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Montessori Schools Offer Big Lessons For 'Managers'



Ashoka, Contributor

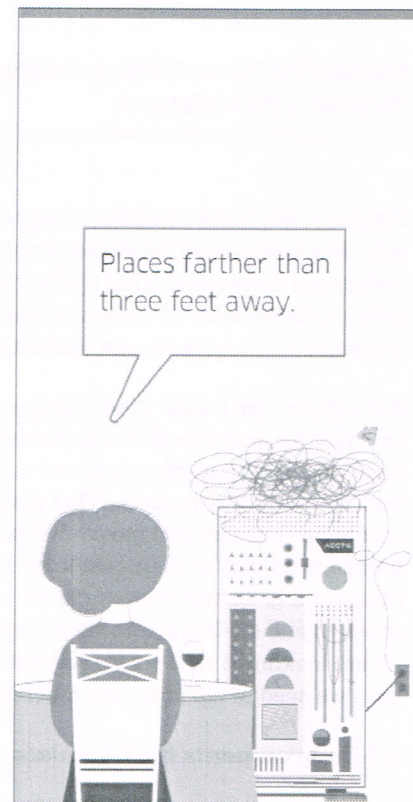


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“No one could have foreseen that children had concealed within themselves a vital secret capable of lifting the veil that covered the human soul, that they carried within themselves something which, if discovered, would help adults to solve their own individual and social problems.” — Dr. Maria Montessori

Did you know that children at Montessori schools regularly outperform those who graduate from traditional schools? And that some of the leading innovators in the world, including Google's [Larry Page and Sergey Brin](#), Amazon's Jeff Bezos and Wikipedia's Jimmy Wales credit their ability to think differently to their Montessori educations?

Founded in 1897 by Italian educator and physician Dr. Maria Montessori, the Montessori approach challenged predominant educational theories by giving children the freedom to grow, learn and contribute in the classroom.



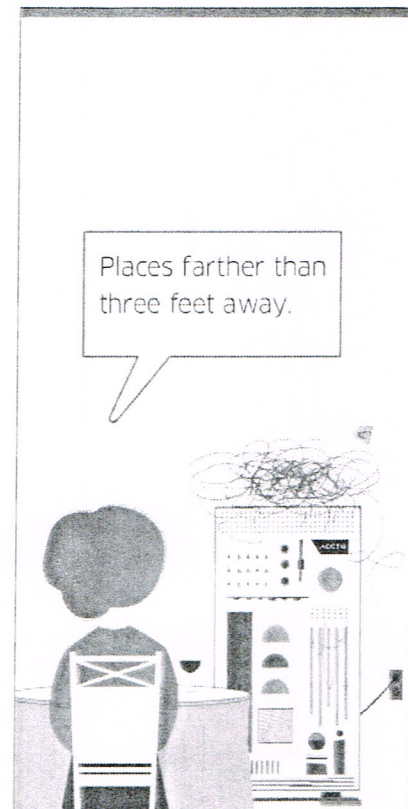
Interestingly, although Dr. Montessori's methodologies were developed for children and education, her philosophy was based on the *science of life*. So it makes sense that studies challenging the paradigm of 'management' today would echo several Montessori principles. The studies show striking parallels between the nature of children and adults, the environments needed to unleash potential in the classroom and the workspace and the role of teachers and leaders.

Let's explore the most common parallels.

1.) *New rules of inspiration*

Instead of seeing children as empty vessels that need to be disciplined and filled, Dr. Montessori saw their innate desire and ability to learn.

She recognized their psychic instinct to grow by seeing life *as it is*. She saw that an infant learns to sit, walk and speak without external instruction. She observed a child's indifference to rewards and punishments and recognized her inner guiding principles as the source of learning. And Dr. Montessori concluded that a child's innate hunger for knowledge and development naturally leads to inner discipline, concentration and joy!



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Similarly, implicit in traditional organizational structures and roles is a deep-seated belief that employees need to be given orders and disciplined. That is why traditional workspaces are built on the premise of 'command and control' with many measures for incentives, punishment and surveillance.

But authors like Daniel Pink of *Drive*, question this idea. Pink says that for activities that require rudimentary cognitive skills, large monetary rewards often lead to lower performance rather than the other way around. What really motivates us is autonomy, mastery and purpose. Pink speaks of the deep human need to direct our own lives, to learn and create new things and to do better for ourselves and our world. His research and studies across several companies show us that if we are looking to encourage (and not manage) people to be their best, we need to tap into their inner drive.

2.) *Environments that Activate*

Because Dr. Montessori saw a child's inherent ability to learn, she realized that all children need is an enabling environment – much like the way a womb supports an embryo. Unlike traditional classrooms where children are dependent on adults for all activities and direction, Montessori classrooms enable a child to direct her own learning. Objects and furniture in a classroom are proportioned to a child's body and books and materials are easily accessible. Most importantly, the environment gives the child the freedom to choose activities based on her inner needs and work at her own pace.

In 2014, organizational development thought leader Frederic Laloux ([Reinventing Organizations](#)) examined organizations with similar self-management structures. He found that FAVI, a French gearbox manufacturing company, organizes its teams into mini-factories (15-35 people each) that cater to a client. There is no middle management, and there are no support functions like human resources or planning and sales departments and no set rules and procedures. The teams self-organize to deliver to the client. Account managers bring orders to the team, which then jointly plans and agrees on a shipment date. The account managers have no sales targets – their motivation is to feed their teams with work and serve their clients well in the face of competition. When opportunities arise, workers also self-nominate to create temporary project teams.

This self-managing structure has reduced the need for meetings, improved coordination and boosted organic problem-solving among workers.

The blue collars wear their own white collars here and no longer receive instructions from above. FAVI has replaced a command and control structure with a structure that is built on trusting employees' inner drive to lead and contribute. The result? FAVI is the only gearbox producer left standing in Europe with 50% market share because of its quality and on-time delivery.

3.) Leader as a facilitator



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In Montessori schools, teachers don't sit behind imposing desks, commanding authority. Children are at the center, free to choose and act. Teachers have to believe, guide, step aside and let the child fly.

Dr. Montessori believed a teacher couldn't play such a role without studying herself and tearing out deeply rooted ego-centric, subconscious beliefs that impede the ability to see children *as they are* - without any preconceived notions or judgments. Instead of leading children, teachers should be willing to be taught by them. Teachers must remain constantly alert to the direction each child is heading and remove obstacles to growth. In essence, the role of the teacher is not to instruct, but to facilitate.

Bill Joiner & Stephen Josephs, authors of Leadership Agility, call the type of leadership that over-controls and underutilizes subordinates – heroic leadership. And they say that in an environment like the office, which now demands greater collaborative problem-solving abilities, we need post-heroic leaders who facilitate participation by acting as catalysts, co-creators and synergists.

According to Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, the CEOs of companies outperforming the competition do not have giant charismatic personalities. Instead, they are good listeners, and they tend to be more humble, modest and quiet.

“The day I stopped seeing myself as a leader and more as a facilitator, my work started to expand,” says Dr. Suresh Kumar, the founder of the Institute of Palliative Medicine in India.

This change in thinking helped him shift from building a large hierarchical organization to catalyzing a decentralized network of over 200 autonomous palliative care units. Organizing them around the shared experience of death, Dr. Kumar encouraged members to lead the solution and positioned himself as only a support for his team. Today, his units across Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and Thailand collectively serve over 65,000 patients a year.

Army Brigadier General Stanley McChrystal, who led the Combined Joint Task force in Afghanistan in the mid-2000s, shares that to respond to the unpredictable environment on the ground, he had to move from being a chess master to being a gardener. He says that *“tending the garden became my primary responsibility.”* He had to learn to make fewer decisions and focus on creating and maintaining the conditions needed for effective teamwork.

Why now? What now?

The parallels prove that Dr. Montessori was not off the mark when she said children conceal within themselves a secret that can help adults solve their own problems. Her observations and principles hold strong clues to addressing growing job dissatisfaction in organizations and the challenges posed by the fast changing environment.

Simply creating open spaces and changing processes, while a great first step, may not be enough. We need to begin challenging our fundamental assumptions about human nature, organizational structures and our roles as leaders. And recognizing the child within may be the best approach to help us get closer to the answer.

Supriya Sankaran (@supriyasankaran) is a lawyer and social innovation accelerator with Ashoka India, and is grateful for the conversations with Subha Sankaran that led to this article.

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