

# Open Process Manifesto

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## 1 Open Process and Closed Process

This is a manifesto in favour of using an open process for collaboration and planning: one in which we explain the evidence and logic that supports our interpretation and planned course of action. Such a manifesto is necessary to counter the numerous compelling endorsements of the contrasting *closed* process of keeping evidence and reasoning held close, and those around us guessing about our thoughts and intentions.

While this closed approach has many other advocates in fiction and among scholars of politics, Alexander Burr’s character from the musical *Hamilton* expresses it in a way that will be helpful for starting our discussion: “Talk less... Smile more... Don’t let them know what you’re against or what you’re for.” Later Burr challenges Hamilton: “Why do you always say what you believe? Every proclamation guarantees free ammunition for your enemies!”<sup>1</sup> This accords with Niccolò Machiavelli’s famous advice to princes, to the fascinating ways Sherlock Holmes makes all clear only at the end of a mystery, and how Jeeves is invariably able to rescue an impossible situation using concealed and devious mechanisms of his own.

My point is not that Machiavelli and Jeeves are wrong, *per se*, but that people are over-eager to apply their methods in inappropriate circumstances.<sup>2,3</sup> If you are not a murderous Renaissance prince — and you are not a preternaturally talented superman whose best-laid schemes invariably come off right — using a closed process may tend toward frustrating your aims rather than advancing them, particularly when those aims are in service of the general welfare and not your own narrow self-interest.

Human life is characterized by faulty beliefs and faulty plans. Machiavelli and his ilk encourage those who seek power to deceive and exploit those who

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<sup>1</sup>This accord’s with Greene’s 20th “Law of Power”: “It is the fool who always rushes to take sides. Do not commit to any side or cause but yourself.” Robert Greene. *The 48 Laws of Power*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>For those who do rule over others, or at least want to better understand power for such people, see also: Bruce Bueno De Mesquita and Alastair Smith. *The Dictator’s Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics*. PublicAffairs, 2011.

<sup>3</sup>The book’s contents are also summarized in a short and accessible video: CGP Grey. *The Rules for Rulers*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rStL7niR7gs> (visited on 10/08/2024).

they hope to get it from. Such an approach may serve the individual, but it prevents learning in the collective sense.<sup>4</sup> Faced today with problems which we must mitigate or overcome if humanity is to have a future, we need to trust more in the capabilities of one another and work toward a politics of the public good in place of politics as an arena for individual self-advancement.

## 2 The Closed Process in literature and life

Machiavelli's *The Prince* advises that deceitful rulers can achieve more than honest ones by using cunning to outwit their opponents.<sup>5</sup>

Sherlock Holmes is the master of the Closed Process. He will routinely deceive even his closest collaborator — John Watson — and leave the details of what he has discovered and the actions that he has taken unstated until the tale has reached a climax and the malefactor is caught. In *The Adventure of the Norwood Builder*, Holmes deduces that the builder Jonas Oldacre has faked his own death and hidden on the property. Instead of telling the authorities where he knows Oldacre's hiding place to be, he tricks them into leaving it himself with a phony alarm of fire. In *The Adventure of Black Peter*, Holmes sets up a false identity as a whaling captain to lure in and capture the murderer he is seeking. In *A Scandal in Bohemia*, the detective tricks Irene Adler into revealing where her photo with the King of Bohemia is hidden by using a plumber's rocket to create another false fire alarm.

A well-known self-help book — Robert Greene's *The 48 Laws of Power* — repeatedly emphasizes the wisdom of Burr's taciturn strategy of always keeping his cards close to his chest.<sup>6</sup> It advocates keeping your capabilities secret, to avoid threatening those above you (law 1); concealing your intentions from everyone (law 3); never trying to convince others through logic (law 9); using unpredictability to cultivate a mysterious reputation and confound opponents (law 17); and speaking and behaving like those around you, even when you feel otherwise (law 38). A distinguishing feature of Greene's book is that he never pays any attention to the general welfare or public good — it is all about doing as well as you can for yourself. The cynicism of Greene's view is acutely displayed in his advice to never commit to any side or cause aside from yourself:

Put yourself in the middle between competing powers. Lure one side with the promise of help; the other side, always wanting to

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<sup>4</sup>Syed also explains how self-deception prevents learning: "A deliberate deception (misleading one's colleagues, or a patient, or a boss) has at least one clear benefit. The person doing the deceiving will, by definition, recognize the deceit and will inwardly acknowledge the failure. Perhaps he will amend the way he does his job to avoid such a failure in the future. Self-justification is more insidious. Lying to oneself destroys the very possibility of learning. How can one learn from failure if one has convinced oneself — through endlessly subtle means of self-justification, narrative manipulation, and the wider psychological arsenal of dissonance-reduction — that a failure didn't actually occur?" Matthew Syed. *Black Box Thinking: Why Most People Never Learn from Their Mistakes—But Some Do*. New York: Portfolio, 2015.

<sup>5</sup>Niccolò Machiavelli. *The Prince*. London: HarperCollins, 2018, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup>Greene, *The 48 Laws of Power*.

outdo its enemy, will pursue you as well. As each side views for your attention, you will immediately seem a person of great influence and desirability. More power will accrue to you than if you had rashly committed to one side. To perfect this tactic you need to keep yourself inwardly free from emotional entanglements, and to view all those around you as pawns in your rise to the top. You cannot let yourself become the lackey for any cause. (p. 148)

To me, this advice is a strong indication that Greene is echoing Machiavelli and giving advice for princes and those in high positions of power who can (Machiavelli would say **must**) suspend everyday human morality in favour of a consequentialist stance that the prince can lie and cheat for the general good. Even that higher-order justification is absent here: Greene is supplying a nihilistic path toward getting what you think you want, ignoring how in everyday life we tend to want good relations with the people around us more than material benefits for ourselves. The idea that we should treat others as pawns underscores the disrespect and contempt inherent to the Closed Process. Since we have decided that other people are instruments to be used in advancing our will, we lose the practical benefits that could arise if we looped them in and recruited them — and also the intangible solidaristic benefits of feeling like we are engaged in a shared purpose and effort with others.

Solidarity is powerful, and isolation eventually makes you crazy.

### 3 What is the Open Process?

At its simplest, the Open Process is just a matter of explaining your evidence and reasoning along with your course of action. If you are on a trip with a friend who seems irritable, for example, it would mean saying that to you it seems they would benefit from a snack or a break, and then providing them with a sandwich or some rest time. In this particular case the scope for misunderstanding in the absence of explanation is small, but the principle is general: by explaining what we are endeavouring to achieve, we empower those around us to understand and help us.

That is the critical virtue of the Open Process: it treats other people as having valuable thoughts and contributions to make. The extreme hubris of the Closed Process approach is that it assumes that the actor knows everything relevant about the problem, knows why the people around them are acting as they are, and knows just what to say or do to prompt them into behaving as the Closed Process user would prefer. This process is prone to misunderstanding and confusion at every step. In my experience, when I try to pursue an objective in an indirect or hidden way, the other people involved can perceive that there is an effort at driving an agenda, but they will seldom guess perfectly at what I am attempting or why. As with telling lies generally, the recipient usually ends up believing neither the truth nor the lie told, but some different ‘truth’ which they imagine motivated the lie. You lie to try to cover up being hungover, but your partner interprets it as a sign you’re cheating; you lie about your real aims

to advance a plot in the workplace, but your potential allies for your real agenda misinterpret you as an opponent and so you miss the chance to advance a more ambitious agenda together.

While telling a lie treats the listener as someone whose knowledge and ability to reason is unimportant (or are even an *impediment* to being usefully influenced in the way the liar hopes), sharing your thinking and planning process openly lets collaborators evaluate and critique it at any stage. They can show how some of the logical steps between your evaluation of the situation and your plan of action are faulty; they can suggest alternative means of achieving your end which you may not have thought of; they can suggest means of implementation which may be better but unknown to the original planner. People who have the evidence and reasoning behind a project or proposal are also much more likely to give substantial voluntary assistance to the effort when they feel like they have been approached for sound reasons, by people who have prepared and researched appropriately, and who have consulted with them in a way that draws respectfully on their experience and expertise.

Greene argues that we must never be open about our failings, but should instead hide them or blame them on a scapegoat.<sup>7</sup> When it comes to the strength of institutions, this is terrible advice. The covered-up problem cannot be fixed at the systemic level, and so will surely recur. As Carl Sagan put it: “If we resolutely refuse to acknowledge where we are liable to fall into error, then we can confidently expect that error—even serious error, profound mistakes—will be our companion forever.”<sup>8</sup> By contrast, **if people feel safe in explaining why they did what they did, everyone gets the chance to learn** from their experience and to correct flawed procedures. Nickolas Means gives a talk which compellingly critiques institutional cultures which seek chiefly to assign blame to and punish those involved in mishaps or catastrophes; he also explains how creating a culture where people can feel safe about being honest allows lessons to be learned and outcomes to be improved for everybody. Specifically, Means discusses the partial core meltdown at Unit 2 of the Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station in 1979.<sup>9</sup> His big point is that people who are committed to their work seldom need additional reprimands beyond their own feelings of disappointment when something has gone badly wrong, and that people don’t go to work trying to be unsafe or to do a bad job. Having an institutional culture where people can explain their reasons and have that interpreted as a shared opportunity to learn rather than a prosecutorial process carrying a risk of reprimand is necessary to make compliance with after-incident investigations comprehensive and meaningful. Concealing failures serves the agenda of organizations focused on a positive public perception, but corrodes the ability of those institutions to achieve their substantive aims; they cover up how faulty maintenance practices in the hospital are causing post-surgical infections, maintain a

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<sup>7</sup>Greene, *The 48 Laws of Power*, p. 201.

<sup>8</sup>Carl Sagan. *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup>Nickolas Means. *Who Destroyed Three Mile Island? — The Lead Developer Austin 2018*. 2018. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xQeX0z0Ncs> (visited on 10/07/2024).

lofty public image, and quietly keep killing people with dirty scalpels.

Open Process also empowers people to support our worthwhile causes through independent action. Not everyone will want to take our direction, or follow our processes, even when they are similarly seized with the severity of a problem and the need to act. Religious Christians can choose to fight poverty through charity while labour activists fight it through legislation and unionization. Movements can work convergently to try to protect possibilities for a prosperous future for humanity and the rest of life on Earth.

Open Process aids cooperation on projects too big for any person. When it comes to causes like fighting for a stable climate, limiting nuclear weapon risks, or fighting antibiotic resistant bacteria, there is no hope that one person's work will solve the problem. We are all part of a more- or less-coordinated effort, with consequences unrolling across the decades and centuries. There is no hope with such problems that a few crafty manipulations will sort things out and leave us all impressed with the back room brilliance that spawned the breakthrough. Instead, it will take lifetimes of insight and effort, none of which can be continuous absent of breaks and illnesses and other obligations, and none of which can ignore the need to keep raising up another generation that is equipped to cope with the world as we have left it to them. Achieving those things requires an open process of informing our colleagues, neighbours, and collaborators to our true knowledge, motives, and plans — then the collective strength of an effort can endure across our inevitable individual limits of health, time, attention, ability, and good fortune. Particularly in the era of digital storage and global networks, Open Process lets you collaborate beyond death and across national, cultural, linguistic, and religious boundaries.

## **4 Only Open Process is resilient for sincere principled causes that go beyond the self**

The Closed Process is dramatically satisfying. It feels great to see Holmes or Hercule Poirot brilliantly turn a set of clues that was shared with us into a surprising and decisive interpretation that punishes the guilty. The drama comes from surprise and artificiality. Greene and others correctly recognize that life can oftentimes be mundane, and that people can be excited and seduced through spectacle and romance. As the planetary stability which has been the cradle for human civilization is further damaged by our fossil fuel use, we all find ourselves on a stage where the prospects for drama are real and of tremendous long-term importance to humanity. We are setting the future collectively together right now, day by day. In this context, we should suppress and redirect the ambition and practice of raising up the individual at the expense of the collective, and recognize the wisdom of those who say that we need to be honest and learn from our mistakes — to learn as collectives and communities of practice, whether that means doctors or diplomats or psychologists or power system engineers. Since failure to learn will now mean universal disaster, the imperative to evaluate and

improve is vital. We can't keep failing or we will run out of liveable planet.

For some types of efforts, we simply cannot afford to let errors be hushed up and lessons lost. Chesley 'Sully' Sullenberger was the pilot who managed to land an Airbus A320 in the Hudson River with no loss of life after numerous Canada goose strikes caused both engines to fail. Reflecting on how aircraft flight rules have been written based on past catastrophes, he explained: "We have learned important lessons, literally lessons bought with blood, and we have to pass them on."<sup>10</sup>

The airline industry has perhaps gone further than any other toward establishing processes for investigating failure which do not emphasize punishment and blame, and thus drive the people involved into hiding all they can. Punishing the person at the controls for being in charge when systematic failures cause catastrophe is nothing more than scapegoating and is, in fact, the opposite of institutional learning.

With an Open Process even if you fail spectacularly, at least the people around you will know what you were trying to do. The desire to be understood can be more compelling than that for benefit or material gain, and the pain and frustration of trying to get our thinking across and failing is a good motivation for trying to be understood by the people around us.

## 5 On the universality of science

Since this manifesto is about the virtue of truth, it is worth describing the important way in which the practice of science and scientific knowledge is distinct from other areas of human endeavour. From all we have seen in the stars, we have excellent reasons to believe that the laws and substances of nature are the same throughout the universe. When we look back at the earliest light from after the Big Bang, we see the same elemental spectra and the same laws of physics at work. This means that what we discover scientifically is knowledge that was always present to be found in nature. People who have nothing to do with us — who may have forgotten us, or lived on the other side of the galaxy and never known of us — can learn the same truths that we have and will get the same results. In this crucial sense, then, science is not culturally relative. Of course the meanings which we derive from what we learn (does evolution imply anything about what we should believe and how we should act?) are culturally contingent and parochial. But when it comes to empirical facts, there is a truth out there to be found.

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<sup>10</sup>Contrast with Greene: "Everyone makes mistakes, but those who are truly clever manage to hide them, and make sure someone else is blamed." (p. 201)

## 6 Conclusions

In his marvelous Jeeves and Wooster stories, P.G. Wodehouse may seem to be providing us with a model in Jeeves.<sup>11</sup> He follows all the laws of power: holds things back and deceives, only revealing his true methods and intentions after he has succeeded. All we normal imperfect people with limited vision might fantasize justifiably about such power. What I would contend, however, is that Wodehouse's stories are filled with warnings about what happens if a normal person tries to play as Jeeves; when his master Wooster attempts to scheme for himself, he invariably fails, deepens his troubles, and needs to be rescued by Jeeves.

Humankind is all Woosters and Watsons, with no Holmes or Jeeves among us.

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<sup>11</sup>In a 1945 essay, George Orwell made an interesting comment on Jeeves' character and what it reveals about England: "The most immoral, or rather un-moral, of Wodehouse's characters is Jeeves, who acts as a foil to Bertie Wooster's comparative high-mindedness and perhaps symbolises the widespread English belief that intelligence and unscrupulousness are much the same thing." George Orwell. *In Defence of P. G. Wodehouse*. 1945. URL: <https://www.telelib.com/authors/0/OrwellGeorge/essay/CriticalEssays/wodehouse.html> (visited on 01/03/2025).