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# Managing

Henry Mintzberg • Berrett-Koehler © 2009 • 288 pages

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Management / Management Concepts

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## Take-Aways

- Most people have basic misconceptions about management.
- People learn to manage through experience, not professional training.
- The speed of the Internet makes modern management a challenge.
- Managers are way too busy for quiet reflection and planning.
- When you move from being an employee to being a manager your focus shifts from the individual to the group.
- How managers “frame” issues determines how their direct reports behave.
- Managers’ day-to-day activities differ, but their core competencies are similar.
- Effective management does not differ considerably from sector to sector.
- Managers must achieve a “dynamic balance” among their daily functions and roles.
- Good managers keep their units moving ahead at all times.

## Recommendation

Managing, believes scholar Henry Mintzberg, must include leading, but the two are not the same. To study which skills are essential to good management, Mintzberg spent an entire day one-on-one with 29 managers from different kinds of organizations and from different sectors – including banking, retail, filmmaking, government, nonprofits and healthcare. Mintzberg looked at managers who worked in the executive suites as well as on the front lines. He learned that although managers differ considerably in their activities, the skills they need are surprisingly similar. Although quite general and not entirely new, *getAbstract* recommends this comprehensive guide to managers, executive placement experts, consultants, students and others who wish to get back to basics and to develop the traits essential to becoming an effective, able manager.

## Summary

### What is Management?

If you ask managers what they knew about their function on the day they started their jobs, most of them say, “Nothing.” One day they “were playing the flute or doing surgery”; the next day, they were supervising others in these jobs. They had to learn by doing. Although people have characterized management as a profession, a science and an art, in fact, it is none of these things in isolation. Instead, it is a combination of them all. In other words, management is a “practice.”

### Three Management Myths

Three myths distort people’s ideas about the skills managers need:

- **Myth 1: Management and leadership are independent skills** – In reality, managers must also lead, and leaders must also manage. Broadly, leading is an aspect of managing. Unfortunately, most organizations “are now overled and undermanaged.”
- **Myth 2: Management is a profession** – Rather, management is a craft. It is something people learn by doing, not by reading a book. The best managers have the experience to understand and appreciate the importance of context when they make their decisions.
- **Myth 3: Management skills must change as the workplace changes** – Management is about human behavior, which has remained fundamentally the same throughout history. Even though managers exist in a changing world, their standard practices are the same now as they were decades ago. The Internet has merely speeded them up – increasing the pressure on managers and everyone else.

*“We know more about the motives, habits and most intimate arcane of the primitive people of New Guinea or elsewhere, than we do of the denizens of the executive suites in Unilever House.” (Roy Lewis and Rosemary Stewart, authors of The Boss)*

In addition to the three basic myths, management is the subject of folklore such as this:

- **“The manager is a reflective, systematic planner”** – This is not something for which most managers have the time. They must work quickly. Their activities are fragmented, brief, diverse and discontinuous. According to some 40 studies that date back to the 1950s, managers “just sort of dash around all the time.” They are action-oriented.
- **“The manager depends on aggregated information, best supplied by a formal system”** – Actually, few managers rely on carefully organized management information systems. Instead, they depend on informal sources, such as telephone calls, e-mail messages and meetings. They manage by word of mouth.
- **“Managing is mostly about hierarchal relationships”** – Organizational charts do not accurately reflect how managers relate to those who are superior or subordinate to them. More important to managers are their “lateral relationships” with associates and colleagues within and outside of the organization. A good manager is the information conduit between the organization and the outside world.
- **“Managers maintain tight control”** – Peter Drucker described the manager as “the conductor of a symphony orchestra.” This is true only if you imagine the reality in which the orchestra functions. The manager is like a conductor who must maintain musical harmony while the players experience individual crises, the stagehands are noisily occupied behind the scenes, the audience is suffering from air-conditioning problems and coughing fits, and the concert sponsor has unexpectedly changed the program at the last minute.

### “Controlled Disorder”

The manager’s responsibility is to ensure that the unit reaches its goals, and that his or her direct reports perform as well as possible. In the case of the CEO – the top manager – his or her direct reports manage large divisions of the organization in furtherance of broad goals. Management involves a blend of numerous activities, including “controlling and doing and dealing and thinking and leading and deciding.” Managing involves moving from the theoretical and speculative to the concrete and interpersonal. As such, it occurs on three planes: “information, people and action.”

### The “Nerve Center”

On the information plane, managers must communicate with others within and outside of the organization. They need these five organizational skills:

1. **“Designing”** – Setting up control systems.
2. **“Delegating”** – Assigning projects and decision making to others.
3. **“Designating”** – Making final decisions.
4. **“Distributing”** – Allocating resources.
5. **“Deeming”** – Setting objectives.

*“Effective managing requires some blend of art, craft and science, whether in the person of the manager alone, or else in a management team that works together.”*

Managers act as the nerve centers of their units. By observation and communication, managers acquire the information they need to direct their subordinates to take action. They must ensure their employees have the information they need to do their jobs.

### **The “Energy Center”**

Managers must unite employees and fragmented groups into a single team. They are the energy centers of their units. They develop teams and individuals, motivate employees and promote the organizational culture. Managers are also responsible for their organizations’ relationships with the outside world. A good manager builds up external contacts and acts as a spokesperson. He or she must conduct information to and from the unit or department, lobby on behalf of the unit with external groups and individuals, and act as a “buffer” to safeguard employees and the unit from outside influences.

### **The Action Leader**

On the action level, managers must be able both to take advantage of opportunities and to deal with disturbances. As they rise in the organizational hierarchy, managers often encounter complicated problems. Solving them requires a deep analysis of the situation. Managing on the action level also requires the development of coalitions, and the mustering of approval and support through negotiation.

*“Managing is important for anyone affected by its practice, which in our world of organizations means all of us.”*

In general, promoting, leading and supervising action is what management is all about. Managers are not necessarily the “doers” but rather the people who “get it done.” A good manager “frames” his or her unit’s tasks by focusing, strategizing and making decisions – establishing the context in which employees do their work. Then, the manager establishes a schedule, which aims to bring the team’s project to fruition. The schedule is the agenda of activities and the unit’s reason for being.

### **Other Important Management Skills**

Managers must possess these additional competencies and traits:

- An aptitude for planning, prioritizing and scheduling activities.
- Communication and analytical skills.
- The capacity to mobilize others.
- A “dynamic balance” among his or her various roles. This is something managers develop through experience. They learn to blend their roles into a unified expression of managerial competence.
- The ability to work collaboratively.
- Lots of energy.
- “Worldly,” practical experience.
- An ambitious, determined attitude: taking the initiative and involving other people.
- The ability to bring about change.
- Facility at processing information and learning from experience.

## Day-to-Day Managing

Although managers of all kinds need the same core competencies, their daily tasks vary widely, depending on factors including the nature of their organization, their industry, their level within the hierarchy, their organization's size and their location. For example, while a corporate CEO might manage by making the rounds of his or her company's offices, a Red Cross official might monitor the activities within a refugee camp and a nongovernmental organization (NGO) executive might figure out how to respond to a political challenge. Tenure and seniority often determine what managers do, as do culture, "temporary pressures" and personality.

*"If you want to uncover someone's flaws, marry them or else work for them."*

A manager's skills or activities are not defined by the sector (government, business or nonprofit) within which he or she works. In fact, substantial variation exists within sectors. A manager's industry plays the greatest role in determining his or her role, especially at the ground-floor, production level. Scale ("size of unit managed") and scope ("breadth of a managerial job") are also important. In general, a company's philosophy of management has little influence on the work its managers do.

*"Too much reflection and nothing gets done; too much action and things get done thoughtlessly."*

A manager's personal style is also important. People with different personalities may approach the same job differently. For example, U.S. President Truman had a passion for decision making, while President Eisenhower shied away from it. However, more often personal style is about how managers act, rather than about the particular actions they decide to take.

## Common Conundrums

Management always involves solving problems such as these:

- **"The syndrome of superficiality"** – Managers have a lot to do and little time to do it. Thus, they tend to deal with issues superficially rather than comprehensively. "I don't want it good – I want it Tuesday!" sums up this basic managerial problem. To get around this situation, break down complex jobs into discrete tasks.
- **"The predicament of planning"** – Lack of time prevents managers from long-range planning. Instead, managers should develop strategies informally by applying on-the-spot learning to their situations and think of strategy as "craft enhanced by a good deal of art."
- **"The quandary of connecting"** – Managers are often not directly connected with the activities they manage, and "hands off" too often amounts to "brain off." Realizing that secluded, segregated offices were exacerbating this problem, Japanese firms placed managers in open areas to improve access and communication.
- **"The dilemma of delegating"** – This is the opposite of the quandary of connecting. Often, managers are better at performing certain tasks than their direct reports and have more access to information,

which may be personal or even privileged. Share information to the extent you can and consider skill and personality when delegating.

- **“The enigma of order”** – Managers establish definition and order within the unit so employees can do their jobs in a sensible and organized fashion. However, managers must also be prepared for any uncertainties or insecurities. Strike a happy balance. Don’t be inflexible and insist on too much order; neither should you allow chaos.
- **“The clutch of confidence”** – You cannot be an effective manager if you lack confidence. But being overly self-assured leads to arrogance, which isolates the individual and instills a false sense of omnipotence. This is a major problem in this current era of “heroic leadership.” Instead, be a “modest manager.” Keep your mind open and listen to the advice and opinions of others.
- **“The ambiguity of acting”** – Taking decisive action in complex situations is difficult and may seem arrogant, as U.S. President George W. Bush learned when he invaded Iraq in 2003. Don’t act just for the sake of appearing decisive. Be selective. Make decisions in steps, and schedule time for feedback.
- **“The riddle of change”** – Organizations need both change and continuity. Regardless of what changes occur, keep your unit on track. Create a feeling of stability.
- **“The ultimate conundrum”** – Managers’ biggest challenge is finding a way to juggle all their problems simultaneously, responsibly and intelligently. While you may be able to reconcile some conundrums, you will never fully resolve them. That comes with the territory.

## About the Author

**Henry Mintzberg** teaches management studies at McGill University in Montreal. The author of 15 books, Mintzberg has won awards from the *Harvard Business Review*, the Association of Management Consulting Firms and others.



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