

Management Education and TrainingA NEW VIEW

by

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This article sets out the main factors in the management process and then goes on to consider the educational implications of that process.

As with so much in management we can start with the blindingly obvious, the fact that managers operate in situations; and this paper starts from that position to consider the education that is required for effective situational management.

1. Managerial Situations

Managerial situations involve a number of dimensions, including the following:

1.1 Time

Each situation has a past, present and future and this requires that every manager should be aware of the history of the situation in which he finds himself; of its influence on the present and the joint effect of past and present on the future. If managers understand this time sequence and its influence upon the situations they face, if they develop a historical sense, they are more likely to make a realistic appreciation of the problems they encounter.

1.2 Self

Each manager brings to a situation himself, his own history including previous experience in other managerial situations; his personality; his values and beliefs; his perception and his intellect. He will also bring his own personal goals to his job.

1.3 The external and internal environment

The external environment represents the various elements which are external to the organisation, for example, competitors; trade unions; educational institutions; suppliers of finance, machinery and raw materials (in the case of retailers goods for resale) and the government. These elements affect the way in which the organisation behaves and how different departments within the firm operate.

The internal environment for any manager comprises the other departments in the organisation; other levels of management external to his own situation - his superiors and peers and the culture of the organisation.

These external and internal environmental elements all develop relationships with the firm and its departments, they represent constraints and contingencies upon the freedom of the organisation and its managers. These relationships involve different degrees of dependency between the firm and its environment and the manager's unit and its surroundings.

1.4 The situation

Within the situation for which the manager is responsible there are four variables for him to consider.

First there is the technology - the equipment and processes through which tasks are performed. In a retail outlet the technology may be that of self-service or counter service; in the office it may be a manual or a machine-based system.

Second, there are the tasks which have to be performed within the given technology; these are the actual jobs that have to be carried out. In the case of the retail outlet, if the technology is that of self service, some of the tasks would be shelf-filling and check-out operating. If the technology is that of counter service a different set of tasks is appropriate.

Third, there are the people who require the skills in order to be able to carry out the tasks. The more complicated the technology and the related tasks, the more diverse might be the skills that are required.

Finally, there is the structure by which I mean the systems of authority, decision-making and communication. The structure provides the framework within which the others operate.

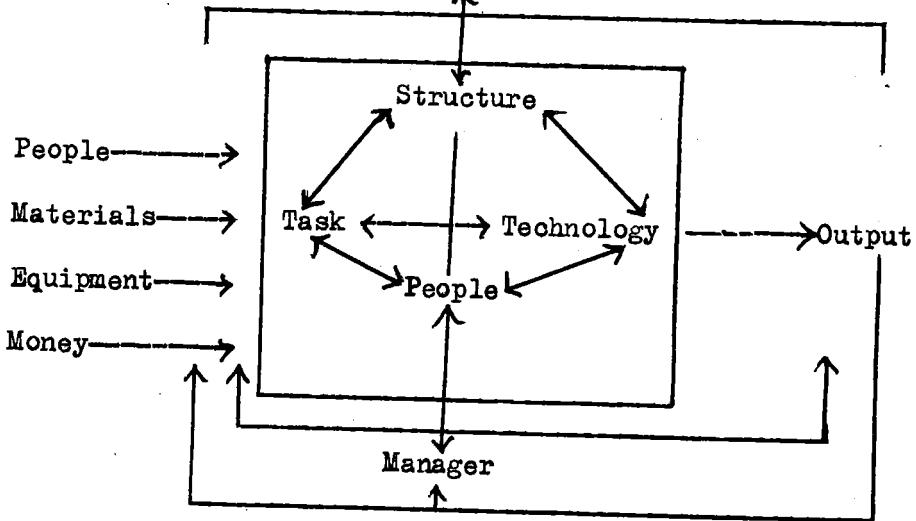
These four variables are highly interdependent so that change in any one of them normally results in change in the others and, apart from any internally generated change, they are subject to change from the external and internal environments.

The position can be formalised into an input, process and output model with (a) an input of resources into the situation from the environment, (b) a process of interaction between the four variables and (c) an output of goods and people.

The situation can be characterised by the following diagram:

Past ——— Present ——— Future

The environment of other levels of management, of peer departments and of the organisational culture.



2. Managerial Behaviour

The conceptual framework outlined in the first section is at once a tool for the analysis of the management situation and a guide to the process of management and to management behaviour in real situations. This section examines some of that behaviour.

2.1 In the complex situations that face managers, their behaviour tends to be characterised by a whole series of relationships which involve an underlying political skill. Indeed management can be regarded as a political process involving conflict and power and calling for the ability to negotiate and trade with others.

A further aspect of this complex pattern is that management action often appears to be varied, short-term and fragmented. The significant is interspersed with the trivial and the manager has to shift moods quickly and frequently. In a special sense the manager has to be proficient at being superficial, he has to deal with a great many issues at a shallow level. He tends to concentrate on the current and specific rather than on general long-term matters. In his work he wants current information, often unsubstantiated, rather than formal detailed reports. His time span is short. This picture of management in action is somewhat removed from the persistent rational planner and decision maker of the text books. It is all too easy to condemn this behaviour but much of it is the result of the complexity of the situation, the pressure upon the manager to produce 'results' and the punishment/reward systems of firms which tend to reward him for results in the 'here and now' rather than for any future contribution he might make.

2.2 In keeping with the above it has been argued with some justification that managers who consistently achieve good results are notably inconsistent in their solutions to the problems they face. Conversely managers who are low achievers tend to be consistent in what they concentrate upon and in how they set about their work. At first sight these views appear surprising and run counter to much that is written on management. Perhaps the use of the words 'consistent' and 'inconsistent' appears to be shocking; they are meant to be so because we need to look at our preconceived notions of management. It could have been said that managers need to be flexible and not rigid, but this formulation does not get to the heart of the matter which I will now consider.

For the purpose in hand managers can be divided into two categories - the low achievers and the high achievers. This is a simplistic division but it will highlight the relevant points.

(a) Low Achievers

The main characteristics of the low achievement managers are as follows:-

(i) They accept, without question, rules of thumb with little regard for situational change. In times of little change, 'the way things were done in the past' might be some guide to what to do in the present but in time of rapid change, as in modern retailing, the past is no longer a sound guide to what to do now. The value of the past is in being a yardstick against which to judge how different things are in the present. History is useful in different ways in different situations.

(ii) They give inappropriate attention to detail. The stress here is upon the word inappropriate. As I mentioned earlier managers tend to be involved in details, but the real question is whether they recognise the limited nature of details and are conscious of the relationship between the details and the context in which they occur. The further point is that managers can and do pay attention to inappropriate details, failing to see what is relevant and what is not.

(iii) They have no control over priorities. These are the managers who react to every issue as though they were all of equal importance.

(iv) They do not move fast enough when faced with important critical situations. They hope that the crisis will go away if only they wait long enough. They are the sleepers of the management scene who hope they can avoid

having to make any high-risk decisions which might rebound on them. They often take the view that it has all happened before and there is no need to do anything now; they fail to see that their inactivity in the past has contributed to their present situation. This is a disease which can afflict firms which have survived over a long time without a great deal of change and this indeed is the weakness in some Co-operative thinking about the problems of the last twenty years.

(v) They tolerate ineffective subordinates. Ineffectiveness breeds ineffectiveness, and in this case they appear to be reluctant to act because it might be uncomfortable for them and their subordinates. Underlying this is a highly personalised view of management and it reflects an inability to stand back and review the ineffective subordinate within his situation.

Personalised management sees subordinates in terms of praise and blame, situational management looks at the problems facing subordinates, how they are coping with them and how they can be helped. There is the recognition that ineffectiveness can be the result of the interaction between the subordinate and his situation and not solely the fault of the subordinate.

(vi) They do not seek advice or help, believing that to do so would be to admit weakness. They appear to be afraid that to admit ignorance puts their authority at risk when in fact it reveals a sufficient maturity to recognise that no one knows everything. Because of this reluctance to face up to the inevitability of ignorance their approach to managerial decision-making is unbalanced. They believe that they know everything when they cannot and, in consequence, fail to recognise that decision-making is based upon incomplete information and for this reason must contain an element of uncertainty. In turn this means that a

manager should never be so committed to a decision that he cannot admit the possibility that it should be changed.

These low achievers are consistent in these characteristics when the real need is to perceive differences. They fail to recognise the need for situational management.

(b) High Achievers

The high achievement manager is characterised by inconsistency in that he behaves in different ways, at different times and in different places. To the outsider he often appears to be inconsistent when making decisions, when apparently faced with similar problems. How can this inconsistency be justified? The answer lies in the fact that because he is consistent in his analysis of situations and exercises self-discipline, he sees significant differences which are overlooked by the non-analytical low achiever. The high achiever utilises, intuitively or otherwise, the type of framework outlined in the first section.

In more detail the characteristics of the high achiever are as follows:

(i) He performs a careful analysis of the situation facing him, recognises the complexity, obtains those facts which seem significant but at the same time appreciates their limitations. He is able to see cause-effect relationships and recognises that problems are generally multi-caused. Further he grasps the strategic realities of the situation, that is, the sources of constraints and of contingencies around him.

This is not to say that the high achiever is so concerned with analysis that he is unable to make decisions. Through practice he becomes skilled at analysing problems quickly. His whole management style is suffused with an

analytical outlook so that it becomes second nature to him. Analysis is simply the start of his management process, he moves to decision-making and then to action which, in turn, leads to analysis to see whether the decision was correct and if not, why not.

(ii) He develops an operating strategy. Every manager who is successful develops a sense of direction, purpose and objectives. A strategy is more than a choice of objectives, it involves the means of achieving them, of deciding what is difficult, of making assessments of favourable and unfavourable factors and of recognising strengths and weaknesses.

An operating strategy can never last very long, it needs to be re-analysed every few months and this the high achiever will do because he recognises the fact of change and accepts the uncertainty it generates.

(iii) The high achiever recognises the classic management dilemmas; he is aware of the fact that his problems are common to most operating managers but is conscious that solutions will be different. Examples of these dilemmas include, first, the new post situation, when it is recognised that in a new job, for the first few weeks or months, the manager will be sized up by his subordinates and that he will be sizing them up. In this situation the signals each sends out are very important, standards set in the early stages become precedents for the future. Second, there is the information void, when the operating manager needs information but is cut off from it because his superiors have not communicated with him. He needs to know what is expected of him by his chief who may not be able to tell him because he himself does not know. Third, a dilemma can occur over the problem of knowing when and how to challenge higher level policies and when to accept them, when simply to run the system and when to challenge it. In these and

many other classic dilemmas the high achiever seems to be able to rise above the habitual response and handle each situation on its merits, recognising that, while the problems are common, the situations in which they occur are very different and need very different treatment.

(iv) The high achiever uses a wide variety of management techniques and never gets too attached to any one. It should be clear that the range of situational problems facing any manager is so great that no one set of responses or choice of techniques is wholly adequate. The manager needs to understand that there is a wide range of tools and techniques available to him and that discriminating choice must be made.

The low achiever tends to settle on a single limited number of techniques and when they fail to meet his needs he feels frustrated. This is an understandable response, for when managers are too close to their problems they lose their sense of perspective and shut out the constructive possibilities offered by the techniques at hand. The key to effectiveness is to know which techniques to apply in which situations.

(v) The high achiever recognises that in any situation there exists a key operating task which must be given priority and must be dealt with in a specific manner. This calls for self-discipline expressed through a readiness to analyse the problem and to reject the notion of 'the one best way'.

Lessons from the high achievers are as follows.

First, employ the practice of analysis with discipline and consistency; second, motivate subordinates and satisfy superiors - both are crucial to the management of a situation; third, manage oneself to avoid consistency when it is inappropriate; and finally, focus on one task of prime importance at a time while setting it within its overall context.

3. The Implications for Management Education and Training

The first section of this paper produced a basic framework for analysing different facets of a management situation while the second section, through its contrast of two different types of managers, highlighted the need for managers to develop particular skills, such as, analysis, decision-making, communication and coping with uncertainty as a result of accepting change.

3.1 The prime need is to educate managers to be able to use analytical skills in complex situations. One way in which this can be achieved is through educating managers to develop a basic open-system approach such as that outlined in section one. Using this basically simple but powerful tool managers come to recognise the problems of complex situations involving issues of relationships, of dependency, of choice, of cause and effect, of search, of limited rationality, and of power and conflict. The aim must be to develop the ability to conceptualise, to think abstractly in order to stand back and see the constituents of the problem and their relationship to the situation in which the manager operates.

If management education starts from this position it can avoid the ever-present danger that there will be an over-emphasis on one variable in a situation at the expense of the others. Too often management education has concentrated on a single variable and as a result we have seen management education as a thing of fads and fancies. In some cases the emphasis has been on organisational structure and on the search for the best structure; sometimes, the stress has been laid on human relations - people-centred management education long held the field; while in other cases, attention has concentrated upon tasks and technology

Often these individual variables have been studied in terms of closed systems; little or no attention has been paid to the environments in which the variables operated. In consequence of these shortcomings, management education has failed to take account of the complexity of the problems and situations facing managers. On occasion it has resulted in disillusionment as managers have recognised that the single-minded purpose of the educators within their own speciality has been far removed from the manager's world. It might be that study in depth of one of these variables could have developed in managers a general analytical skill but often the possibilities of wider application have been lost through over-emphasis on particular specialisations.

3.2 While there are firm grounds for the education of managers through the development of analytical skills, the difficulties should not be underestimated.

First, there is the prior need for management students to understand the nature of theory. Theory and categorisation are aids to analytical thinking and the manager has to recognise that both are abstractions from reality and as such tend to simplify its complexity. This means that management students must not equate theory and reality and think that categories are more than devices to help people organise information. The danger is that students do not appreciate the limitations of theory and seek to apply it directly to real situations as though it was an accurate reflection of them. This problem is often exacerbated by the 'text book' approach to management education which can only lead to disaffection.

Second, all concerned have to recognise an important tension within management education. Managers have limited time, they work under pressure and want complex problems simplified. The unfortunate result is that managers often apply simplified solutions, based upon limited theory, to

complex situations. The further result is that they become disillusioned with management educators. This means that a preliminary task of the educator is to clearly state the nature of his contribution to management effectiveness, the rationale behind it and its limitations. Management educators have to avoid the trap of overselling their wares.

3.3 If we think situationally we see that management has to take account of areas which do not receive a great deal of attention in the bulk of management literature. I refer to the historical dimension and the consequent need to develop an historical sense, and to the notion of management as a political process. Further, there is the need to examine more fully the nature of personal values with a view to establishing their influence in any situation.

3.4 If we accept the view of management and of management education outlined in this paper it becomes evident that the important factor in the educational process is less the content than the manner in which it is presented. What are called for are manners and methods which encourage and even force people to think about the content. There needs to be a concentration on the 'why' type of questions and approach rather than on the 'how' approach. It has to be basically analytic rather than descriptive. What should be clear is that a concentration on techniques of management is a failure to recognise the priority of thought in the management process. It should also be evident that educational techniques which come between the management student and the education of his thought processes, techniques which amuse, interest but spoon-feed the student, will not contribute to the improvement of management performance.

A problem in this approach which has to be squarely faced is that people in general, and managers in particular

believe that thinking is as natural as walking and eating and that it does not have to be learnt. This means that there is an initial barrier to be overcome; there is resistance to learning how to think and in consequence there is a need to demonstrate that managers do not think clearly as of right.

Another problem is that many managers come to management education expecting to be given answers or the latest techniques. They want to be helped directly and quickly and the temptation for the management educator is to respond with programmes of short courses of a techniques nature. Such activity will not deal with the real problems of management, at best it is a palliative which gives the patient what he wants without curing him.

While appreciating the pressures on managers and their own desire for quick help, the tasks of management educators are clear. They have to convince managers of the basic requirements for effective management, as laid out in this paper, and then they have to educate managers to meet those requirements. Management education must be rooted in the basic academic virtues coupled with a deep understanding of the situational problems of management.