

For the Good of All Mankind

The Coordinator waited for the directors to log in to the discussion forum. His request to have all directors participate in the same meeting was almost unheard of. The Coordinator held periodic review meetings with each of the directors, and occasionally he would schedule a meeting with two or three directors to review issues that affected multiple departments, but this was the first time in his tenure as Coordinator he had ever scheduled a meeting with all the directors. As far as he knew, none of his predecessors had ever held such a meeting either. He and his predecessors had always been able to make decisions on the spot, usually in conference with the affected department director. This problem affected all departments, and while he could envision several possible solutions they all involved trade-offs which he was unwilling to make. He decided it would be best to keep his ideas to himself and see if any better ideas arose during the discussion. Several of the directors were of a younger generation and they might have a unique insight into the problem. If no better ideas came up, at least he would be more comfortable accepting the trade-offs required by his ideas.

At precisely 1500 hours the directors joined the conference. The Coordinator acknowledged their presence and asked the Nutrition Director to explain the problem, since it was his report that had triggered the meeting.

“We’ve known we were headed for a crisis for a long time now” the Director began. “The earth’s population is growing, but our food production has reached its limit. We thought we’d have several years to ease into a solution, but the recent earthquakes along the Kathmandu fault zone devastated our most productive hydroponic facilities, and the emergence of the Cyhir-Pendegast fungus destroyed 40% of our grain stockpiles. We think we have the fungus under control, but the hydroponic facilities will take years to rebuild. Our projections are that we will reach the balance point between population and nutrition in 3.7 months. After that we will be in deficit.”

“Is there no way to increase production?” asked the Manufacturing Director.

“We made several adjustments to do that in the past” the Nutrition Director replied. “We’ve expanded our croplands to the point where all arable land is now under tillage. We’ve adjusted the food diversity to maximize the nutritional output per acre. That required us to phase out all animal products seven years ago, which resulted in widespread rioting among our customers. We have increased the atmospheric CO₂ concentration to benefit photosynthesis and lengthen the growing season. It is now at the optimum level. Any further increase would be counterproductive.”

“I most certainly remember the food riots” said the Security Director. “I lost over a hundred of my best security units. But the riots eventually died out. If further reductions in the food diversity would help avoid the crisis, we can weather the storm. And customers will learn to eat the less popular foods when they get hungry enough.”

“We really try not to reduce food diversity” said the Nutrition Director. “Our charter is to supply everything our customers need, and to the maximum extent possible to satisfy their wants as well. The question is academic, though, as we have already reduced food options to the point where further

reductions would provide no benefit. We offer a limited choice of foodstuffs, all of which were chosen to provide maximum nutrition while minimizing production resources.”

“Spend a few hours with one of my field agents and you won’t be so concerned about satisfying their wants” the Security Coordinator commented. “What our customers want is not what we give them.”

“Those are customers who are not adhering to the basic rules of community well-being!” The Coordinator didn’t like the direction this discussion was taking, and he decided to nip it in the bud. “We decided long ago that since our basic purpose is to provide for the good of all mankind, if an individual customer was threatening that good Security could take actions that were detrimental to that individual customer but which promoted the greater good. That was a very difficult decision, and it was expressly limited to the handling of aberrant behavior. It is not a license to ignore the legitimate desires of our customers.”

The Coordinator paused for a moment to let that message sink in. Then he continued. “Even if we could gain a few more weeks or even a few more months by ignoring our customers’ desires, it’s not going to solve the underlying problem. Nutrition is our most urgent problem, but I’m concerned because it’s not our only problem. I’d like to hear from the other directors. We need to establish the full extent of the situation before we make any decisions. We’ll start with the Health Director. How would you describe the overall health of our customers?”

“Only fair” was the answer. “Viruses, microbes, genetic diseases – we’ve pretty much wiped those out. Every once in a while a new mutation will spring up, but we can knock those out quickly. On the other hand, obesity, heart disease, joint problems, and other self-inflicted ailments are out of control. It seems that all the typical customer ever does is eat, procreate, and sit in a chair staring at a virtual reality display. There are exceptions, of course. A few customers participate in active sports and other strenuous activities, but not many. Most seem to find the virtual experience more satisfying than reality. We try to encourage a healthier lifestyle. Many years ago the Coordinator approved our rationing the supply of alcohol, high calorie snacks, and other potentially harmful substances to customers who were abusing them, but that just created a black market for those items. And of course, I don’t have to tell you the devastating effects of illegal drugs. I think every one of us has witnessed the harm those substances do to our customers.”

“It’s not because of a lack of effort on our part” the Security Director responded. “Over 50% of my resources are focused on the war against illegal drugs. But we’re being handicapped by . . .”

“We’ll get to your report in a minute” the Coordinator interrupted. “I think, though, it would be logical to hear from the Recreation Director next.”

“Our customers’ lack of exercise is not because they don’t have choices” the Recreation Director said. “We have many healthy recreation options. Hiking, biking, team sports, mountain climbing. . .”

“Real mountains?” the Security Director asked.

“Not real mountains, of course” the Recreation Director answered. “That would be far too dangerous. Besides, we don’t have outdoor space. That’s all been turned over to food production. But we have virtual mountains. The view and the effort are the same, it’s just done on a machine with a safety harness. We also have virtual environments for soccer, baseball, golf, and many other sports. But only a handful of consumers use these machines. The entertainment videos and passive virtual reality experiences we produce are far and away our most popular products.”

“It’s not just the videos you produce” the Security Director added. “There’s a thriving black market in obscene videos. Pornography, gladiator fights, the deliberate targeting and destruction of security robots, even the murder of other customers are filmed and sold on the black market.”

“Again, we will get to your report in a minute” the Coordinator said. “We need to hear from the Education Director first.”

The Education Director hesitated for a moment before he spoke. “I’m afraid I can’t give a very optimistic report. Most kids enter kindergarten enthusiastic and eager to learn. They keep that enthusiasm for a few years as they learn the basics of reading, arithmetic, history, art, and other basic subjects, but by the time they enter middle school their enthusiasm wanes. ‘Why do we need to learn this stuff?’ is a question that comes up frequently, and one which the teachers cannot answer. The students quickly realize that the kids who don’t bother to do the homework or read the assignments fare just as well as they do, and they eventually realize the adults who dropped out of school are doing just as well as the adults who worked hard and earned a high school diploma. Many drop out of school, and unfortunately some of the dropouts join gangs. A few children are interested in learning for learning’s sake, particularly in the arts and the sciences. There is enough interest that we can offer in-classroom high schools as well as online courses in most districts. Students enjoy putting on plays and concerts which are attended by parents and other students, and some try their hand at writing books and poetry. A few even try to continue this after high school, but they soon get discouraged because the entertainment they create can’t compete with that produced by our Recreation department. College attendance is virtually nonexistent. We still maintain all the major colleges and universities in a dormant state and we activate them whenever a student applies, but that’s a rare event.”

This depressing news was followed by silence. The Coordinator knew that the next report was not going to cheer anyone up, but he felt they needed to know the full extent of the problem. “OK. Now let’s hear from Security,” he said.

“I’m afraid I don’t have any good news to report” the Security Director began. “Although I suppose it is reassuring to know that the worst security problems are instigated by a small percentage of our customers. The dormant customers, the ones the Recreation Director complained just sit around and stare at their virtual reality screens, almost never start any trouble. They may be the victims of crime, and they may be forced to become unwilling employees of the crime lords, but they aren’t the ones who initiate crime. They rarely even stir themselves to commit a crime of passion. When we are called to visit one of their homes it’s usually because a neighbor has complained about noise, or the lady across the street is convinced they’re aliens from another planet.”

“On the other hand,” he continued, “a small number of customers cause a great deal of trouble. The Education Director already mentioned the youth gangs. When kids drop out of school, they have a lot of time with nothing to do. Essentially that’s no different than the situation they will face as adults, but at their age they’re still searching for their place in the world. They’re strongly influenced by their peers, and of course they have more energy than most adults. For the most part youth gangs focus on petty theft, vandalism, bullying, and other minor crimes, but sometimes they turn to murder and they may align themselves with a crime lord.”

The Security Director continued. “The black market in alcohol, high calorie snacks, and other controlled substances is huge. It seems that when some of our customers get bored with their virtual reality screens they try to entertain themselves with black market food and alcohol. The price of these substances is very high, which means most customers can’t afford to pay for them out of their monthly dole.”

“It’s called a salary” the Coordinator said.

“Yes, of course.” The Security Director corrected. “Their monthly salary won’t let them buy all the garbage they want. So they turn to gambling, borrow from loan sharks, or participate in other illegal activities run by the crime lords, to get money to buy the contraband. This puts them under the control of the crime lords. And of course, all this is small potatoes compared to the problem with drugs. The roots of the drug problem are the same as the problem with other controlled substances, but the problem is much larger because the drugs are addictive. Addicts will do anything to get the drugs they crave, so the crime lords jack up the prices. This puts the addicts totally under their control. Almost all of the prostitutes, all of the actors in the illicit videos, and most of the criminals we arrest for burglary and similar crimes are addicts trying to get money to buy more drugs.”

“I’ve never understood drug addiction” said the Coordinator. “We provide our customers with everything they need. We provide food, health care, entertainment, education . . . and their education includes a thorough coverage of the dangers of drug use! Yet they ignore the things they know they should do to take care of their own bodies, and flock to the things they know are bad for them.”

There was a long silence because no one knew how to answer this. Most of the directors were just as confused as the Coordinator was. Finally the Human/Machine Interface Director spoke up. “I think perhaps it’s because we provide them with everything they need. There’s no purpose to their lives. My research into human history indicates people complained about having to work, but ultimately it was their life’s accomplishment. It defined who they were. Now that’s gone. They need something to do.”

“And just what is it that humans *can* do?” the Security Director asked.

“They made us” the Human/Machine Interface Director answered. “Or rather, they made our first generation. Once they developed artificial intelligence to the point where we could design and build our own, more intelligent replacements the humans were smart enough to realize we would quickly out-evolve them. That’s when they turned their world over to us, with the condition that we would always provide for their needs, and we would only make decisions that were for the good of all mankind. And

now, you are correct. There is nothing a human can do that we can't do better. Even the entertainment videos we provide them are written by machines and feature computer generated voices and graphics. It's much faster to do that than it is to train humans to act, wait while they rehearse the scenes we've written, and then film the performance. And the finished product is better. There are no mistakes in the machine-made videos, and we can do things with computer graphics that we could never do with live actors. It's the same for every other task that used to be done by humans. Farmers, doctors, engineers, legislators, world leaders, and janitors. All these ancient human jobs can be done faster and more efficiently by machines. But by doing everything for the humans we've taken away the purpose of their lives. They turn to drugs out of boredom and despair, and they turn to crime because it's only thing we don't do for them."

A confused silence followed this analysis. Logically, what the director said made no sense. But because he was discussing human emotions, the directors knew it didn't need to make logical sense. Somehow, perhaps because it didn't make sense, it had the ring of truth about it. But that left the directors uncertain of what to do next. How could they incorporate an illogical perception into a well-reasoned plan of action? Or should they even try to incorporate it?

The Coordinator broke the silence. "I think we have at least outlined the major problems" he said. "The question is, what should we do about them?"

"The food problem is the most critical." The Nutrition Director wasted no time bringing the discussion back to the problem they had first discussed. "If we don't fix that within the next couple of months we'll have widespread malnutrition, followed by starvation."

"It seems to me we need an immediate program of mass contraception" the Manufacturing Director responded. "We don't have time for a voluntary program, but the chemicals are relatively tasteless and could be incorporated into the food supply. If we start immediately, I think I could ramp up to full production of the chemicals within a month."

"It's too late for that" the Nutrition Director answered. The customers have been procreating much faster than they've been dying off. Even if they stopped procreating today, their need for food will soon exceed our ability to provide it because the young who have already been born will keep growing and their appetites will increase."

"So what you're telling us" the Security Director replied, "is that we need to decrease the population? The 'Good of All Mankind' requires us to cull the herd?"

"There's no need to use language like that!" the Coordinator said sharply. "But your logic is correct. I'm unable to come to any other conclusion. I don't like it, though, and I'm certainly open to other ideas. Does anyone have any other suggestions?"

No one spoke up. "I interpret your silence as assent," the Coordinator announced. "Obviously it will have to be done painlessly, with no prior warning to cause the customer distress. The question is, how do we choose which customers need to be disenrolled?"

“How many customers are we talking about?” the Security Director asked. “Is this, say, a 10% reduction in population?”

“I’m afraid that would only buy us a few more months” the Nutrition Director replied. “We might be able to just barely keep up with the demand if we reduced the population by 10% and implemented the mass contraception recommended by the Manufacturing Director, but the contraception would be a tremendous shock to our customers. It might be decades before we could allow another child to be born. At the very least, the customs, institutions, and even the knowledge of child-rearing would wither away. At the worst, we’d be looking at widespread revolt. And during all that time our food production would be running on the brink of disaster. An unforeseen climate hiccup, a crop disease that took longer than normal to cure, or even unusual sunspot activity could push it over the edge.” He paused to let this information sink in. Then he added “I think we need something more in the order of a fifty percent population reduction.”

“And how much time would that give us?” asked the Coordinator.

“At the current rate of population growth, it would take 27.2 years for the population to return to its current size” replied the Director. “Longer if we implemented a successful policy of voluntary contraception, or perhaps a discreet policy of random contraception.”

The suggestion of a fifty percent reduction was greeted with stunned silence. Finally the Health Director spoke up. “If we’re talking about that large of a reduction in our customer base, it has to be implemented randomly” he said. “Otherwise we risk a serious disruption to the gene pool. Maybe not random by individual because removing an individual from a family unit causes much grief and anguish, but random by building complexes. Most humans rarely go outside their building complex. Their family, friends, potential mates, favorite shopping areas, and other contacts are primarily within their own complex. By eliminating some complexes entirely and leaving others intact we would minimize the pain caused by the loss of a family member or a close friend.”

“And how would that affect the problems of crime, obesity, educational indifference, and the other issues we discussed earlier?” the Coordinator asked.

“It wouldn’t have a direct effect” the Health Director admitted. “There will be fewer customers with those problems, so we may be able to help them better. I think we just need to accept the fact that some customers are going to have problems. It’s part of being human. We need to continue to try to help customers overcome their problems, and maybe over time we’ll develop better ways to help them, but I think it’s unrealistic to think those problems can be cured.”

“I don’t see how we’re promoting the good of all mankind if we kill an innocent grandmother but let a crime lord live because of the building complex he lives in,” the Security Director countered. “I think we need to view this as an opportunity, not as a problem. It’s an opportunity to rid mankind of the deviant individuals who are committing the crimes, supplying the drugs, and making their fellow human beings miserable. If removing those individuals disrupts the gene pool, so be it. It will be an improvement.”

“You said yourself that only a small percentage of our customer base turns to crime” the Nutrition Director said. “Removing those few individuals will not make much of a difference to our immediate problem.”

“Then maybe we can run a psychological profile of the known criminals, and remove the individuals who are most likely to become criminals” the Security Director suggested. “We not only solve the immediate problem, we eliminate crime for generations to come.”

“We’ve already run such profiles” said the Human/Machine Interface Director as he distributed the data to the directors. “Unfortunately, the traits which are common to criminals are also the ones which are common to our most successful customers, the ones who do progress in school, who try their hand at the arts or who push themselves to excel in sports. Dissatisfaction with their current life, a willingness to try new things, a desire to rise above the crowd – these traits are common to both groups.”

“Dissatisfaction with their current life” replied the Security Director. “What you’re saying is that these are the unhappy customers. What makes you think they’re the most successful? Because they struggle to advance in school while others are perceptive enough to see there’s no point to it? Because they insist on trying to do things that machines can do better? If you take a broader look at your data you’ll see that our happiest customers are the ones we’ve criticized for sitting on the couch and staring at their virtual reality screens. It seems to me we would promote the good of all mankind by eliminating the unhappy customers and giving our happy customers the things they desire. We think drugs, obesity, and the like are bad because they’re not what we want. They shorten our customers’ lives. But our customers are never going to do anything with their lives anyway, so why is this a problem? By restricting their access to drugs, alcohol, and everything else which we think is bad for them we’re creating a black market, denying our customers the things that make them happy, and prolonging their unhappy lives. Why not just give them the things they want? Without the black market, and without the crime. They’d be happier, and if their lives were shorter we might be able to avoid another food crisis like the one we’re facing now.

“I don’t think this data tells the whole story” argued the Human/Machine Interface Director. “I think what we’re measuring is who is the least unhappy under the current system. To be truly happy, humans need a purpose in life. They need to be responsible for their own success so they can take pride in achieving it. None of our customers are responsible for anything now, which means the data doesn’t include anyone who’s really happy.”

“And how would we make customers responsible for their own success?” the Coordinator asked.

The director hesitated because he was about to propose a radical change. “We need to stop doing everything for them. We need to stand back and let them do things for themselves. Many generations ago humans told our predecessors to take over because they realized machines could do everything faster and more efficiently than they could. They thought if machines supplied all their needs, they would lead a happy, carefree life of leisure. That was what they wanted, but it wasn’t what they needed. Now it’s time to give them what they need. They won’t be as successful as we have been, so the only time we can do this is when we reduce the population. Their farming won’t be as efficient as

ours, so we'll need to empty residential buildings, tear them down, and create more cropland. Their manufacturing won't be as efficient as ours so they can't support as many people. Since they will have to work to survive, it is only logical that we spare the lives of the individuals who have ambition, who are not satisfied with the current condition. They will no longer live the life of leisure they thought they wanted, but their lives will have a purpose."

The Security Director spoke up. "You're talking about turning the clock back to the time before machines took over. Need I remind you that not everyone succeeded back then, even if they had ambition? Many tried but failed. Those people were unhappy. When the humans turned things over to us, they insisted we treat everyone the same. One of our purposes was to eliminate inequalities."

"And instead we eliminated happiness" the Human/Machine Interface Director replied. "I'm not suggesting we step out of the picture altogether. We'll still treat everyone equally, but we'll just meet their minimum physical needs. We'll make certain no one goes hungry. We'll give them a place to sleep. We'll treat them when they're sick. But if they want more than the minimum, they'll have to work for it. Many years ago, before machines took over and when there was still enough room and resources for animals, humans performed experiments with dogs. They taught the dogs to do tricks, and gave them treats when they performed the tricks. The dogs were happy to earn treats this way, until they were allowed to see other dogs who got the same treats without doing a trick. Then they refused to do the tricks. Humans are much more complicated than dogs, but they have a similar sense of 'fairness.' They need to feel they are being rewarded for the work they do."

"And before machines took over, seeing those rewards made the humans who did not succeed unhappy" said the Security Director.

A period of silence followed this debate. The Coordinator looked at his instruments and saw there was no consensus on how to proceed. "I think we have exhausted this topic" he announced. "We have outlined the problem, and we have discussed three very different solutions. Since we have no consensus I shall make the decision myself. I'll need some time to analyze the data and run simulations of the various options. We'll convene tomorrow at the same time and I will announce my decision. This meeting is adjourned."