

# 1. A role for humanities in the formation of managers

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‘I felt responsible for the beauty of the world’  
Marguerite Yourcenar, *Hadrian's Memoirs*

The community of scholars and experts on management is by now of vast proportions, and its expansion testifies to the widespread and growing interest of developed and developing countries in the creation and diffusion of expert knowledge on management and organizations. It is not surprising that this interest should be so lively and far-reaching, given that management – in all its varieties, functional and sectoral – is among the most widespread professions of our time. But this community is also so large because it comprises a series of sub-communities that can be arranged along a continuum: with interest in theory at one extreme, and interest and involvement in the practice of management at the other.

Broadly speaking, we may say that the members of this vast community gravitate around three main nuclei of interest: management research, management design, and management education. The first nucleus comprises more academically oriented scholars interested in studying management and organizations as social and cultural phenomena; the second, scholars more interested in ‘management theory’ viewed as normative science (how organizations should be designed and managed); and the third, those more specifically concerned to translate the expert knowledge about management – produced by management researchers and management designers – into management ‘practice’, through training or consultancy. In this last group, those who study and those who are studied overlap, in that the sub-community extends its off-shoots into companies, where it includes internal consultants, specialists, and even line managers interested in rationalizing their work. These sub-communities often act as separate worlds, each with its own journals, its own ‘sessions’ (even at single-theme conferences), its own paradigms, and its own reference values (Barley et al., 1988). Academically oriented scholars are often reluctant to concern themselves with the problems and requirements of practitioners, and see problem-solving research

as fieldwork of a strategic and restricted sort (Schein, 1987; Gagliardi, 1991). On the other hand, the frequent conceptual weakness of practitioner-oriented discourse – due to excessive haste in translating new ideas into simple causal models – fuels suspicion of other groups, a reciprocal tendency to differentiate and distinguish, and scant interest in communicating. This gives rise to a vicious circle in which everyone loses something: the academics lose the opportunities and creative stimuli that could be derived from more immediate exposure to the reality of management; the practitioners miss chances to access richer and more sophisticated models for the interpretation of organizational reality.

From this point of view, a comparison between management research and management design is illuminating. For a number of years, academic research on management and organizations has been aware that organizational order never arises solely out of a preordained rational project, because organizations are the living product of processes where historical and political, instrumental and expressive, material and symbolic aspects are inextricably interwoven. Processes are then more relevant than structures, and design could be more appropriately seen as a social process and as a dialogic exploration during which differing views of the world, cognitive maps, strategies and interests are set against each other and mediated. Nevertheless, still the most widespread conception in the literature and practice of organizational design is that what has to be designed is a structure, and the structure to be designed is mainly viewed as a system of tasks and roles which can be formally communicated and consciously learnt. These social patterns mediated by mental experiences are still viewed as the main – if not the only – factors working for regularity and persistence in time, and the interplay between physical, symbolic and social structures is largely neglected. What is particularly surprising, in my opinion, is the distance that separates the two extremes of the continuum: management research on the one hand, and management education (and management practice) on the other.

In Europe, the academic study of organizations and management was initially, and for a long time thereafter, indebted to North America for its ideas, epistemologies and models (Djelic, 2001; Shenhav, 1999). This dependence has diminished with time, however. For years, European management research has been in great ferment, gradually acquiring a set of distinctive features with respect to the tradition and models still dominant in the United States (Bacharach et al., 1995). In my view, the three most striking of these features are the following:

1. There seems to be a widespread and specific tendency to contextualize the phenomena studied: attention has shifted from the organization as

a circumscribed phenomenon analysed mainly in terms of its internal dynamics to the relations between organizational forms and management models – and their socio-institutional context, with its diverse political, cultural, economic and technological aspects.

2. Organizational analysis has grown more ‘cultural’, open to the most diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, interested just as much in the local and in ‘understanding’ as in the explanation of the translocal, in the best Weberian tradition. It has become attuned to general trends in contemporary thought, and attentive to ongoing debate on the crisis of science and the nature of knowledge. The values underpinning these inclinations are tolerance, an openness to discussion, and appreciation of cultural diversities and specificities.
3. Above all, analysis of management and organizing has fruitfully sought inspiration in disciplines other than those from which it has traditionally drawn its analytical categories, namely economics, psychology and sociology. The most promising new insights seem to derive from other social sciences like anthropology and cultural studies, but also from disciplines to which the division of intellectual labor has assigned the great heritage of humanistic culture: philosophy, history, literary criticism, linguistics, the study of art and of aesthetic experience.

Only very little of this richness and vitality has been transferred to management education, to management consulting and, as a consequence, to everyday management practice. In the sphere of practice, besides the hasty and often uncritical embracing of managerial fads which the management market ceaselessly produces and consumes, the basic conception of the manager’s role and of how it is learnt continues to be the conception adopted and disseminated fifty years ago by the first European business schools and consultancy companies that imported it from North America. This conception portrays managerial competence as the possession of a self-referential set of methods which enable managers to cope rationally with problems that – even if strategic and far-reaching – are and remain practical problems. Such problems have to do with resources and goals, means and ends, and are therefore to a large extent ‘technically’ governable. This conception – which separates the sphere of politics, of values and emotions, from the sphere of administration, of facts and efficiency – has probably come to predominate because it serves to qualify management as a scientific phenomenon. By virtue of this conception, also education into ‘institutional leadership’<sup>1</sup> – which prompted Richard Normann (1976) to liken a manager to a ‘statesman’ – risks being converted into a set of prescriptions. The majority of management education courses deal with the emotions as part of projects to optimize interpersonal relations. Ethics (in business) is one subject like

any other, not a dimension which traverses every managerial function and activity. This construction ignores the fact that each manager, when making any decision, consciously or unconsciously assesses the alternatives available not only on the instrumental level, but also on the more general one of their lawfulness and desirability, and that no choice is morally neutral.

The socialization into the management profession emphasizes the narrowly rational and instrumentalist dimensions, at the expense of moral and aesthetic ones. Yet no profession deserves its name if technical codes are not flanked by ethical and aesthetic ones, with general validity for the professional community, independently of the contexts within which its practitioners work. The profession of manager is then in danger of remaining only 'half a profession', and we should not be surprised that companies often appear to be 'moral mazes' – as shown by Robert Jackall (1989) in his book, which mercilessly explores the world of corporate managers. At the same time, the most widespread practices of management education seemingly postulate that expert knowledge on management can be translated into prescriptions readily transferable to managers. But in this case, too, the simplifications adopted in practice ignore the more problematizing views propounded by academic research (Czarniawska, 2003), which has for a long time distinguished between espoused theories and theories-in-use, emphasized the mysteriousness of the ways in which theories are translated into action, and demonstrated that theories really empowering for action often have inspiring rather than prescribing qualities. What is most surprising is that this 'half professional' – rationalist, calculating, able to combine means and ends in the service of any cause – is increasingly often also proposed as a model for non-profit organizations, whether public or private, where it is evidently more difficult to artificially separate the sphere of ideals, values and collective interests from the technical-administrative sphere of operations.

One therefore discerns a widening gap between the richness and developments of European management research, on the one hand, and the substantial inertia of the conceptions that generally underlie socialization to the profession of management, on the other. This gap concerns both the conception of management imparted by socialization processes and the theories of learning that these processes implicitly adopt.

Conceiving a company solely as an economy, and not as a community as well, is to forget that formal organizations – to which modern society assigns the task of transferring values and collective expectations into collective action – increasingly characterize the social landscape, replacing or contaminating communitarian forms of aggregation, and that today the majority of people spend most of their waking lives in organizations. Conceiving management education solely as training in the management of an

economy is to ignore the enormous power of managers in determining the individual and social quality of life in the community – small or large – entrusted to them, in making their organizations pleasant or oppressive places in which to work, in fostering possible human happiness or at least reducing avoidable human suffering.

Leaders can actually perform a crucial role in determining the character of the organization. Organizations, even more than professions, are the most immediate objects of identification for individuals, and the identity of the organization for which one works may be of crucial importance in the overall construction of personal and social identity, determining the esteem in which individuals hold themselves and the prestige that they enjoy in society. And the greater the power that the organization wields over society, the more the choices of the managers who run it influence the lives and destinies not only of its workforce but also of those who live outside it but undergo the effects of these choices as consumers, suppliers, or simply as members of the wider community. It's difficult to imagine that managers can fulfill these responsibilities by using the same cultural baggage that enables them to optimize the use of limited resources in pursuit of specific goals.

It will be objected that these matters are not new, that I am talking about the firm's social responsibilities, an issue long on the agenda, indeed a watchword that has already aroused the interest of the business services industry and already become a commodity, a pre-packaged product with its serving suggestions, to be placed alongside the other ready-made items on the manager's shelf. But I honestly do not believe that what is taught to managers on these matters can really enable them to discharge such a high and serious responsibility.

In *Hadrian's Memoirs*, Marguerite Yourcenar recounts that the great statesman's first thought on being told that he had become emperor was: 'I felt responsible for the beauty of the world'. Exactly: I believe that managers should feel responsible not only for profit and turnover but also for the beauty of that portion of the world which they have the fortune to govern. And I do not think that a manager can be a statesman unless s/he has a profound humanistic culture, a thorough knowledge of history, of philosophy, of art, of the heritage of knowledge and sensibility that humankind has constructed in its history on this continent, and which can be an inexhaustible source of inspiration and creativity. In recent years, ISTUD – an Italian management center specialized in post-experience management education – has organized a series of innovative programs which expose managers of various levels to educational experiences unusual for a business school: purely philosophical speculations, aesthetic experiences, lessons in history. What has struck both trainees and trainers is the extraordinary potential of analogic exploration, critical reflection and creative

re-invention that these experiences offer in defining and addressing everyday management problems usually coped with by resorting to stereotyped routines. A humanistic culture will not provide administrators with prescriptions or information that can be used immediately to solve specific problems, analytical or relational; nor will it enable them to take technically satisfactory decisions. But perhaps it will help them to evaluate events and persons with greater humility, to view phenomena from a broader perspective, to courageously confront the moral risks and responsibilities involved in doing their job, to rely constantly on a set of values rather than apply algorithms, and to give just as much importance to passion as to reason, to wisdom as to competence.

These expectations towards managers might seem irremediably idealistic, and the confidence placed in the inspiring qualities of humanities could be groundless. However, at least some of the authors who contributed to this volume seem to share both of them. Moreover, without optimism nobody would venture on such a demanding task as trying to reconstruct from scratch the whole system of management education.

## NOTE

1. According to Selznick (1957, p. 28), the institutional leader is 'primarily an expert in the promotion and protection of values'. Thompson (1967, p. 11), drawing on Parsons (1960), distinguishes three levels of organizational responsibility and administration: technical, managerial, institutional. The institutional level has to cope with 'a wider social system which is the source of the "meaning", legitimation, or higher-level support which makes the implementation of the organization's goals possible'.

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