There were two very interesting books written in the 1950s. Actually, there were probably a lot of interesting books written in the 1950s, however, I want to focus on two. Both books, in their unique way, deal with people in organizations.

The first book, a work of fiction, is titled *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. This 1955 semi-autobiographical book written by Sloan Wilson is about a middle class man in corporate America and how he and his wife survive in a world dominated by business. Today, a theme for the book could be about achieving work/life balance. This very popular book was made into a movie starring Gregory Peck. (See the entire movie on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vTOtqR_OR4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vTOtqR_OR4))

The second book is titled *The Organization Man* by William H. Whyte, Jr. was published in 1956. This most remarkable book is an argument against every team-related philosophy that is used in business management today. It contradicts all of today’s best practices that advocate the benefits of group or team effectiveness. This book champions the value of individuals over teams.

To put *The Organization Man* in its proper historical context, I need to provide a brief history of the philosophy of human relations.

In 1927, Harvard University Professor Elton Mayo took a team of protégés and social scientists to the town of Hawthorne, near Chicago to become a part of a series of time and motion studies that were being conducted on employees at the Western Electric Company.

The tests involved making subtle and not so subtle changes to employee work methods, their physical work spaces, their work schedules and compensation to determine how much of an impact these changes had on their productivity. At first, the changes had a positive impact, however, when the tests stopped, the employees reverted back to their old ways. The value of the tests were compromised, one assumes, because the test subjects were aware of their role as test subjects, and responded accordingly to the attention they were receiving. (*This was later referred to as the Hawthorne Effect or the observer effect.*) Though the studies did not produce the desired outcome, something remarkable and unintentional happened. The social scientists bonded with the employees through their casual daily interactions.

These daily interactions led to discussions about work and later became a regular forum where the employees shared with the social scientists their inner most problems at work and at home.
simply listening, this new approach to employee relations resulted in the birth of the *job interview* and interview became a formal part of company operations. The testers, or social scientists, interviewed *all* the workers and then later collated all the information from the interviews into elaborate charts and graphs. What emerged from this new discovery was the philosophy that we now know as human relations. The time and motion studies approach transformed from external motivation techniques to the discovery of an internal approach that sought to reconcile that employees were human beings with physical and emotional needs. The social scientists speculated that if company leaders addressed employee concerns and needs, the core problems surrounding employee motivation would be solved. Abraham Maslow would call this self-actualization.

Human relations was a counter revolutionary strategy at this time. The prevailing management philosophy deployed by plant leaders was Scientific Management, as espoused by Frederick Winslow Taylor (see Taylor’s short book *The Principles of Scientific Management* published in 1911). Scientific management was very authoritative, hierarchical, tightly controlled management philosophy.

The troubling parts of Scientific Management espoused that employees were inherently lazy and the best way to motivate them was to use a heavy-handed authoritative approach. If only employees would stop being lazy and give in to management’s direction and control, some company leaders truly believed all would be well at work and everyone could be happy.

One can see why Elton Mayo’s human relations doctrine, which advocated putting workers first, was so revolutionary at that time. And it worked for a while until it was challenged by Mr. Whyte in his book *The Organization Man* in 1956. From the 1930s to the 1950s human relations had evolved from a counter revolutionary doctrine to a standard business practice.

Whyte argued that though Mayo was a brilliant scholar, human relations evolved opportunistically and without proper context. Whyte maintained that Mayo was a romantic, whose studies of primitive cultures and the social ethic that thrived during the Middle Ages, with its reliance on religion as a means to social control, badly influenced Mayo’s theories about people management practices in the modern business world. (*Mayo passed away in 1949.*)

To Whyte, human relation’s emphasis on the effectiveness of group behavior was misguided and lacked strategic purpose and direction. Human relations advocated group behavior only for the sake of achieving strong group behavior, when it should be focused on the sole purpose of achieving a business goal. In other words, a business goal should not be to achieve strong group behavior. Fast forward to the year 2015, how many times have managers sat in a group meeting and afterward lament that the meeting was a waste of time. In today’s business climate, most managers complain there are too many meetings.
By the 1950s, Whyte maintained that human relations had evolved to become a coup attempt by middle managers to wrestle control of the company from the CEO. Line and middle managers wanted complete control of the company’s reigns and desired to reduce the CEO’s role to a consultant. Human Relations’ main tenet of maximizing the potential of the direct reports, gave middle managers the serviceable philosophy they needed to seize control. For the CEO, this shift in power led to a kind of leadership schizophrenia. If the CEO drilled down too deeply, she/he would be interfering with the employee morale and effectiveness of the management level below them. How was the CEO supposed to lead in this environment?

In terms of the myths about effective teamwork, says Whyte, the mental aspects of coming up with creative solutions to solve complex business problems at work is an extremely disorganized and a mentally internal process and is difficult to accomplish as part of a team. The team’s greatest asset is to come to a consensus regarding the ideas of individuals. In essence, the group’s primary value is to discover the best idea of the group’s smartest individual.

Human Relations’ misguided emphasis on group effectiveness and teamwork over the individual is an attempt to create conformity and homogeneity. Whyte goes on to show how some company leaders, heavily indoctrinated in the social ethic, and their agents (mainly human resources) use policies, procedures and programs to maintain a culture of group uniformity.

Well-meaning but misguided recruiters eliminate the strong individuals, who have great potential to innovate, based on the requirement to conform to the cultural standards around “fit.” Instead relying on the biases related to cultural values and fit as a means of achieving social conformity, recruiters should find “it.” From an aptitude, knowledge and skills perspective, what is “it” that makes a manager good or great? “It” needs to replace “fit.”

Whyte explains how personality tests are used to achieve cultural conformity and how this leads to the displacement of strong individuals whose original ideas and beliefs are not in line with the company’s core beliefs. He shows how the questions are designed to penalize people for their individualism and for their unique perspectives in favor of those whose responses are consistent with company cultural norms. (Whyte worked in the testing field for a number of years.)

At the conclusion of the chapter on personality tests, Whyte refers the reader to an appendix titled How to Cheat On Personality Tests. In the appendix, Whyte discusses a series of personality test questions and explains how they are designed to achieve conformity. He also explains how the test questions can be answered to by-pass the conformity traps contained within them. Here are two examples:

**Question:** Have you enjoyed reading books as much as having company over?
It is pretty obvious the test question is designed to see if the person is an introvert or an extravert. Business culture rewards outgoing behavior. If you want the job or promotion, I think you know which choice to make.

**Question:** You have been waiting patiently for a salesperson to wait on you. Just when she’s finished with another customer, a woman walks up abruptly and demands to be waited upon before you. What do you do?

a) Do nothing
b) Push the woman to one side
c) Give her a piece of your mind
d) Comment about her behavior to the salesperson

This question is designed to see how dominant or passive you are. The best course of action is to go straight down the middle. You don’t want to show that you are always trying to control the situation. Responding with the most conventional answers are to best approach when taking personality tests. Avoiding the extreme answers one way or the other will place your scores near the average.

For Whyte, the appendix titled *How to Cheat On Personality Tests* suggests that true cheating takes place on personality tests when the tests are designed by management to conform to rigid cultural norms.

Whyte is acutely aware that in order for companies to thrive successfully, some degree of uniformity is necessary to achieve company goals. If there is too much uniformity, he warns, the culture will become static.

One can debate the merits of the three managements philosophies discussed in this article: Scientific Management, Human Relations, or Whyte’s advocacy for individuals over groups. One point is clear. The danger is not that there are too many management philosophies to choose from today, as leaders have the freedom to choose all or parts of the philosophies that best meets their business needs. Whyte is arguing in *The Organization Man* that the real danger to company culture is if there is only one choice.