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Brunsson Holmblad, Karin

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Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics
Düsternbrooker Weg 120
24105 Kiel (Germany)
E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)
<https://www.zbw.eu/econis-archiv/>

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A Dual Perspective on Management

By Karin Brunsson*

The article discusses the need for management teachings, which, arguably, differ substantially from any experience of managerial practice. It is suggested that the teachings of management are a necessary component in the social construction of organizations; thus they form an important part of the organizational economy that dominates world society. This is why management cannot be taught from a practice perspective only, but must be taught dualistically: as a coherent set of ideas - a doctrine - and as it may turn out in practice. The teachings of management should be simultaneously trusted and distrusted, and all students of management should master the capacity to embrace contradictory views on the topic of management.

Keywords: *Doctrine, Management, Organization, Social Construction, Teachings.*

Managers and Their Work

"It is common knowledge" observed Stinchcombe (1965: 145), some fifty years ago, "that modern societies carry on much more of their life in special-purpose organizations than traditional societies do". Twenty five years ago, Simon (1991: 28) claimed that the term "organizational economy" was more adequate than the commonly used "market economy". Later scholars relate the increasing number of organizations to a widespread belief in rationality, science and the independent individual, as well as the progressive development of standardization (Meyer et al. 2006).

This article starts from the presumption that organizations may be conceptualized as institutional facts (Searle 1995). Few question the idea that there are organizations, be they large corporations like Ikea, public organizations like a government agency, non-profit organizations like the Red Cross or nation states like Greece. People may also refer to organizations in a comprehensive, general and abstract sense, without having any particular organization in mind. In any case, and in contrast to physical objects - "brute facts" in Searle's terminology - organizations are constructed by speech acts. Institutional facts are "talked into existence" and exist only if they are generally accepted by individuals and perpetuated by the individuals within those organizations. However, once constructed, they seem as real as any other kind of reality, such as trees, tables or individuals. And obviously, organizations include massive amounts of brute facts: managers and employees, buildings, machines, furniture, etc.

It is further presumed that organizations are different from other groups of individuals engaged in some common activity. Formal organizations (which are the typical organizations, indisputably classified as organizations) are hierarchically ordered and have their own identity. They can talk and act and make decisions, but when doing so they rely on one or more individuals. Within

* Associate Professor, Department of Business Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden.

organizations, due to the hierarchical structure, particular individuals have more discretionary power than others. They may be called entrepreneurs or leaders or consist of a collective group of professionals and will in this article be referred to as managers.

The starting point, in short, is that the social construction of organizations includes ideas pertaining to managers and their work (Brunsson 2013). Though often summarized as management, ideas of what managers should do may differ substantially from what they actually do. On the one hand, management should help organizations become successful by means of proactive, long-term planning and rational decision-making. On the other hand, it is generally acknowledged that managerial practice is people oriented and consists of a set of fragmented, short-term activities. While some admit that managerial practice may be disorderly and confusing, but serves organizations well nevertheless, there are a vast number of ideas of how to improve practice in order to make it come closer to an orderly kind of management (Brunsson 2007).

The dual nature of management is the topic of this article. If it is true that there is a discrepancy between how management is taught and how it is practiced, and if this discrepancy is generally acknowledged, why do universities, business schools, management consultants and others not teach management as it appears in managerial practice? Which circumstances support the teachings of management and help perpetuate the "gaps" between teachings and practice? What does a dual perspective on management mean?

In the following sections, the idea of management is deconstructed and some complications that managers meet in practice are brought to the fore. It is suggested that the idea of management includes a coherent set of ideas, which are loosely coupled to practice. These ideas – the teachings of management – dominate management textbooks, as well as many popular books and articles on management. They are neither descriptive nor normative, neither enviable nor completely useless. Instead, the teachings of management may be characterized as a doctrine. Much like any religious or political doctrine, the management doctrine is optimistic as well as persuasive and highly attractive to a substantial number of people. Furthermore, it seems quite stable, as reactions to the doctrine serve to preserve rather than to overturn it.

Students of management should understand the intricacies of the management doctrine, while realizing that managers' working environment will often function in a quite different fashion. They must learn to take a dual perspective on management and embrace contradictory notions of what management is all about.

The Idea of Management and Managerial Practice

Organizations come with an objective. Somebody wants to produce something that others demand or might ask for and this can best be accomplished by means of an organization. It seems obvious that this somebody should want the undertaking to become successful. The idea of management, then, is to help promote organizational success. This applies to all organizations, irrespective of

their production and including, perhaps, even illegal undertakings. It would be pointless, one may argue, to engage in management or engage managers, if the idea was to undermine the objectives of the organizations.

The Idea of Management

The very idea of management is to promote an egoistic organizational imperative: managers must see to the interests of their organizations first of all. It may seem tough to substitute a machine for a number of loyal subordinates (for example) or to outsource production to low paid workers in distant countries, but if such changes seem likely to make the organization (more) successful, managers should undertake them. The same holds true when it comes to replacing suppliers or outcompeting another enterprise: the interests of the managers' own organizations should be their number one priority. Explicitly or implicitly, this presumption dominates management textbooks, as well as many popular books on management and leadership.

Which organizations are most likely to become successful? The general answer to this question is that organizations should be effective; they should reach their objectives with as little effort or input of resources as possible. The notion of efficiency is included in that of effectiveness; organizations are not effective, unless they are efficient and use as little input resources as possible to produce their output. (But they can be efficient though being ineffective, should they focus on the wrong things. A frequently used example is that of producing life vests of concrete.) It is the duty of managers, then, to help their organizations become effective.

What do managers actually do when they engage in management? The textbook answer to this question is that they make decisions. Oftentimes, decisions are presented as an end product and little attention is paid to what happens after decisions have been made. But as a basis for their decisions, managers are expected to engage in a number of future-oriented activities, such as strategy and budget work, the construction of balanced scorecards, or the selection of profitable investments (Anthony and Govindarajan 2007, Horngren et al. 2002).

The textbook version, then, is that decision-making is at the heart of management. However, managers are not supposed to make their decisions in any haphazard or emotionally based way. Instead, the textbook authors make clear that managers should follow the rules of formal rationality (or approximate these rules). This means that their decisions should be made in a conscientious and informed manner. Most importantly, managers must have a clear and unerring view of the objectives of their organizations, as well as a clear view of how to act in order to make their organizations successful (such views are frequently called visions, strategies or business ideas). By means of planning or budget procedures and calculations they should collect relevant information about the future and decide on which actions are the most advantageous to their organizations (Simon 1957).

To summarize, the idea of management is built on the assumption that there are a number of interrelated and very fundamental relationships, which all see to

the interests of the organization and which together help constitute management (Brunsson 2013). Together, these relationships of organizational egoism, effectiveness and rational decision-making to organizational success indicate that management matters. They make management appear an orderly, purposeful and useful undertaking. Not only must organizations have somebody responsible for their talk, decisions and acts, but these managers are also crucial for the organizational well being, or so textbook authors and many other authors on management generally imply (Brunsson 2007). However, the actual work of managers is less straightforward.

Managerial Practice

In a study of nineteen newly appointed sales and marketing managers, Hill (1992) found widespread disappointment. Although they were recruited from within the company and should already have been familiar with the nature of managerial work, these managers believed that, as managers, they would make important decisions and be engaged in strategy and planning work. Instead, they found "people challenges" (p. 7) to be their most important part of their work. Their first year transition into managers further involved learning how to handle a large number of diverse tasks and how to cope with stress and emotions. In essence, they were forced to develop a new professional identity which differed substantially from what they had expected.

In a similar vein, a number of studies of managerial practice show that the work of managers is quite disorderly, even chaotic. Not only is managerial practice context specific and time bound, but it also depends to a large extent on organizational environments and the characteristics of individual managers (Carlson 1951, Stewart 1967, Mintzberg 1978, Kotter 1982, Tengblad 2000, Watson 2001). Some objections to each of the presumptions included in the idea of management are summarized below.

In practice, the relationship between management and organizational success is not always clear. Many circumstances within and outside organizations contribute to their success. Managers may misunderstand or misinterpret the contexts of their organizations. They may make - as it turns out - the wrong decisions or they may fail to make any decisions at all. They may be victims of circumstances, which they have little chance of influencing or which are unknown to them. "There is no one formula for success", concluded a research team having made interviews at 500 companies from different sectors and in different parts of the world (Berger 2006).

What is effective further depends on somebody's judgment. Within organizations there are normally divergent opinions on which measures should be undertaken in order to increase organizational effectiveness. The meaning of these concepts, as well as the relevant time perspectives that managers should consider, are contested. In practice, managers must negotiate not only with their subordinates, but also with other managers and external stakeholders. The changes they initiate are the outcome of a number of compromises (and whether or not the changes are actually implemented - and when - is yet another question).

Moreover, it is not always clear which changes best serve organizational interests, or even what these interests actually are. There are short-term and long-term perspectives to take into account and diverging opinions concerning the effects of different changes. In practice, managers must make sense of confusing situations, negotiate with others and compromise as to what should be done.

While planning procedures suggest order, managerial practice is rather the opposite of order. It concerns mundane, often unexpected problems, which must be solved in cooperation with others within and outside the organizations. Decisions may be important, but it is not always clear when decisions are made or by whom. Managers may be ignorant of which decisions they are expected to defend.

In addition, managers are subject to time pressure. They do not have time to collect the information they need for informed decisions. When engaged in controversies, they must sometimes rely on their own (emotional) morality. In turbulent environments, managers may have to adjust, even ignore, the objectives of their organizations. And the outcome of an informed decision may be as likely to fail as that of an experience-based decision.

In sum, managerial practice differs in important respects from the idea of management. Most importantly, management is context-bound and depends on the production of the organization and its location in time and space, as well as on the capacity – and luck – of the individual managers and the people who surround them. However, though generally acknowledged, managerial practice plays a minor role when it comes to teaching management.

Four Gaps and What to Do about Them

An accountant in a large multi-national company succinctly summarized the loose coupling of managerial practice to the ideas and teachings of management (Scapens 1994: 315):

- Well it is, you see, how things evolve. I suppose in the academic world it is all clear cut; but it is not really you know. When you come down here, it is a hell of a big mishmash, all inter-related influences. It is not clear-cut and logical. It looks completely illogical, but that is how it happens.

But academics are not naive. They have long observed the discrepancy between what they teach and what they learn about management. In essence, they have identified four "gaps" (Brunsson 2011a):

- **Between management education and managerial practice:** Critics argue that management education does not take managerial practice into account. Students are taught to build elegant models and expensive information systems, but not to handle the poor working conditions in the factories where the production takes place. Nor are they told how to act swiftly in a crisis. Chances are that the teachings

of management make students into obedient bureaucrats, with little aptitude for managerial positions.

- **Between management research and management education:** Critics claim that management education is only loosely coupled to recent research results. Researchers pay little attention to education, and management textbooks come in new editions with only minor changes. Because management education deals with organizations generally, little attention is given to variations between organizations.
- **Between management research and managerial practice:** Critics argue that those who do management research do not understand managerial work in practice. Their solutions to problems that they observe are too costly and come too late, which is why management research becomes largely irrelevant.
- **Between what managers might accomplish and what they actually accomplish:** Critics claim that managers are not audacious enough. Managers do not make use of the knowledge that management education and management literature provide. In this case, the criticism is not that management education is irrelevant or outmoded, but rather that it is not put to use.

Some regard these "gaps" as natural and quite uninteresting, because they see management research, management education and managerial practice as different kinds of activities, which are not necessarily related (Kieser and Leiner 2009). But many find them irritating, an indication of isolated professions. More often than not, students of managerial practice conclude that managers ought to organize their work in a more systematic and long-term fashion (Brunsson 2007). Others suggest a closer cooperation between academics and practitioners, which presumably should lead to more situation-specific and relevant research (Hodkinson and Rousseau 2009, Syed et al. 2009). Yet others recommend academics to engage in the general social debate or to engage knowledgeable "translators", who have the capacity to explain what the academics mean (Røvik 2008, Singleton-Gren 2010).

In addition, there are divergent opinions on what management education should comprise: should the students be prepared to engage immediately in managerial practice, mode-2 knowledge (Nowotny et al. 2001, Starkey and Madan 2001)? Or should they be taught fundamental characteristics of organizations - "conceptual underpinnings" - rather than the particular management techniques - "best practices" (Porras 2000)?

In conclusion, the suggestions to remedy the "gaps" imply radical changes of large categories of professionals and of their attitudes as well as their work. Such changes take time, whichever direction they take (and given the many divergent opinions on what is wrong this is not at all clear). Meanwhile, the discussion proves that neither academics nor other writers on management are unaware of the discrepancy between the teachings of management and managerial practice. They are concerned, but of course no major changes can be expected in the short run due to the major changes proposed.

This means that the recurrent discussions on "gaps" and how they should be closed are counter-productive and serve to stabilize the gaps rather than help close them. Different writers see different problems and propose different remedies, while recognizing that the effects of any major change will appear only in the distant future. When discussions on gaps reappear, the gaps will be moved yet further into the future. As a consequence, and for the time being, recurrent discussions on gaps call attention to the insight that the teachings of management are only remotely similar to managerial practice. At the same time such discussions preserve these very teachings and the gaps remain stable.

A more radical approach is to defy the very idea of management and instead promote the idea that leaders should take the role of managers.

The Idea of Leadership

Many authors on leadership describe leaders as exceptional people, who abhor bureaucratic arrangements and act on their gut feelings (Burns 1978, Peters 2003). Leadership guru Bennis (1989: 39-40), for one, described leaders as change prone and charismatic individuals:

- The manager administers; the leader innovates. The manager is a copy; the leader is an original. The manager maintains; the leader develops. The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people. The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust. The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective. The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why. The manager has his or her eye always on the bottom line; the leader's eye is on the horizon. The manager imitates, the leader originates. The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it. The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader is his or her own person. The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing.

Whether or not such exceptional (and enviable) people fit into hierarchical organizational arrangements is not altogether clear. While some expect leaders to have managerial positions and just be a better kind of manager (Fryer 2011), others see leaders as necessary complements to managers. Leaders become necessary, they argue, because in a globalized society change is imperative and inescapable (Kotter 1990).

But most arguments for leadership depend on the idea of formal organizations. When this is the case, the objective of leadership becomes identical to that of management: organizational success. Nor do ideas of leadership question hierarchy; rather, hierarchy becomes more pronounced when leaders are involved; there are no leaders unless there are also followers, as Bennis (1989: 17) noted somewhat surprised:

- I had been writing about leadership for many years before it struck me that there was a vital aspect of any organization's success that had been overlooked, not great leadership, but great followership.

Like managers, leaders are expected to take initiatives and make decisions. Leaders may create a different and perhaps more diffused kind of order than managers, but they still create order.

In essence and somewhat paradoxically, while arguments for leadership may set out to question a traditional and presumably old-fashioned, idea of management, they actually serve to strengthen this idea. The traditional idea of management must be known in order to make the idea of leadership appear different and novel. It constitutes the very basis for the idea of leadership and is indispensable for any such idea.

Between Ought and Is

The preceding paragraphs argue that attempts to change or question the idea of management rather serve to strengthen this idea. The question then becomes what the teachings of management are. Do they make up a management theory? Are they ideals to be sought after? Or are they no different from the idea of organization?

Because management is taught as an academic subject, many expect that there must be some management theory. But whether or not and to what extent, that is actually the case is disputed; the answer depends on the perspective of the observer. Academics refer to theory in several ways: as an answer to the questions what, how and why (Whetten 1989) or to denote the major work of well-known scholars (Schwartz 2007, Pryor and Taneja 2010), even to make recommendations (Drury and Dugdale 1992: 344-345):

- Theory should represent the desired state and practice should represent the current state.

However, to regard the teachings of management as a theoretical ideal is to make managers engaged in managerial practice frustrated and disappointed. Most managers would probably see themselves as failures, like the newly appointed and frustrated managers whom Hill (1992) studied (see above).

Yet another possibility is to merge the idea of management with that of the organization. In fact, within organization or management research the two concepts are often used as synonyms. Academics speak, for example, of management and organization theory (Wren 2005: 230) or of organizational theory as disconnected from contemporary management practices (Suddaby et al. 2011: 237). In these and similar instances either management or organization becomes a superfluous concept.

The teachings of management are neither outright theoretical nor clearly descriptive; rather they are somewhere in between. Typically, textbooks on

management accounting and management control provide examples from managerial practice of, for example, strategy or planning procedures. But these are stylized ad hoc examples, which give little information of how frequent or complicated these procedures are in practice. Consequently, they rather underline the unclear character of what is taught, making the teachings of management simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive (Brunsson 2011b).

Nor do the teachings relate only to organizations or to a strict educational setting. To the contrary, the teachings of management are widely spread in the popular press and by means of so-called self-help books, where they apply not only to organizations, but to individuals as well. Individuals, too, are expected to set goals, be effective and strive for success. Preferably, they, too, should engage in long-term and short-term planning in order to find time for as many activities as possible. Surveys show that prestige relates to experience: modern (and wealthy) individuals are deemed more successful the more they have achieved before they die (Manpower 2014).

This is why it makes sense to see the teachings of management as separate from the idea of organization and to regard it as a social construction in its own right. But whether or not it makes sense to continue to teach management in this fashion is yet another question.

The Art of Accommodating Duality

If it is true, as the previous sections suggest, that managerial practice differs substantially from the teachings of management, these teachings may seem superfluous and to understand them a waste of time. Would students of management not benefit from understanding, rather, the complexities of managerial practice?

One answer to this question is that managerial practice is situational and depends on particular circumstances. It is difficult to detract any general properties of management from managerial practice, which is why any teachings of management would be a contradiction in terms (in addition, many would probably hesitate to accept a managerial position).

The teachings of management, in contrast, consist of a coherent set of ideas, which cannot easily be replaced by any description of managerial practice, however realistic such a description may be. Instead, their loose coupling to practice makes the teachings of management similar to a doctrine. Much like other doctrines, whether religious or political, the orderly, future-oriented and comprehensive characteristics of the management doctrine make it attractive to individuals who strive for control in an organizational setting. Moreover, the tenets of the doctrine seem irrefutable: who could argue that managers should not see to the interests of their organizations or that they should employ techniques that they find ineffective or that they should not try to make informed decisions, but rely on their gut feelings? Who does not want to be an important decision maker, with the capacity to strategize the future and

make an impact on their organization? In sum, the teachings of management seem much more attractive than any description of managerial practice.

The attractiveness and coherence of the teachings, in educational as well as in consultancy and other settings, help explain the ambition of many managers to change routines or control systems in order to bring them in line with the management doctrine, the idea being that there is something wrong with managerial practice. Some may even believe that the discrepancy between doctrine and practice is a local phenomenon, which pertains to themselves and their own organization, while others are more skillful; better managers.

A dual view on management would probably bring some relief to such frustrated managers. The teachings of management are then seen as one way of talking, thinking about and teaching management. They may be looked upon as a doctrine, which belongs to a different sphere of practices, that of social constructions. When that is the case, the loose coupling to managerial practice becomes less problematic; it constitutes, rather, the state of the art. Religious and political doctrines, too, are necessarily loosely coupled to individual or political life: there are no perfect individuals, nor any perfectly liberal or socialist or capitalist society.

The article started with the observation that formal organizations proliferate in modern society. Many witnesses to the functionality of such organizations: organizations allow for an efficient production by means of coordination, centralized control and group cohesiveness, they argue (e.g., Stinchcombe 1965, Barnard 1938, Hofstede et al. 2010). But, while all organizations include people and a number of artifacts (other "brute facts"), the idea of the organization is a social construction, which exists only in the minds of individuals. The management doctrine relates to this idea, to the extent of being at times conflated with it.

But although the management doctrine seems to be an inevitable part of the very construction of organizations it is not identical with the idea of the organization. As discussed above, the management doctrine relates to both organizations and individuals, and in a number of respects modern individuals take on organizational properties.

An awareness of the nature of the teachings of management should make students of management trust and distrust them at the same time. Students should realize that these teachings have the character of a doctrine, which is imperial for the social construction of organizations, but loosely coupled to managerial practice.

A dual perspective on management may appear schizophrenic, but perhaps it is not. Individuals are capable of embracing different, even contradictory, perspectives in many situations; without noticing they break rules to which they passionately cling or they act superstitiously, while avowing against superstition. A dual perspective on management requires a skeptical approach to the teachings of management. But students who master the art of accommodating a dual perspective on management will approach management in a realistic and insightful manner.

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