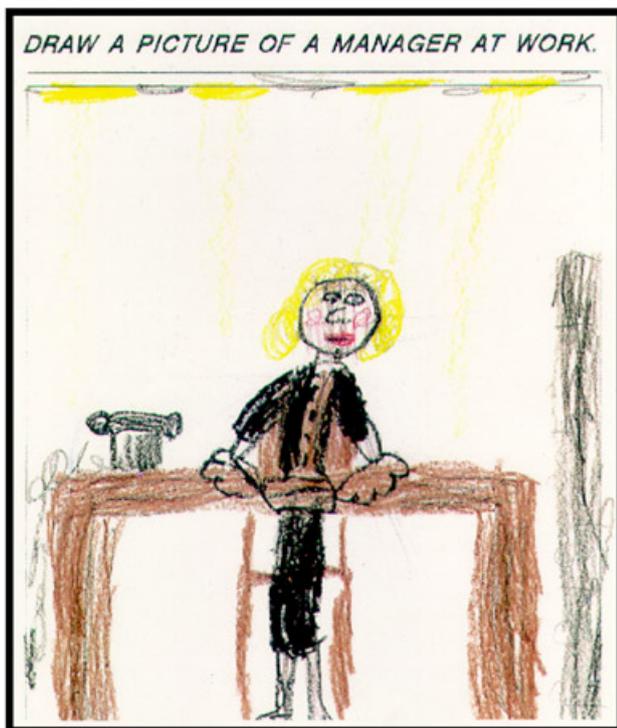


## What Do Managers Do at Work?

Recently Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times* argued for “the rise of populism,” and the *Wall Street Journal* touted the same with its headline, “Who’s the boss? There isn’t one.” After reading these articles, my mind raced back 25 years to my first encounter with a few maverick companies attempting to manage without managers and a subsequent Saturday morning conversation while watching *Yogi Bear* cartoons with my three-year old son.



“Managers boss the workers but they get bossed by the boss. They make sure things are alright. They use the phone a lot.”  
-14 year old



“Managers are in total control of the employees. They monitor all the activities of their subordinates. They’re like a traffic cop at work.”  
-14 year old

Halfway through the cartoon program, the park ranger stood up and said, “Wait a minute, I’m the manager around here, and I don’t do things like this [picking up garbage].” He promptly put the bears in the park to work and went back to his office, where he fell fast asleep. A commercial break came on, and I asked my son, “What do managers do at work?” He immediately replied, “They throw kids’ toys away.” At first I thought, “Where did that answer come from?” Then I remembered that the manager in our apartment complex hated kids. Everyday around 6 p.m. she would walk the grounds, pick up any stray toys, and toss them in the garbage dumpster. No wonder my son concluded, “managers throw kids’ toys away.”

The next week I wondered if my son was unique in knowing what managers do at work, long before he would ever have a job. To tackle this question, I collaborated with my colleague, Warner Woodworth, on collecting data from more than 1,000 kids, ages 5 to 18, about what they thought managers did at work (using a combination of interviews, surveys, and for the younger children, drawings.) Here’s a quick snapshot of the results:

- 55%: Managers control people’s actions at work, making sure they do what they’re supposed to do when they’re supposed to do it.
- 39%: Managers fix problems at work, any problem (and more often than not, they fix every problem).

- 6%: Managers develop people's capabilities by coaching them to become better at what they do.
- Less than 1%: Managers understand and serve customer needs.
- Less than 1%: Managers make a profit for their companies.

Innovation (developing new ideas that make a difference) by definition demands that people challenge the status quo, which is not something most managers get thrilled about, especially those holding onto old school maps of what managers do (i.e., No. 1 controlling others, and No. 2 fixing all problems).

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**"Managers control a group of people in a company. They do all the paperwork and get better pay."  
-16 year old**

I don't expect the recent push for popularism or the call for companies without bosses to catch hold quite yet, or at least not a strong hold. We have an older generation of leaders who often like the perks of managing (telling others what to do and how to do it) and a younger generation of leaders who don't have the greatest role models to challenge their image of what managers act like at work. Indeed, for the power of innovation to take deep root, it will take some serious uprooting of how we all think about work and what role managers should play to help great ideas escape the iron grip of authority.

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