

Melville, Bartleby, and Management

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Introduction

What would Herman Melville say about modern American business? Well, if your job requires you to work on the ocean, and your leg happens to be removed by a large white whale, let it slide. You can pick up a nice cushy workman's compensation settlement, and then you and your buddy Starbuck can open a chain of coffee shops.

Melville's writing has considerable relevance for business, especially when you consider that a whaling ship like the *Pequod* was a commercial venture. We can certainly see the parallels of its captain's drive towards a misguided and ultimately self-destructive goal with the debacles we saw at Enron and WorldCom.

If *Moby Dick* was an example of disaster as a result of a leader's actions, "Bartleby the Scrivener" – Melville's story that most directly described the working world – describes disaster as a result of a leader's *inaction*. Although the workplace technology and culture have changed in the 150 years since "Bartleby" was first published, the issues of management and business relationships have not. These are the issues that I will talk about tonight and what I explored in my novel *Offline*.

"Bartleby" as a Failure of Management

"Bartleby" is about an attorney who fails to connect professionally and personally with one of his employees, and it leads to tragic results for both him and his troubled staff member.

Lawyers have always required copies of important legal documents. In the days before photocopiers and typewriters, a lawyer hired a scrivener to write by hand a word-for-word copy of it. The attorney had two scriveners to do copy his legal documents, whom he called Turkey and Nippers. (Hey, at one company, they called me "Dirt Bag.")

Turkey was an efficient worker in the morning, but after lunch, his face "blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals; and continued blazing—but, as it were, with a gradual wane—till 6 o'clock"¹ when he left for the day. Turkey blamed it on his age, but I suspect it was more what he drank with lunch. As a result, he became sloppy and less proficient at his work in the afternoon. His manuscripts were full of blots, which were unacceptable for a legal document. In one incident, he

¹ All quotations from "Bartleby the Scrivener" are from Bartleby.com.

slapped a cookie on a document in lieu of a seal. It may seem funny, but remember that Turkey actually defaced a legal document that took many hours to copy.

Nippers, on the other hand, didn't get to speed until the afternoon. (He probably could have used a few of Starbucks espressos.) He also used his boss' office to run his own questionable paralegal business on the side. As you can imagine, this would open the attorney to all sorts of liability problems.

So, if Turkey was useless after lunch, and Nippers wasn't productive until the afternoon, the attorney had in effect two employees do the work of one. Compare that to most businesses today where one employee does the work of two, or three, or a whole department.

So, how did the attorney address this problem? He hired another scrivener, Bartleby. At first, Bartleby was a proficient worker:

At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically.

Then, the attorney made a simple request that he proofread someone else's work. This was when Bartleby first made his infamous reply, "I would prefer not to." (Could you imagine saying "I would prefer not to" to your boss? I wouldn't dare say that to mine.)

So, what should the attorney have done? In short, the narrator preferred to do nothing:

This is very strange, thought I. What had one best do? But my business hurried me. I concluded to forget the matter for the present, reserving it for my future leisure. So calling Nippers from the other room, the paper was speedily examined.

Now, those of you know from Management 101 what happens when you ignore a problem: It gets worse. So, it was with Bartleby. The "I would prefer not to" sentence became more and more frequent. Each time, the attorney failed to act to address Bartleby's "performance issue." He even turned to his employees for advice. He complains first to Turkey:

"He says, a second time, he won't examine his papers. What do you think of it, Turkey?"

It was afternoon, be it remembered. Turkey sat glowing like a brass boiler, his bald head steaming, his hands reeling among his blotted papers.

"Think of it?" roared Turkey; "I think I'll just step behind his screen, and black his eyes for him!"

So saying, Turkey rose to his feet and threw his arms into a pugilistic position. He was hurrying away to make good his promise, when I detained him, alarmed at the effect of incautiously rousing Turkey's combativeness after dinner.

"Sit down, Turkey," said I, "and hear what Nippers has to say. What do you think of it, Nippers? Would I not be justified in immediately dismissing Bartleby?"

"Excuse me, that is for you to decide, sir..."

Another lesson from Management 101, if you do not address a management issue promptly, it will become apparent to your staff and hurt everyone's morale.

However, the attorney gave into Bartleby's behavior. It became a situation he could have lived with indefinitely, as he had with Turkey and Nipper's behavior. But the attorney learned that Bartleby has been living in his office. This led to a situation that highlighted his second failure of management: his failure to connect with his employees as people.

When managers connect with employees on a personal level, employees feel that managers genuinely care about them and value them as part of a team and become willing to produce and follow policy. Employees and managers *want* to work together because they believe they are working for their mutual welfare. But when employees feel that managers are only looking out for themselves, when the connections feel superficial and insincere, employees might at best begrudgingly comply with management directives. They don't care about their work, because they believe their managers don't care about them.

Look at what is happening at American Airlines. Unions were willing to accept pay cuts and other concessions to save the airline. When they saw that the executives were increasing their bonuses, they started moves that could force the airline into bankruptcy.

The same lack of concern was shown by Bartleby's boss. Let's look at this exchange where the attorney tried to extract information from him:

"Bartleby," said I, in a still gentler tone, "come here; I am not going to ask you to do any thing you would prefer not to do—I simply wish to speak to you."

Upon this he noiselessly slid into view.

"Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?"

"I would prefer not to."

"Will you tell me any thing about yourself?"

"I would prefer not to."

"But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you."

He might *feel* friendly, but he sure didn't act that way when he interrogated Bartleby like a police detective.

What happens next shouldn't surprise us: Bartleby stops copying. So, the attorney gives Bartleby six days to leave the office. But after six days, Bartleby was still there.

So, what do you do with an employee who won't go away? Well, the attorney moved his office across town. Meanwhile, Bartleby remained at the attorney's old office, which ruined the attorney's reputation so much that he wound up abandoning his firm just to get away from the rumors and criticism. Finally, the new tenant of the old office had Bartleby arrested and sent to the Tombs.

The guilt-ridden attorney visited Bartleby in prison:

"Bartleby!"

"I know you," he said, without looking round,— "and I want nothing to say to you."

"It was not I that brought you here, Bartleby," said I, keenly pained at his implied suspicion.

But the attorney had brought him here. He failed to take responsibility for Bartleby's welfare by not addressing his problems and then abandoning him when he became a liability. This shows in the narrator's rather insensitive comment about Bartleby's plight:

"And to you, this should not be so vile a place. Nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass."

"I know where I am," he replied, but would say nothing more, and so I left him.

In the end, Bartleby starved himself to death, leaving the attorney with the guilt of an employee he failed to manage and make a personal connection. He declared his remorse in the ending lines of the story, "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"

Now, this would seem to be an extreme case of management failure. When you consider some of the incidents of workplace violence we have seen over the past ten years, such a tragic end – or an ever worse one – is possible. But even having an otherwise capable employee leave because of a problem with management is a great loss for a company. So, could an unhappy outcome like Bartleby's be avoided?

Would a Change in Management Change a Bartleby?

I wrote *Offline* to answer that question and several others I had from my years working in high-tech companies.

There have been a number of changes in the American workplace since Melville wrote "Bartleby." There were no women in Bartleby's office, but there are today – many of whom hold management positions. The other significant difference in American business today is the rapid rate of corporate upheaval through mergers, layoffs, and closures. Companies that have been around for a century evaporate overnight. The corporate landscape changes at a pace we didn't see 25 years ago, let alone 150.

This is the changing workplace that I wrote about in *Offline*. But even though many things have changed, I still saw the challenge in managing employees that I read about in "Bartleby." So, I thought "Bartleby" would be a great core for a new story. But I didn't want to just retell Melville's story in modern dress. I wanted to change the parameters:

- ❑ What if Bartleby's boss was a woman instead of a man?
- ❑ What if she made a dedicated effort to understand and manage Bartleby, instead of just brushing him off like the attorney did?
- ❑ What if she were forced to let him go? How would he respond?

I also had to make some changes to Bartleby. The first thing that had to change was his job. (There aren't too many opportunities for people who copy legal documents by hand these days.) So, I made him a QA technician at a computer software company, a job that requires the same focus and precision as a scrivener of old. However, I kept Bartleby's reluctance, as in this scene when the boss in this story, Lucy, has to get him to comply with a management policy that even she doesn't agree with:

"Look, Bartleby, I like you."

He raised an eyebrow.

"What I mean is, you're an extraordinary employee. You've contributed a lot to this group. You have the respect of many people throughout this department. You've gained my respect and appreciation as well. And I know that...you have leadership potential."

His lips shifted slightly. She wanted to interpret this as a start of a smile but wasn't sure.

"I want to see you continue to do your best work for our group, but I need your cooperation. I need you to relinquish access to the software-versioning system."

"And what if I do not?"

She slammed her hand hard on the desk. The kitchen knife and cable ties clattered. "Damnit, Bartleby! You don't know how serious this is! Jake sets the rules here, and you can't keep going 'I prefer not' whenever he sets one you don't like!"

"It is not that I do not like his rules. I will follow those rules that assist me in my work. When they hinder my work, I would prefer not to follow them."

"You can't pick and choose! We have to represent management and carry out their policies even when they have their heads up their asses. You should know that!" She waited for a reaction. His face remained mute and placid. "Or is that why you left management?"

"My past is none of your concern."

"But your future is! You keep flouting company policy like this, and you won't have a future here!"

He pivoted his head and shoulders back to the computer screen. "Does that mean you will terminate me if I do not comply?"

Every nerve in her body fell numb. Her throat clenched shut. After a moment, she found her head nodding. Her voice struggled to form the word, "Yes."

He swiveled in his chair, directing his whole body towards her. He gazed at her, but he looked at her chin instead of her eyes.

"Bartleby, I really don't want to let you go. Please."

He gazed past her, aiming his eyes at the tarp-covered cart against the wall. He then aimed his eyes towards her. "I would prefer –"

She had already finished his sentence and had started assembling an angry reply.

"– to comply with your request."

She blinked and stared at him in amazement. Her amazement turned to joy, until he spoke again.

"But I cannot."

Lucy does differently several things differently from the attorney in "Bartleby." She acts promptly. She stays firm. She tries to connect with him personally. And, she gets at least a slight shift in his behavior – something that our attorney didn't accomplish once in "Bartleby." But is Lucy's dedication and concern enough to change a Bartleby? Well, you have to wait for *Offline* to find out.

Conclusion

Offline is in the "submission and rejection" phase of publication. If you are an agent who would be interested in representing the book or a publisher who would like to publish it, please see me after the meeting.

If you would like to see a synopsis and sample pages of *Offline*, visit my Web site at www.matthewarnoldstern.com. I also invite you to subscribe to my newsletter, which includes the latest about my book and other news. My Web site also includes my speeches, tips on public speaking and writing, and other helpful information.

To recap what I've shared tonight: The workplace has changed considerably since Herman Melville's time, but the demands of management have not. "Bartleby" shows the trouble that can happen when managers ignore problems in their office and fail to connect with their employees. By acting promptly and sensitively, managers have a better chance of resolving problems. These are the lessons from "Bartleby the Scrivener" and *Offline*.