



THE PRACTICE OF MANAGING

BY JAMES T. BROWN



Managing
By Henry Mintzberg

Maverick business professor Henry Mintzberg's new book, *Managing* (Berrett-Koehler, 2009), is a must read for those serious about management. He bases his book on the idea that "It is time to recognize that managing is neither science nor a profession; it is a practice, learned primarily through experience, and rooted in context." Everyone can get the basics right, but it is the subtleties that result from knowledge and real-life experience that result in exceptional levels of performance.

Three Planes

Mintzberg sees managing as "influencing action"; that is, helping organizations and units get things done. His model describes three planes that represent where managing takes place: the *information* plane, the *people* plane, and the *action* plane (see "Rules of Managing" on p. 10).

The Information Plane. According to Mintzberg, managers manage information to drive people to take action; they create budgets, set objectives, and so on. He thinks that most managers spent too much time on this plane, at

the expense of the people and action planes. Mintzberg is critical of what he calls "deeming," where leaders impose targets in the absence of strategy. He states, "Some deeming is fine; management by deeming is not." I agree with his premise that many leaders get caught in the trap of seeing their jobs as merely declaring or deeming "stretch goals" and then holding the organization accountable for achieving them.

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must mobilize support and conduct negotiations. According to the author, "Managers who don't do and deal, and so don't know what is going on, can become incapable of coming up with sensible decisions and robust strategies." When leaders make decisions that leave you wondering, "What were they thinking?" it's often because they are disconnected from the action plane.

10 Useful Points

A lot of management or leadership books focus on one competency or aspect. *Managing* provides a balance/blending of many aspects. The book has key points in bold text, which makes it easy for time-constrained readers to quickly scan to items of importance and dive in where they find an interest. Here are 10 points I found particularly useful:

1. Much of a manager's information is not verbal so much as visceral—seen and felt more than heard.
2. Managers help to bring out people's natural energy.
3. Managers are gatekeepers and buffers in the flow of influence. Mintzberg characterizes five ways in which managers can get this role wrong:
 - *Sieves* allow external influences to create an environment in which individuals have to respond to a variety of pressures.
 - *Dams* are the opposite; they block external influences and disconnect the organization from the outside world.
 - *Sponges* absorb all the pressure and are at risk for burnout.
 - *Hoses* create a lot of pressure for those who support the organization from the outside.

TEAM TIP

Schedule a monthly meeting to review a single chapter in this book and discuss the important points and take-aways.

The People Plane. When describing the people plane, Mintzberg states that "People are not driven so much as encouraged, often to ends they favor naturally." This simple statement has many ramifications. For instance, encouragement may be praising, coaching, or simply truly understanding the circumstances of those you are leading. When Mintzberg states "to the ends they favor naturally," he implies that managers need to ensure that the goals of the task are in alignment with the goals of the person being lead.

The Action Plane. On the action plane, managers "do on the inside" and "deal on the outside." Mintzberg describes the "doing on the inside" role as "managing projects proactively and handling disturbances reactively." For the "dealing on the outside" role, managers

- *Drips* are the opposite; they don't put enough pressure on outside supporters.

4. The pressures of managing are not temporary but perpetual.

5. Managing is no job to approach with hesitation; it requires too much of the total person.

6. Successful managers are flawed, as we all are. Fortunately, certain flaws are not fatal.

7. Managing contains many inescapable conundrums. (Chapter 5 documents these challenges and is worth the price of the book by itself). The conundrums of managing reminded me of the statement “describe in detail briefly.” Here are two I found particularly appealing:

- *The Action Conundrum.* The Ambiguity of Acting describes the difficulty of making decisions in a world where there are a multitude of factors, all of which may be known with varying degrees of certainty. This reality often paralyzes leaders into not acting, while others seem to wait forever for information or data of limited value.

- *The Information Conundrum.* The Dilemma of Delegating highlights the difficulty of delegating when information is “personal, oral and often privileged.” It is challenging to delegate when the context required for the task may not be available to the task recipient.

8. Readers of *The Systems Thinker* will appreciate the question: “Do I have sufficiently powerful mental models of those things I must understand?” I like the question about mental models, because my experience has been that many leaders have an insufficient picture of the things they need to understand.

9. Effective managers are reflective: They know how to learn from their

own experience; they explore numerous options; and they back off when one approach doesn't work to try another.

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10. Measure what you can, but then be sure to judge the rest, too: Don't be mesmerized by measurement.

True Managerial Effectiveness

If you are looking for the “three steps to ...” or the “five essential factors ...”

or the “eight ways to ...,” this book is not for you. But if you believe that you can always improve your management skills, then you'll get a lot out of *Managing*. In particular, the self-study questions for managers in Chapter 6 are a powerful tool to improve your performance as a manager.

If you are a high-level leader, consider giving this book to your managers and then scheduling a monthly meeting where the group reviews a single chapter and discusses the important points and take-aways. Doing so might just help create true managerial effectiveness in your organization. ■

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ROLES OF MANAGING		
	FRAMING THE JOB AND SCHEDULING THE WORK	
	Internal	External
Information Plane	Communicating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring • Nerve Center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spokesperson • Nerve Center • Disseminating
	Controlling <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing • Delegating • Designating • Distributing • Deeming 	
People Plane	Leading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energizing individuals • Developing individuals • Building teams • Strengthening culture 	Linking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networking • Representing • Convincing/Conveying • Transmitting • Buffering
Action Plane	Doing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managing projects • Handling disturbances 	Dealing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building coalitions • Mobilizing support