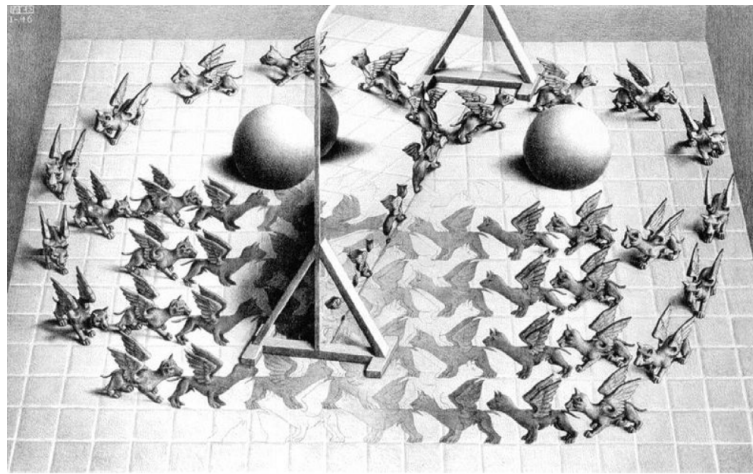


# In Harvard Business Review: Self Management Beyond "Visionaries vs. Skeptics"

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Late last year, I wrote a four-part series on self management, [first](#) laying out a conceptual structure for understanding different ways to define self management; [then](#) offering a perspective on Holacracy as the form of self management currently most in the spotlight; from that starting point, beginning to sketch out [an alternative framework](#) that I believe will, in many circumstances, be more practical than Holacracy; and finally exploring what self management looks like when viewed from [the lens of culture](#) rather than structural architecture.

Building on this work, it has been an honor to have the opportunity to co-author [Beyond the Holacracy Hype](#) in the *Harvard Business Review* with Ethan Bernstein and Mike Lee of Harvard Business School and John Bunch, who played an integral role in the implementation of Holacracy at Zappos. We have tried to reach beyond what has increasingly become a clash between self management's missionaries and self management's skeptics. We have aimed:

1. To contextualize self management historically, as a further evolution of work on self managed teams that dates back to Eric Trist's midcentury research in the South Yorkshire coal mines
2. To weigh the benefits and challenges of self management at both the work unit and the enterprise level, looking at the two imperatives of reliability and adaptability
3. To get beyond the either/or of "traditionally managed" vs. "self-managed" and point the way to a range of hybrid models (e.g., 3M and Google creating side-by-side directed and volunteer economies)

Good thinking about organizational design has always been contextual. To take a typically purple passage from the missionary side of the self management debate, here's Brian Robertson from his recent book *Holacracy: The New Management System for a Rapidly Changing World*:

One way or another, in both organizations and society, I think we'll continue to see static, centralized control systems giving way to something else. Evolution seems to

favor processes that allow peer-to-peer, emergent order to show up in response to real tensions. I think one of the best ways we can enable that is to infuse governance throughout a system—a process so fully integrated that it just happens, like breathing, with no need for master architects to apply a perfect design up front. And there's a beautiful paradox here when you have a system that distributes authority and honors the autonomy of all its parts and players, you also get a system capable of acting as a cohesive, integrated whole at the same time. So we needn't actually choose between centralized and distributed systems. The beauty of a functioning holarchy is that it gives us both—autonomous whole entities, made of interconnected parts that themselves are autonomous and whole, at every level of scale.

That's perhaps a beautiful ideal, but if you're Elon Musk building Tesla, what do you do? If you're building a business with big, lumpy choices, you don't have the ability to lean a little into the world, respond as the world responds, iterate, let the sensitive responses of the parts add up over time to the right whole mosaic. You're less like our ancestors on the savannah, gradually wending their way toward homo sapiens - and more like the world's last pair of chickens, who have one good shot to produce the necessary clutch of eggs.

I believe that perhaps the worst consequence of the missionary tone of self management's advocates is how naturally the advocacy leads to a reactionary response - that since we aren't going to be "teal" (Frederic Laloux's term for a next generation mindset and approach to organization), the natural alternative is a kind of caricature of hierarchical management. Far better to attend to the actual choices that lie in front of us, and how different those choices might be in different parts of their business. At P&G, for example, they have in fact radically decentralized certain aspects of technical problem solving in their innovation process, while retaining the tightness of financial management (among many other things) they need in order to consistently deliver upon their investor targets.

There is indeed more under the sun than is dreamt of in our philosophies, and our HBR article is one early attempt to expand the immediate practical range of choices that leaders perceive regarding where to create tight structures of authority, where to create loose, self-managing structures and where to find middle ground between these poles. We're still in the very early innings of this exploration. While this is an exploration that may not be "transformational" in the way that Robertson claims for Holacracy or Laloux for Teal, it is deeply, practically important for people creating, building and running companies. I'd love to hear stories, examples and ideas from others engaged in learning about these same questions - and hope many of you find our article a step forward in your own search to find models that work for your specific goals and contexts.