

Managing: Pure, If Not Simple

Overview

Henry Mintzberg provides a very unique perspective into the art of managing. His views have helped to shape modern practices more so than any other contemporary in the field. What is it that makes Mintzberg's approach so effective?

In this reading we will explore Henry Mintzberg's latest book, simply titled *Managing*. Published in 2009, more than 30 years after he published his seminal analysis, *The Nature of Managerial Work*, Mintzberg sets out to see what, if anything has changed in the world of management over the past several decades.

This book closely examines the daily lives of 29 managers from a variety of fields and industries, such as business, government, healthcare, and the social sector. Mintzberg writes about observing top management, middle management, and those at the bottom of the management chain. Additionally, the sizes of the organizations in his sample vary, ranging from 18 to 800,000 employees. There are six chapters in the book; we will closely explore the central topics of each chapter and the managerial issues that they seek to address.

Chapter 1: Managing Ahead

In this chapter Mintzberg asserts that our current managerial model places too much emphasis on leadership concepts, and should instead focus on the basic management skills that are necessary to effectively run a team. He also suggests that management and leadership should go hand-in-hand and should never be considered separate entities: "we should be seeing managers as leaders, and leadership as management practiced well."

Unlike several of the theorists we have discussed in previous readings—Taylor, Fayol, and others—Mintzberg does not believe that management is a science at all. He asserts that good managers arise as a result of their experiences and the individual situations in which those experiences occur. Mintzberg writes that management is a practice and that the way to handle each situation will vary depending upon the circumstances. Additionally, effective managers will rely on the abilities and skills of their employees in order to make the best decisions for their specialized team.

Chapter 2: The Dynamics of Managing

In this chapter, Mintzberg explores two key points for effective managing:

1. Managers should know about the traditional approaches to management that require planning and organizing.
2. Managers need to learn through their daily and lifelong managerial experiences.

Mintzberg believes that management practices can be improved only when both of these approaches are fully employed.

By their very nature, managers are action-focused and extremely driven individuals. The overall pace of their work is frequently chaotic, with any given number of issues potentially arising throughout the day. While some of the events that occur are significant, others are less so, creating the need for managers to “shift moods quickly and frequently.” Managers thrive on this constant flow of activity and recognize the need to balance big picture projects with the day-to-day tasks that they are regularly expected to complete. They must be conscious of the inherent sacrifices in doing one thing at the expense of delaying another. The internet has had a tremendous influence and impact on managers and the managerial process. Email has become a call for instantaneous response. This can interrupt the flow of a manager’s activities and may create an artificial urgency. This only adds to the seemingly disorganized nature of conducting business. The dynamics of managing revolve around constant pressure, but Mintzberg believes that much of the freneticism should be done away with, or at least reduced to the levels that were common several decades ago.

Because managers are so action-oriented, they generally prefer being directly involved in solving lower-level problems and communicating via informal means as opposed to writing reports and sitting through long meetings. Good managers are able to recognize the benefits of both informal and formal managerial tools and duties.

This chapter also covers the various types of relationships that managers cultivate in the workplace. While managers may spend much of their time interacting with others at their own level, effective managers will also build professional relationships with those at different levels within their organizations. This can be positive both for morale and for building the effective work relationships that are necessary for improving productivity.

Mintzberg ends his first chapter with a discussion of all of the seemingly random and disorganized events that occur in the day of a manager. He quotes a *New York Times* commentary on one of his own studies that describes managing as “calculated chaos” and “controlled disorder.” As long as the chaos is kept under control, organizations will

function effectively. However, once these limits are exceeded, management will lose its effectiveness and the organization will become dysfunctional.

Chapter 3: A Model of Managing

Throughout his writings, Mintzberg cites many management theorists, pointing out the good and the bad elements of each approach. What he tends to favor is an amalgamation of commonly accepted theories and principles, wherein the best elements of each are incorporated into a meta-approach.

A manager's role includes making use of all of their professional skills, abilities, resources, and experiences. He or she is able to quickly process information, work well with people, and take necessary actions. The decisions a manager makes directly impact what everyone else will end up doing. For example, if a manager schedules his or her own activities and decides to bump a meeting, this will have a negative impact on the schedules of other workers. The right information must be properly processed and communicated effectively to others. As the manager becomes a conduit for information sharing and communication, they should possess the necessary skills that will allow them to clearly and concisely convey information to employees, upper-level management, customers, clients, and vendors.

A manager must not limit his/herself to the role of delegator, as an equal balance must be struck with their roles as facilitators and decision makers. A manager must delegate, work *with* people, and earn employees' respect as a leader. As a leader, a manager will bring out the best in people, enable them to develop professionally, and facilitate a strong climate for effective teamwork. If management does not give proper attention to the corporate climate, there can be a break-down in organizational culture that may take a long time to fully restore.

Mintzberg asserts that managerial practices cannot be taught in a classroom, but can only be learned through experience and over time. "It is this dynamic balance that renders futile the teaching of management in a classroom, especially one role or competency at a time. Even mastering all the competencies do not a competent manager make, because the key to this work is the blending of all of its aspects into this dynamic balance. And that can only happen on the job...."

Chapter 4: The Untold Varieties of Managing

In this chapter, Mintzberg identifies fourteen functions of managers that have been previously examined by other management theorists. He divides the functions into five groups and seeks to identify which of these functions the managers in his study participated in daily.

The five groups and their components are:

- external context, which includes national culture, sector, and industry;
- organizational context, which includes form of organization, age, size, and stage of development;
- job context, which includes hierarchical levels and functions;
- temporal context, which includes temporary pressures and managerial fashion; and
- personal context, which includes background of the individual, tenure at the job, and personal style.

Mintzberg finds that on any given day the managerial factors identified by past theorists are much less significant in a manager's daily life than those factors that are often given little consideration. He also concludes that no one factor can be evaluated separate from the others, and that therefore, all factors must be considered together and in the specific context of each individual situation.

After examining cross-organizational structures, Mintzberg found that the most significant impact on a manager's behavior and success is the form of the organization to which they are involved. Different organizational forms include entrepreneurial organizations; traditionally formal organizations; professional organizations, where workers tend to operate independently; project organizations that focus on teams; missionary organizations, which are dominated by a strong corporate culture; and political organizations that are typically fraught with conflict.

Based on Mintzberg's exploration of the different operating and leadership styles in his study, he concluded that every manager will exhibit the style that seems appropriate for that individual and his/her work environment. For example, some managers are regularly required to oversee their employees' workflow to keep things on track. Others are expected to act as intermediaries with the company's client base. In another approach, which he calls "remote controlling," the manager utilizes hands-off tactics to allow for greater employee freedoms and personal responsibilities. Next we have a posture of "fortifying the culture." This approach is designed to create a community atmosphere so that people will work together more effectively. An "intervening strategy" enables the manager to get involved as needed when changes are required. "managing in the middle" and "managing out of the middle" are for those managers who are in the center of the hierarchy and interact with both senior management and those at the lower levels.

Chapter 5: The Inescapable Conundrums of Managing

At every twist and turn, a manager is faced with a problem to be solved, a crisis to be averted, or an issue to be reconciled. Mintzberg refers to these issues as *conundrums* and defines thirteen of them:

Thinking Conundrums

“Thinking Conundrums” include “The Syndrome of Superficiality,” “The Predicament of Planning,” and “The Labyrinth of Decomposition.” These conundrums involve getting things done under constant pressure, how to plan and think ahead amid such chaos, and how to find a way to create unity in a world of constant analysis.

Information Conundrums

“The Quandary of Connecting,” “The Dilemma of Delegating,” and “The Mysteries of Measuring” make up this next category of conundrums. These issues include being separated from the things being managed (i.e. remote managing); how to safely delegate responsibilities when information may be proprietary, personal, or unable to be shared; and how to manage issues that cannot be measured or monitored.

People Conundrums

Here, Mintzberg lists “The Enigma of Order,” “The Paradox of Control,” and “The Clutch of Control.” As discussed earlier, management can be chaotic, so control can be challenging. A further problem that arises is how workers can maintain the appropriate level of disorder when a manager is attempting to instill a sense of order. Finally, a manager must be able to impose a sense of authority without appearing arrogant and/or conceited.

Action Conundrums

“The Ambiguity of Acting” and “The Riddle of Change” make up this short list of conundrums. These involve being able to make decisions when necessary, and learning how to make appropriate changes in the face of continuity issues.

Overall Conundrums

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This last group, which breaks down a manager's problems into two very simple and basic categories, includes "The Ultimate Conundrum" and "My Own Conundrum." These categories answer the manager's questions: how can I possibly get everything done, and how can I look at all of these issues separately when they appear to be the same problem?" In this category, the manager might view all of the conundrums as overlapping with each other, and they might not view each problem individually but instead as one large-scale problem to be resolved.

Chapter 6: Managing Effectively

Mintzberg begins this chapter by quoting Winston Churchill: "Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

This chapter of the book focuses on what Mintzberg views as the basis of all management, which is of course the effectiveness of managers. He opens with the notion that, like all of us, every manager is flawed. Yet in spite of these flaws, many managers are able to excel and achieve great success. The key is to maximize the manager's strengths so that their weaknesses become more and more irrelevant.

Some flaws, however, cannot be overcome, resulting in managerial failure. Some individuals may not be suited for management positions. Some people may have skills and intelligence but do not want to be in a leadership position. Others may simply be incompetent or do not have the appropriate skill set for a management position. Some people fail as managers because the job itself cannot be managed; these jobs are positions that should not exist in the first place. Another scenario for failure is that sometimes a manager's skill set and his or her position are not a good fit. *Success failures* describe those managers who have transformed from humble and successful individuals into arrogant jerks who will often take themselves too seriously and erode their standing within an organization.

Now, we will move on to a discussion of effective practices. Managers should bring energy, enthusiasm, and passion to their work. They should seek to learn from their experiences and be open to new ideas and challenges. Managers should be able to balance analytical thought with innate intuition and experience. They should know how to bring out the best in their employees and be willing to initiate action, instead of simply reacting to situations.

To conclude, Mintzberg describes the essence of management in this final quote: "Managing is a tapestry woven of the threads of reflection, analysis, worldliness, collaboration, and proactiveness, all of it infused with personal energy and bonded by social integration."

Summary

- Mintzberg's *Managing* is based on the analysis of the daily lives of 29 managers at different levels of management in a variety of fields and industries with organizations varying in size.
- In opposition to other theorists, Mintzberg believes management is a practice and not a science at all.
- Mintzberg believes that effective managers apply a combination of traditional approaches to management and experiences gained throughout their careers.
- A manager's role includes making use of all of their skills, abilities, resources, and experiences.
- In Mintzberg's study, traditional managerial factors were much less important than factors not considered by other theorists.
- Managers are constantly facing a wide range of problems and issues to be resolved. Mintzberg calls these *conundrums* and defines thirteen of them, which come under the headings of "Thinking Conundrums," "Information Conundrums," "People Conundrums," "Action Conundrums," and "Overall Conundrums."
- All managers are flawed. Focusing on a manager's strengths can mitigate some of their weaknesses.
- Some individuals fail as managers, because they may not be the right person for the job or the job may not be a good fit for them.
- Effective managers exhibit a combination of skills and abilities that rely on experience, flexibility, interpersonal skills, and passion.