

Managing as Creating¹

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Over the past twenty years, the principles and vocabulary of management have infiltrated nearly every sphere of human activity. These days, we don't just manage our businesses, but also our lives, our relationships and even our emotions! Management has become so pervasive that many people assimilate all the latest theories and models without even realizing it. The slogans abound, vying with one another to proclaim their "truth," whether it be that *the customer is king*, that *profit is the only goal possible*, that firms must *grow or die*, that *you have to compete globally*, or that *you can't improve what you can't measure*. Managers, in particular, are bombarded on a daily basis with "messages" that inevitably end up shaping their approach and dictating their actions. Even without having taken the relevant training, they adopt a pre-packaged management practice that is modelled after or dictated by the latest flavour of the month.

This document represents a collective position and has been signed by people from diverse horizons, including executives, deans, professors, researchers, artists and students. Our focus is on the management in general of organizations of any kind, on the leadership of people and on the training of managers. Our intended audience includes all those who live within organizations, and, in particular, that new breed of expert that has emerged over the past fifty years or so.

The Omnipresence of Management

There is certainly no shortage of studies and theorizing in the management field. Our daily language abounds with terms that have their origin in management. The public and parapublic sectors, armies, recreational organizations, the arts, and, of course, businesses are all scrutinized through the lens of management principles, theories and models. In the space of mere decades, management has become a new universal reference, so much so, in fact, that all areas of human activity are today measured against its yardstick. We are encouraged to regard our co-workers, our bosses and even our family members as so many "customers" or "partners" whose needs must be met. Any pretext is good to demonstrate our leadership, to display our competitive spirit or entrepreneurial skills.

The concepts follow in quick succession, taking on the semblance of slogans that are rapidly appropriated and applied to any and all situations. The list is long, but here are

¹ This article has been published in *International Journal of Arts Management (IJAM)*, vol. 7, Spring 2005, n° 3, p. 4-10, and as Invited Article, in *Japanese Journal of Administrative Science*, Volume 18, n° 3, 2005, 193 - 198

just a few examples of such concepts: competitiveness, reengineering, modernization, optimization, just-in-time, free trade, outsourcing, globalization, quality of working life, total quality, streamlining, ISO compliance, excellence, strategy, leadership, value chain, value added, performance, accountability, public-private partnerships, learning organization, corporate culture, competency profiles, coaching, emotional intelligence, mentoring, governance, convergence, etc. All of these notions follow on the heels of one another or vie with each other for dominance among the ranks of the new management credos that, though often poorly documented or developed, are swallowed whole by *experts* of all stripes.

These slogans, with their generalizing and universalizing tendencies, are often seductive, but the reality is that they quickly become obsolete, only to be replaced by others, in the service of an industry that is dependent on novelty, change and progress. This is particularly true in the field of leadership, which is all the rage these days.

While the credos themselves have a short shelf life, the beliefs that engender them tend to die hard. Truth be told, the trends one finds in management are merely a reflection of a much broader social phenomenon. New management orthodoxies do not emerge by chance. They attract attention and they may have some substance, but in their failure to recognize unique or special situations that call for genuinely new or innovative solutions, they can also have the effect of suppressing opportunities for expression, creativity and action.

The Urgent Need for a New *Refus global*

At one time, religion dominated Quebec society with near absolute authority. Many intellectuals experienced it as an intrusive force and a purveyor of beliefs, interdictions, taboos and fears that acted as powerful barriers to free thought, liberty and creation. The authority of the Church created powerful religious elites that maintained close ties with the civil elites in Quebec society. In 1948, a group of Quebec artists signed the *Refus global* [Global Refusal], a manifesto drafted by the painter Paul-Émile Borduas that heralded the Quiet Revolution that was to follow in the sixties. The manifesto launched a call for freedom from Catholicism, orthodoxy, fear and religious dictates. Clearly, these were no minor reforms!

Management today stands at a point where there is a need for a new “*refusal*” – one that could be formulated as *a refusal of theories, models and fads*. This refusal is necessary in order to resist preconceived notions, dogmas and trends and to break free from the new catechisms and other doctrines that purport to possess the latest truth about action and leadership. We must once again throw off the shackles and claim a larger space for originality and creativity.

There is no doubt that managing is a complex and difficult task. It is not surprising, therefore, that many practitioners are seduced by models that appear to produce results as if by magic. Nor is it surprising that consultants and other such peddlers of magic recipes see therein an endless source of business opportunities.

Contrary to mathematics or the “hard” sciences, in management there is no scientific knowledge that can be described as universal, nor is there a generalized knowledge that is applicable in all situations. Knowledge is, and must be, “contextualized.” It rarely transfers neatly from one reality to another, or simply from one organization to another.

Consequently, there can be no such thing as a single management approach, just as there is no such thing as a perfect organizational or leadership model. Paraphrasing Borduas, our message to the new management experts found in many of today’s business schools could be: *To the devil with management theories!* This refusal should apply as much to normative theories as to scholarly theories developed based on a research approach that, while technically rigorous, is unable to fully account for the complexity and the organic nature of management, and even less so the mysteries of human behaviour and of organizational reality itself.

Even when useful, models, methods and theories tend to be based on a reductionist view of reality. In practice, everyone, including managers, gathers information and constructs their own understanding of the context, their *own* theories, their *own* policies, whether implicit or explicit, based on their own situation – a situation they must first comprehend in order to choose the best course of action. And they do so while continually seeking inspiration in the ideas of others.

Management is an object that must be studied as rigorously as possible, while taking care to choose the type of “science” that is best adapted to the complexity of this reality.

Management Training

The profession of manager is one of the only professions that one can teach without ever having actually practised it oneself. What would surgeons, dentists, nurses, lawyers, singers or writers think if somebody tried to come in and teach them their profession without having ever performed surgery, extracted a tooth, cared for the sick, pleaded before a judge, sang on stage or published, as the case may be? What value would they see in such a speaker coming to talk to them about their profession or purporting to teach it to them? And yet this is precisely the type of situation that occurs regularly in management schools.

Broaching the subject of management training inevitably raises the fundamental question: What is management? What place has the idea itself of “professional management” come to occupy in our society over the past few decades? In all fields of art and human activity, creation, taken in its broadest sense, is inseparable from action. It is in action that a personal vision and understanding of reality are expressed. And, often, it is only afterwards, not before, that such creations are enriched by the men and women who study them and devote themselves to teaching them.

Management schools have established new fields of academic research and teaching. They have hired researchers trained in scientific methods and earned greater credibility in academic circles. But at what price? It is the object itself of their research that eludes them, that has been rendered invisible and that we can no longer even grasp, for the simple fact that there are no easy answers, much less universal ones.

The challenge of management schools is to impart knowledge to (future) managers that will help guide their actions when the time comes to act, to teach them to take action and to make them aware of the complexities of management, while reconciling knowledge, intentions and actions.

Managing as You Are

Regardless of the field in which it is practised, management is an activity specific to human beings, who bring to it their knowledge as well as their lack of information, their qualities as well as their faults, their talents as well as their shortcomings, their strengths as well as their weaknesses, their skills as well as their ineptitudes. Talent is invariably a combination of all these characteristics. But these faults, shortcomings, weaknesses and ineptitudes should not be evoked complacently or used as an excuse for our failures, as is so often the case. We learn each day to deal with these less desirable, yet very real aspects of ourselves. We strive to keep them in check so as not to fall victim to them, and, sometimes, we even manage to turn them to our advantage in order to succeed.

Managing as you are first means getting to know yourself better. It means developing a fair and realistic perception of yourself and others.

Managing as you are means saying goodbye to the image of the ideal leader that you think you should be or that you would like to be; it also means saying goodbye to models and formulas that you would like to be able to apply anywhere, at any time, without consideration for the differences that exist between situations and people.

Managing as you are means accepting that you do not know everything. It means seeking to surround yourself with competent people in areas where you are less proficient and with qualified collaborators whose suggestions and critical opinions you seek out and welcome.

Managing as you are means accepting to be yourself in front of others, knowing that some people may not like you and may even be aggressive toward you, and not backing down despite that.

Managing as you are means claiming the right to think differently and recognizing your duty to consult and listen to others, to acknowledge your mistakes and learn from them, and to start over again and persevere.

Managing as you are means managing human beings who, like you, are imperfect.

Managing as you are also means managing along with other people. Management is an eminently social profession. The truer the manager remains to himself, the better he knows himself, and the more he will accept to see others remain true to themselves while focusing on the task to be accomplished or service to be provided.

Managing as you are means being autonomous and keeping an open mind vis-à-vis your own principles and beliefs as well as those of others; it means finding your own way of thinking, your uniqueness as a leader, and, ultimately, it means *managing like nobody else*.

Thus, in order to become true creators and opinion leaders, managers must cast aside models that do not correspond to their reality and dare to place their trust in their imagination, their intelligence and their wisdom.

A Method

It is a serious error – one often repeated in the “social sciences” – to want to apply the model of the hard sciences to the study and understanding of human action. The human being we study is a living and thinking entity that changes and acts. Like the researcher, he too is searching. And at the same time he is constantly changing. When it comes to people, subjectivity and intersubjectivity are an integral part of the “real and the objective.” When it comes to understanding the management of organizations and the leadership of people, the scientific project should focus on describing this reality as it appears at a given moment in time as humbly, as faithfully and as fully as possible.

Management, as we have said, is a matter of context and historicity. Much more history is made by the leaders and organizations themselves than by the theoreticians who observe them and report on their behaviour and results. In order to manage a company, an understanding of the complexity of people and organizations is indispensable. It is only once one has a better grasp of this complexity that one can simplify, get back to the essentials and steer a steady course through both calm and stormy waters. Management is a practice that is known and learned largely through experience – first that of others, and then one’s own. It is an action that is enhanced through reflection, and it is through action coupled with reflection that one is able to develop an approach that is very personal. Expertise cannot replace experience.

There is a common misconception that the same development model or the same management processes can be applied indiscriminately not only to all companies in North America, but also to all those in the former Soviet Union, Europe, Africa, Latin America, Haiti, etc. But can it be said that all national and corporate cultures, that all people and living conditions are the same everywhere? Do we know that what was true for a country or organization ten years ago is still true today or will still be true in ten years? Of course not.

In the field of management research, the case study method constitutes a direct empirical approach that serves as the basis for the production of documents and the advancement of knowledge. It is these documents that then serve to support the process of learning practices and skills. The case method is based on openness and receptiveness in direct contact with people and real-life experiences. In the case method, priority is given to the practice itself of management, to the rigorous study of the phenomenon. It involves a case-by-case analysis of real-life situations, where one is required to examine the intelligence of the actions of those who succeed (or fail) at management, and to derive orientations, personal positions and new syntheses that can then be put to good use in one's own practices.

Management training should favour an approach based on the journeyman-apprentice relationship, internships with leading experts and master classes. The case method is intended as a kind of substitute for the actual relationship between a master and an apprentice. A case study should place the learner in the position of decision-maker; it should lead him to reflect on a situation in a manner that goes beyond the search for cookie-cutter solutions. In particular, the type of case method we advocate relies on narratives that strive to present an in-depth and well-documented description of practices, and to reflect, as faithfully as possible, the realities we want to understand and that will constitute the object of learning. In all cases, it should offer an inductive method of learning in which the leading role is played by the learner.

The Art of Being a Management Teacher

The way in which we ourselves learned has an undeniable influence on the type of teacher we go on to become. A musician or singer necessarily learns his art from a *master*. It is thus much easier for him to favour a certain type of training and learning than for a manager to whom only abstract knowledge has been transmitted. The fact of having had the opportunity to learn within a mentor-type relationship, or simply to come into contact with expert managers, inevitably teaches us – by a process of osmosis – something about learning itself, thereby giving us a hand in shaping our own talent.

This might leave one with the impression, then, that only expert managers make good candidates to become management teachers. However, experience has shown that very few of these managers have either the competence or the desire to become researchers or teachers in their field. To be a *pedagogue* requires special qualities, years of preparation and continuous upgrading. The corollary of managing as you are, in the field of management training, is teaching as you are, with all the challenges and shortcomings this implies.

The fact is that very few senior managers become good teachers. This is particularly true of those who believe that teaching is simply a matter of describing their experience, the risk, of course, being that they are likely to run out of material after a couple of hours! Training people to become managers does not – indeed, it must not – consist in producing clones of ourselves. One is not born a good teacher of management.

Although it can give one an edge, like all talents, the talent of *master teacher of management* is, for the most part, something that one develops and acquires. The innate aspect of that talent is but a foundation on which one must build. As in any job or profession, some people have greater potential than others, which makes the selection process all the more crucial.

To become a teacher, a senior manager must constantly upgrade his knowledge and skills, keep abreast of the many different ways in which management is exercised, and prepare to become a veritable master, a guide who is able to help others find their own way – that is, to help them discover their talent. Often, he does this with people younger and more brilliant than himself. Just as parents are proud to see their children not only do things better and differently than them, but also surpass them, what better source of pride for a professor than to see his young students surpass the generations that preceded them!

Along with his knowledge, the management expert also brings his qualities and shortcomings, his strengths and weaknesses to his teaching. What he is and what he does is more important than what he says. When we truly believe in the power and value of an inductive pedagogical approach, while at the same time recognizing its limits, we are able to place our faith in the intelligence of the person who is learning, not only in relation to a specific object of learning, but also in relation to *learning how to learn*. The goal is to make the person who *wants* to learn autonomous and to sharpen his judgement.

Of course, it is possible to be a good teacher of management without ever having practised the profession of manager! However, a teacher who does not have actual management experience and whose knowledge of management is not rooted in practice should have the humility and the wisdom to call on the experience of those who do have first-hand experience and who are talented and successful managers. He should also be willing to learn from his students, some of whom may themselves have valuable management experience, and to use pedagogical approaches, such as the case method, that allow him to compensate for his lack of experience and to reflect on the practice of others along with his students.

Teaching management is profoundly unsettling, because it requires that the teacher resist a natural and legitimate urge to teach. In particular, it implies resisting the traditional propensity to *profess* that we have internalized since the very beginning of our education. Teaching using the inductive method means abandoning the desire to impress as a teacher.

Rethinking Management Training

Numbers, statistics and the use of mathematical language and quantitative methods are necessary – even indispensable – for good management and the development of effective solutions. These essential aspects of management also make for less complex objects of training. However, one must always come back to the essence of management as a praxis, a philosophy of action and creation rooted in common sense. The most

crucial aspect of managing lies here, in the act of setting goals and objectives, of developing and assuming the leadership of others while relying on one's good judgement.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that a company can still offer a good product or quality service while having a "home-made" management approach, one that is outside accepted norms and traditional canons of correctness, or that avoids formal processes and popular theories. Although the company's management may seem deficient (in the eyes of experts), it may nonetheless be a very successful company. Similarly, a manager who has no academic training in management may excel at the job of leading an organization despite his lack of formal training. On the other hand, using the latest or most popular management process or earning a degree from a prestigious management school can hardly be said to constitute a guarantee of success.

Of course, this is not to say that we should call into question the existence of management schools. On the contrary, a management school that maintains close ties with the business community, with the world of action in all fields, can offer its students a valuable opportunity to document practices, build networks, save time, develop critical thinking, shape or sharpen their judgement, learn the art of persuasion and discover their own talent. It is up to the people at the universities themselves (directors, professors, researchers) to remain vigilant and to ward off any attempts to sever these important ties. It is their duty to safeguard the fundamental *raison d'être* of their institution.

The message that is currently being sent, whether directly or indirectly, to young professors coming out of doctoral management programs is that they must produce a type of research that is intended solely for their professor colleagues. To advance their careers, they are expected to publish in scholarly journals that are ranked according to how often their articles are cited by other researchers. The drive for international accreditation by management schools is pushing research and training programs toward ever greater standardization.

Ensnared in their ivory tower, conversing only with their own kind, research professors can reach a point where they lose sight of the actions of those who actually manage organizations in the real world. Supremely confident in their theoretical and normative models, they look down upon these people or, even worse, ignore them totally. In such a context, it is not surprising to see management schools cut themselves off from the world of action and head straight into a crisis of legitimacy.

Rejecting Management Fads

Management, like education and creation, is not always exciting. It has its inevitable share of mechanical, repetitive and technical aspects, and can indeed be routine and monotonous at times. However, the key component of management is creativity, and, as such, management depends on imagination and intelligence to determine the course of action that will produce team results.

Despite the best efforts of their human resources departments, companies that seek to trade in their organizational culture in order to adopt the latest hot management

trend, with its ready-made models or magic recipes, run the risk of achieving only relative and short-lived success.

The intelligence itself of actions will always need to be rediscovered, described and disseminated anew by practitioners and apprentice managers alike, as well as by those who aspire to teach management.

In management, one must always strive to carve out a greater space for common sense, judgement and creativity! To ensure that their ideas remain relevant and are taken seriously, theoreticians need to remain attentive to and observe management in practice. It is urgent that management schools immediately step up and assume a veritable leadership role in teaching the freedom to think, to create and to manage.

Montreal, January 2005

The list of signatories is provided in this WEB Page:

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