was a Quaker whose tombstone in Pennsylvania bears the inscription "The Father of Scientific Management". He was born to a wealthy family in Philadelphia and, as a teenager, travelled round Europe with his parents, whom he referred to formally as "thee" and "thou".

Like many management theorists after him, Taylor trained first as an engineer. He started his working life on a factory floor as an apprentice pattern-maker, an experience that infused everything he achieved thereafter. He then worked at Midvale Steel Works in Philadelphia, where he became chief engineer, before moving to Bethlehem Steel Company. There he pioneered time and motion studies which analysed how specific jobs might be done more efficiently. He took to walking round with a stop-watch and a notepad breaking down manual tasks into a series of components that could be measured. Out of this grew the idea of piece work. At the same time he managed to win the American national tennis doubles championship, using a spoon-shaped racquet of his own design.

His larger purpose was to prove that "the best management is a true science, resting upon clearly defined laws". This he called scientific management. Peter Drucker (see [article](#)) said that Taylor was "the first man in history who did not take work for granted, but looked at it and studied it. His approach to work is still the basic foundation". Drucker maintained that Darwin, Freud and Taylor between them were the makers of the modern world.

In our scheme, we do not ask the initiative of our men. We do not want any initiative. All we want of them is to obey the orders we give them, do what we say, and do it quick.

Taylor's greatest work, "The Principles of Scientific Management", was the very first business bestseller. Its influence spread to unlikely places. It was translated early into French and inspired Henri Fayol. In Russia, Lenin at one stage exhorted Soviet workers to "try out every scientific and progressive suggestion of the Taylor system". Subsequent failure to achieve Taylor-like production targets led many Soviet workers to the gulag.

Today scientific management, sometimes known as Taylorism, is often seen as a system that has no room for the nuances of human nature in its urge to find ever greater manual efficiency. But Taylor himself is universally acknowledged to have been one of the most original and influential management thinkers of all time. His biographer, Robert Kanigel, wrote: "After Ford and Taylor got through with them, most jobs needed less of everything—less brains, less muscle, less independence."

Taylor lived at a time when industrialisation was being fuelled by massive movements

of labour from the land to the factory. His main achievement was to devise a way whereby totally unskilled sharecroppers could, as Drucker put it, “be converted in 60 to 90 days into first-rate welders and shipbuilders”.

Notable publications

“The Principles of Scientific Management”, Harper and Brothers, 1911; reprint, Hive Publishing Company, 1986

“Two Papers on Scientific Management: A Piece-rate System and Notes on Belting”, George Routledge, 1919



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This profile is adapted from “The Economist Guide to Management Ideas and Gurus”, by Tim Hindle (Profile Books; 322 pages; £20). The guide has the low-down on more than 50 of the world's most influential management thinkers past and present and over 100 of the most influential business-management ideas. To buy this book, please visit our [online shop](#).