

# Emersonian Self-Reliance and Inherent Contradictions in American Business Management

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## Abstract

Business management within the United States of America contains unacknowledged, inherent contradictions that constrain individual and collective action, and form barriers against the development of authenticity and solidarity within organizations. The Emersonian themes of *conformity*, *consistency*, and *knowledge*, as developed in his 1841 essay *Self-Reliance*, were used as constructive points of philosophical inquiry around which to interrogate the theory and praxis of current American business management. The need for such an examination of management is observable in recent social phenomena. Specifically, the great resignation was explored as a potential representative response to dealing with the contradictions between management as currently practiced within the United States and the existential needs of those subjugated by and to its praxis. Philosophy emerges as an effective way to assess the degree to which organizations can achieve their emancipatory potential using the current theory and praxis of business management.

## Keywords

Authenticity, Autonomy, Conformity, Knowledge, Freedom, Philosophy, Resignation, Transcendentalism, Organizational Theory

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational management as currently practiced in the United States of America contains inherent contradictions (DeGeorge, 1994; Larson & Gobeli, 1987; Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). A chasm exists between the individualism espoused as foundational to our, albeit increasingly abstract and fragmented, national ethos (Raeff, 1997; Shain, 2021; Yankelovich, 1998) and the collective subjugation rou-

tinely enacted in professional practice (Arrighi & Maume 2000; Jackson, 2022; Rosioru, 2013). Previous research has examined how perceptions of power influence organizational sentiment (Jackson, Slover, & Heath, 2022) and linkages between management engagement and employee wellbeing (Böckerman, Bryson, & Ilmakunnas, 2012). Whereas these studies are informative, and potentially constructive, issues with modern, American employment persist in the areas of empowerment (Ettorre, 1997), personal fulfillment (Kerr, 2017), and exploration of ideas (Hind, Wilson, & Lenssen, 2009). The persistence of these concerns points to a potential need for a deeper understanding of this phenomenon and forms the rationale behind the selection of this topic. Philosophy provides a basis of inquiry into this concern.

Philosophy is uniquely situated to contribute to a richer, and potentially more liberating, understanding of the organizational dynamic between what is desired existentially and what is provided economically. While any one of a variety of philosophical perspectives, from structuralism to postmodernism, could be used beneficially to analyze aspects of this concern, the quintessentially American form of nineteenth-century transcendental philosophy provides a particularly fitting lens for this assessment. The rationale behind discussing concerns of organizational praxis in conjunction with aspects of transcendental philosophy is that such an atypical approach provides an enhanced basis for understanding and overcoming inherent contradictions in American business management.

Spence (1985) described the United States as “a success-oriented society” that emphasizes individualism (p. 1285). Given the centrality of self-reliance to effective individualism, there is potential benefit from examining that concept philosophically. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1841) essay *Self-Reliance* contains three elements around which organizational management can be interrogated philosophically to reveal intrinsic inconsistencies. To explore this concern, three themes were addressed: *conformity*, *consistency*, and *knowledge*. Each of those three elements suggested something of the occupational frustrations found in modern American businesses, across industries and organizational types, and that have potentially contributed to the great resignation (Gittleman, 2022; Serenko, 2023). Because conformity is observable most directly, that element provided an accessible point of entry for addressing this concern.

## 2. Three Emersonian Themes on Self-Reliance

### 2.1. Conformity

Conformity can be defined as the act of modifying aspects of one’s authentic self to more closely align with the prevailing attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors of a given reference group (Jahoda, 1959). Employees routinely conform to dominant organizational cultures in terms of appearance, attitude, language, and work performance. While business literature admits that there are detrimental effects associated with conformity (Kim, Du-Babcock, & Chang, 2020; Miner, 1962), Gulati (2022) explained, “corporate cultures tend to encourage conformity.” If there

are individual and institutional detriments associated with conformity, why does it persist? One of the individual benefits of conformity to organizational norms is acceptance (Chen et al., 2022; Dittes & Kelley, 1956). Nonconformity can make one an organizational outcast. Institutionally, conformity contributes to management's ability to control the workforce. Collectively, these elements suggest that conformity is an organizationally complex phenomenon.

Admittedly, there are pros and cons at both the individual and organizational levels associated with conformity (Bernheim, 1994; Vit, 2009). Philosophy provides one with a way to break out of the conventional type of economic comparisons that contribute to the *status quo*. In the transcendental philosophy of Emerson (1841), conformity is seen as a barrier to self-reliance. In respect to the notion of conformity it is particularly noteworthy for the purpose here that Emerson made use of business metaphors, explaining that "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion." Organizations, like societies in general, value conformity. Individuals may be incentivized in a variety of ways, direct and indirect, to conform to organizational standards and expectations (Jackson, 2022). When they do there is a corresponding erosion in their self-reliance. This loss is compounded as any given initial act of conformity is habitualized over the course of one's career. In this way, the notion of consistency becomes a point worthy of both organizational and philosophical scrutiny.

## 2.2. Consistency

Consistency is marked by a steadiness in behavior, attitude, or direction. In terms of individual actions, consistency exists when current behavior corresponds with previous behaviors. Through consistency past, present, and future organizational performance is fused into a predictable similitude. For this reason, business success is often attributed to consistency, and it is therefore desired by those responsible for organizational performance. Patterson (2020) explained, "most business owners desire consistency." For the reasons already presented, this preference is not altogether surprising. What is consistent is predictable, and what is predictable is amenable to managerial control (Sutton, 2001). Therefore, there is significant economic justification for consistency. But is there a darker side to consistency to be found through philosophical inquiry?

Emerson (1841) famously stated, "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." The fulcrum of his point revolves around the notion of *foolishness*. Determining when one should maintain or deviate from consistency is ultimately the key to organizational success. At the individual level such a determination is as complicated as it is contextual. Deviating from consistency in organizational practice is more problematic due to the desires and expectations of management, that can take the form of official policies or unofficial norms (Duvanova, 2012). Going against those corporate desires and expectations can be awkward

for employees, if not risky. Consistency in employee actions in this type of situation aligns with the perspective developed by Emerson in which consistency is “a reverence for... past act or word” that we adhere to because “we loath to disappoint” others. In this context, consistency can be seen as an indefinite perpetuation of conformity enacted by employees to please those who hold power over them. Such a structural form of subjugation calls for philosophical critique. As suggested, through philosophy one can reassess the value of conformity and consistency against virtues residing outside the reductionist prism of economic commerce, exchange, and employment. Doing so effectively points to the role of knowledge.

### 2.3. Knowledge

Knowledge can be defined as the collection of facts and information one has gained through experience, reflection, and education (Tsoukas & Vladimirou, 2001; Zagzebski, 2017). Businesses have placed such a premium on knowledge that the field of *Knowledge Management* was created to emphasize linkages between organizational knowledge and success (Greco, 2009; Hawley, 2003). Davenport (1994) defined knowledge management as “the process of capturing, distributing, and effectively using knowledge.” Within organizations, knowledge is commodified for distribution and consumption. Such knowledge-as-a-product is valued ultimately for its organizational utility (Flanagin & Bator, 2010). Organizational knowledge holds the potential to improve decision making and promote greater uniformity in thought and action. This unidimensional view of knowledge, while potentially pragmatic in an organizational sense, is arguably incomplete. Myopically pursuing this form of knowledge could alienate employees from the intrinsic rewards of contemplation. Examining knowledge philosophically illuminates its multidimensionality.

From an organizational perspective, there is little distinction as to the type of knowledge that is worthy of being managed organizationally. At a basic level, the knowledge which is useful is the knowledge about which businesses care. Emerson (1841) distinguished between two types of knowledge, the intuitive and the *tuitive*. For Emerson intuitive knowledge is “the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life;” it is “primary wisdom.” When intuitive knowledge is subsequently institutionalized it becomes *tuitive*. It is here that the inherent contradiction residing within American organizational management is most acute. The type of knowledge, which is transformative, creative, and generative, the type of knowledge that is most essential for organizational growth and development, is intuitive knowledge. This knowledge is individualistic. Once this knowledge is commodified for organizational consumption, through the knowledge management processes, it becomes *tuitive* knowledge.

For the creative person who nurtured and developed the intuitive insight this process can be alienating, as one’s thoughts and work are organizationally appropriated. For those within the organization, on whom these subsequent *tuitive* thoughts are superimposed, the process can become one of intellectual confor-

mity. In either case, organizational knowledge lacks the essential qualities resident in its intuitive form. Collectively, a philosophical appraisal of the elements of conformity, consistency, and knowledge reveal something of the inherent contradictions that are resident in the theory and praxis of American organizational management. When employees experience its effects, it can generate responses of organizational consequence that reverberate throughout both the economy and society.

### 3. The Great Resignation

While philosophical, the concern regarding inherent contradictions in the theory and praxis of American business management is far from esoteric. The consequence of ignoring these fundamental inconsistencies of management is potentially rippling through American organizations. This is most readily apparent in what has come to be called the “The Great Resignation” (Formica & Sfodera, 2022; Hopkins & Figaro, 2021; Sull, Sull, & Zweig, 2022). A key attribute to that phenomenon is a greater number of younger workers leaving their jobs. There is value in assessing this *great resignation* from a variety of perspectives. Hetler and Kerner (2023) explained, “employees across multiple sectors came to the realization that they weren’t happy with their jobs... people weren’t satisfied with their work environment, the industry they were in or their work-life balance and left their jobs.” From this perspective emotional elements like *happiness* and *satisfaction* contribute to one’s decision to resign. If this was the only study suggesting existential concerns influencing economic decisions one might be able to dismiss or contextualize it. However, the results from other studies are broadly consistent with these findings.

A recent Pew Research Center survey (Parker & Horowitz, 2022) revealed that “low pay, a lack of opportunities for advancement and feeling disrespected at work are top reasons why Americans quit their jobs.” The economic concerns of pay and career prospects are not surprising. That these elements contribute to employees’ willingness to stay in their current positions is relatively straightforward. In addition to those elements, a concern for *respect* was found to contribute to the great resignation. Like the concern for happiness and satisfaction, a desire for respect at work points to something which transcends the basic economic calculus of employment. People are looking for more than compensation from work, they want to be personally engaged with what they are doing. In the Adobe (2021) report, *The Future of Time*, it was found that “a third of the workweek is currently being spent on unimportant tasks,” and that if given the time, “workers would pursue passions and personal growth.” Collectively, research on the great resignation suggests that existential as well as economic concerns have influenced individual’s decisions to opt out of traditional employment. Given a finite existence, Americans are increasingly valuing personal fulfillment over financial remuneration. When employment decisions were primarily economic, the inherent contradictions of American business management could be largely ignored. As these decisions become increasingly existential, the

benefit from confronting them philosophically is compelling. Doing so creatively and constructively requires substantial work.

#### 4. Limitations

This assessment has its limitations. First, it was based on a single philosophical essay by a single author. Second, a single branch of transcendental philosophy was explored. Lastly, within this assessment only the faintest contours of the type of philosophical inquiry needed to explore management theory and praxis were sketched. Whereas these limitations are significant, they do not individually or collectively detract from the primary goal of this assessment that was to show through an illustrative example that philosophy's potential contribution to business management is substantially more than its common relegation to business ethics (Bowie, 2000; De George, 2006; Moriarty, 2005). If one is serious about understanding the deleterious effects of American business management that have contributed to the great resignation, and other similar phenomena, one must look outside the largely self-congratulatory legitimizations of business rhetoric and assess it more rigorously and critically from a perspective outside itself. Philosophy, as Locke defined it, is the process of liberation from ignorance and prejudice. As such, philosophy holds latent emancipatory power for interrogating, understanding, and transcending the inherent contradictions and subjugations found in modern business praxis.

#### 5. Conclusion

Dispiriting disconnects between the rhetoric and reality of business management are observable through even the most cursory of philosophical assessments. Philosophy is needed to understand the inherent contradictions in American business management existing between the subjugation that is pervasively routinized and the Emersonian self-reliance lingering as our collective ethos. To the degree to which the great resignation reflects a privileging for one's quality of life and individual autonomy over one's financial compensation, it is a concern with roots in existentialism as well as economics. By placing Emerson's (1841) essay *Self-Reliance* in the context of American business management, an observable gap emerged between individual transcendent hope and the collective drudgery of organizational experience. Emerson himself explained, "a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices". Philosophy provides a unique and powerful point of reference from which one can more effectively assess the degree to which an organization achieves its emancipatory potential.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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