

Managing

A book review

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Henry Mintzberg. Harlow, Essex: FT Prentice Hall. 2009.
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An occupation without status?

The newspaper tells us, in a faintly cynical tone, that the number of managers in higher education in the UK has grown at three times the pace of academics in a recent five-year period. The chair of a university governing body bemoans the resulting growth of red tape and auditing functions. Welcome to the world of managing.

The notion of managers – and with it the notion of managing – has certainly fallen in the esteem that the public and academia once held it. People in business once aspired to being managers. That was before everyone became a manager, even when the only thing they manage is waste. More than half a century ago Peter Drucker's famous book *The Practice of Management* (1955/1968) explained the work of managers and perhaps started the process of demystification. Management to Drucker was a serious yet down-to-earth occupation. Henry Mintzberg's groundbreaking study *The Nature of Managerial Work* (1973) described the job of the manager – the chief executive no less – as an extraordinarily ordinary one of coping with a myriad of demands and a fragmented existence. The picture was far removed from the orderly activities catalogued by Henri Fayol (1916) as planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating and controlling business activity.

Not long ago in these pages, Michael Brocklehurst and his colleagues (2010) recounted some of the dissatisfaction that engulfed the role and title of the manager. In its stead grew a concentration on leadership, from the programmatic (Bennis & Nanus, 1985) to the scholarly (Finkelstein, Hambrick, & Cannella, 2009). Upper echelon theory (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984) gained as middle management (Scarbrough & Burrell, 1996) and management in general (Scarbrough, 1998) declined.

This erosion of the value seen in managing was not what Mintzberg had in mind in 1973 when he published the first of his many books, with their serious yet charming style,

rooted in a deep knowledge of what managers do and think about. Only such practical reason could have recognized the flaw of the purist variety in evidence in strategic planning before Mintzberg's emerging strategy (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985) emerged.

Management, redux

Mintzberg, still active at McGill University in Montreal, has examined the work of managers, this time leaving no doubt that we are meant to praise and not just study them. His 2009 addition to the oeuvre is called, simply, *Managing*. This book is a self-conscious return to his roots in the themes of *The Nature of Managerial Work*, even down to his reuse of the quotations that began each chapter of the 1973 work to introduce the new book's chapters.

Giving credit to Charles Handy (1994), Mintzberg notes that it is a word with two meanings: the conventional one concerning planning and control, and another, older one, coping. Not much has changed in management since 1973, he contends, even with the growth of the internet and many outward signs of a new economic and business landscape. Managers still live fragmented lives, coping with competing demands on the time and attention, seeking out that fragmentation when it does not exist. Gone from the manager's life is the notorious in-tray of mail awaiting attention. In its place, however, we see the inbox of email messages, now often updating on the mobile phone the manager uses to interrupt his written conversations with oral ones. *Plus ça change ...*

Managing, he writes, is a combination of art, craft and science. Vision and creative insights are set against experience and practical learning, informed by analysis and systemic evidence. Managing involves balancing these elements. Too much science and the cerebral activity becomes the merely calculating. Too much craft and the engaging becomes the tedious. Too much art and the insightful becomes the narcissistic.

The book has a second root, as well. While the 1973 book grew out of his doctoral studies examining in detail the activities of five chief executive officers over a week each, the new volume draws upon the lives of 29 managers, some junior, others quite senior; some private companies, others in large corporations, still others in public authorities. The appendices give details of some of these encounters and vignettes from those experiences illustrate the narrative Mintzberg develops in the main body of the text. The discussion, though, largely confirms what he has already established: that managing is a complex and messy task, and that managers like it that way.

Managing, he writes in Chapter 1, is a practice. In language echoing the “strategy as practice” literature his earlier works helped to spawn, he says the managing is “certainly not a science, if we mean by science the systematic development of knowledge”. Much science is not like that either, to be fair, with accident and serendipity playing a big role in scientific discovery, which only goes to substantiate his argument.

Nor is managing a profession. Mintzberg dismisses the notion of the professional manager repeatedly throughout the book, pointing out that it lacks a codified body of knowledge despite decades of business school studies and research. Management, he says, is a calling: “efforts to professionalize it, and turn it into a science, undermine that calling” (p. 13). Professional managers, were there such a thing, would be able to work in any setting, which practice tells us they cannot do. The same theme lies behind his earlier *démarche*, *Managers Not MBAs* (Mintzberg, 2004).

Chapter 2 distinguishes between “folklore” and “fact”, among them that the manager is a reflective, systematic planner. No prize for guessing that description is categorized “folklore”. The “fact”, he writes, is that managers work at an unrelenting pace with activity characterized by brevity, variety, fragmentation and discontinuity. These are the messages he relayed in 1973 and the ones he learned again in more recent contact with managers. The older book was wrong, that is, insufficiently complex, in its view of the 10 roles of managers come in three varieties linked in a linear fashion: interpersonal, informational and decisional. Instead, in Chapter 3, he offers a different view with three planes of activity: action, people and information. The first two involve leading and doing inside the organization and linking and dealing externally; the last involves communicating and controlling, but also framing the activities and scheduling the work. Managers are not conductors of an orchestra, but people who constantly have to reconcile all the competing demands for attention and action.

Chapter 4 tells us of the “untold varieties of managers”, a departure from the earlier work in that it is based on the diverse backgrounds of the subjects of the current study. Managing out of the middle arises more from linking and dealing than other forms, while managing in the middle emphasizes controlling and communicating. New managers get a mention, too, a change of role that comes as a shock to many on the day when doing becomes managing.

Chapter 5 discusses 13 conundrums of managing spread out across the three planes of activity and a fourth zone: thinking. Yes, managing involves that, too. These conundrums come with catchy names, though rather little data for us to assess whether they are really as

problematic as he suggests. In the Syndrome of Superficiality, for example, he wonders how we get deep into a topic when there is so much pressure to get the job done. His solution is not a solution at all: managers manage by breaking complex issues “into small steps that can be taken one at a time”, he writes. Managers “also have to hone their capacity to *reflect* in their work” (p. 160, emphasis in the original). Reflecting, he reflects later on, comes from the Latin for folding something back on itself. Managing is about layer upon layer of unresolved issues that nonetheless demand a decision.

That reflection comes as one of the steps in Chapter 6, the final section, when Mintzberg seeks to describe what it means to be “managing effectively”. He then writes about what goes wrong: people failures, when the wrong person is assigned to manage; job failures, when the task itself defies management; fit failures, when a good manager faces the wrong set of issues (demonstrating the fallacy, he notes, of “professional management”); and success failures, the paradox of doing too well, when “doers become overdoers, linkers become gadflies, the leaders become cheerleaders” (p. 204).

A variety of threads holds managing together: the energetic thread (managing is “no job for the lazy”); the reflective thread (exploring numerous options, backing off when something does not work to try something else); the analytic thread (analysis may be misguided, but trusting intuition makes no more sense); the worldly thread (N.B. being *global* is less important); the collaborative thread (managing works well when it bring out the best in others); the proactive thread (too much reflection means nothing gets done, too much action means things get done without thought); and the integrative thread (tying the others threads together).

This section is where Mintzberg seeks to draw the bigger lessons, among them that managers are not effective (or by extension, ineffective). Rather the match between the manager and the situation leads to effectiveness. That means that measuring the effectiveness of the manager is bound to be mistaken; measure instead the effectiveness of the managed unit. And: “don't be mesmerized by measurement” (p. 225).

Managing, not leading

Mintzberg saves his most stinging remarks for the cult of the manager-as-hero: the leader. We idolize them, he writes, sell biographies of them under “fiction” as well as “business”, sometimes unable to distinguish the difference. Nor can we teach someone in a classroom to be a leader. The expression “young leaders” is an oxymoron, a designation

that “can encourage hubris and thereby spoil what might have become real leadership” (p. 221). “By the excessive promotion of leadership, we demote everyone else,” he writes. By contrast, “effective managing can be seen as engaging and engaged, connecting and connected, supporting and supported” (p. 235).

Therein lie both the beauty and the ugliness of this book. It reports on a study of 29 days of managing, but we hear the conclusions largely without the data. The data look similar to those from 1973, just more of them and from a broader range of managing. The literature he reviews along the way to illustrate his conclusions range from the contemporary to the earliest writings on management. Much of the writing he cites was cited in the first book, too, suggesting there's wisdom in the old scholarship – which there surely is – but also that the changes we have witnessed in the business landscape since then have not mattered much. They range from the breakup of conglomerates to the demise of most vertical integration; from ubiquitous computing to the (somewhat overstated) death of distance by advances in telecommunications; from the hollowing out of the middle in industry (Riiber Knudsen, Randel, & Rugholm, 2005) to the shrinking of middle management through to the notion of empowerment that all the other developments have made possible.

Mintzberg has not written this book, though, for academics. He makes not even a casual nod to the uncertainties we discuss in critical management theory or the distinctions between narrow and broad notions of stewardship. Nor is this a textbook: he eschews the now obligatory end-chapter summaries, choosing to put key sentences and phrases throughout the book in **boldface, so the busy reader – the busy manager – can quickly get the point** without having to linger on the subtleties.

As a result, we recognize that this book is written for future and current managers. The more experienced ones will, no doubt, recall how his 1973 work more nearly summed up what they felt about their jobs than any of the textbooks on organizational behaviour or principles of management they were told to read. The new volume repeats those old lessons for his new apprentices. He offers some additional insights and contemporary detail, sadly presented with rather less elegance than we have come to expect from such a master.

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