Managing: Pure, If Not Simple

Overview

Henry Mintzberg provides a very different view of managing as compared to all other observers, scientists, theorists, and business thought-leaders.

In this reading, we will explore Mintzberg’s latest book, simply titled Managing. Published in 2009, more than 30 years after he published The Nature of Managerial Work, Mintzberg sets out to see what, if anything, had changed in the world of management over time, whether he himself had changed, and what he had learned about managing over the years.

The book is based on the daily lives of 29 managers in 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 vary, ranging from 18 to 800,000 employees. There are six chapters in the book; we will explore the main topics of each chapter and the managerial issues they address.

Chapter 1: Managing Ahead

Mintzberg believes that there is not enough management and too much leadership. He feels that too much emphasis is placed on the concept of leadership and as a result, there is not enough effective leadership being practiced. He also believes that management and leadership go hand-in-hand and cannot be 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 feels that good managers come about as a result of their experiences and the individual situations in which those experiences occur. Mintzberg says 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 people to make the best decisions.

Chapter 2: The Dynamics of Managing

In this chapter, Mintzberg discusses the two realities of managing:

1. what managers know about the traditional approaches to management that require planning and organizing, and
2. what managers have learned through their daily and lifelong managerial experiences.
Mintzberg believes that management practices can be improved only when both of these realities can work together.

Managers are action-focused by nature. In their daily lives, the pace is rapid and hectic with a number of issues potentially arising at any time. Some of the events that occur are significant, while others are less so, creating the need for the manager to “shift moods quickly and frequently.” Managers thrive on this constant flow of activity and recognize the need to accomplish what must be done as well as what is in front of them at that moment. They must be conscious of the inherent sacrifices in doing one thing at the expense of doing another. The dynamics of managing revolve around constant pressure, and Mintzberg believes that much of the freneticism should be done away with, or at least to take it back from as far as it has gone.

Because managers are action-oriented, they would rather spend time involved working on a situation and communicating through the more informal methods than writing reports and sitting in meetings. A great deal of information flows through an organization’s informal means of communication, such as gossip and word-of-mouth. Good managers recognize this and seek to tap into these sources so that they can be ahead of the information timeline.

Another topic covered in this chapter includes the types of relationships managers cultivate in the workplace. While managers may spend much of their time with others at their own level, effective managers also build professional relationships with those at other levels. In this way, the manager can be aware of all aspects of a company’s activities.

In this chapter, Mintzberg also discusses the impact that the Internet has had 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.

Mintzberg ends this 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 become dysfunctional.

Chapter 3: A Model of Managing

Mintzberg cites many management theorists and claims that all of their theories are correct and all of their theories are incorrect. What he favors is a combination of all things. By excluding one part of a job, it minimizes the managerial function, and by including everything, the role is expanded.
A manager’s role includes making use of all of the manager’s skills, abilities, resources, and experiences. He or she is able to process information, work with people, and take action. The decisions a manager makes impacts what everyone else will be doing. The manager schedules his or her own activities, which will then impact the schedule of other workers. The right information must be processed and communicated to others. The manager becomes the center of the information pipeline, sharing information with others as well as being able to communicate effectively with the outside world.

Managers must not define themselves in the role of controller of others but facilitate actions based on sound decision-making. 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 repair.

A manager plays many roles and must find the proper balance to be effective. Mintzberg again states 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 twelve functions of managers that have been previously noted by other management theorists. He divides the functions into five groups and seeks to identify which of these 29 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 more insignificant in the managers' daily lives than those factors that are
given little consideration. He also concludes that no one factor can be evaluated singularly, and all factors must be considered together and in the context of each individual situation.

He also finds that the most significant impact on a manager’s behavior is the form of the organization. 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 fraught with conflict.

Based on Mintzberg’s exploration of the different styles of the managers in his study, he determines that each individual exhibits the style that seems appropriate for that individual and work environment. For example, some managers are required to maintain the workflow to keep things on track. Others are required to be the connectors with the world outside the company’s boundaries. Another approach requires the manager to have a combination of both of these postures. In the next approach, which he calls “remote controlling,” the manager has a hands-off, detached approach. Next we have a posture of “fortifying the culture.” This approach is designed to create a community atmosphere so that people can work together effectively. The 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.

Each manager exhibits a different style and approach to his or her work. Yet, each approach fits the individual, his or her style, his or her work environment, and the myriad of issues and tasks that he or she faces. No one factor defines a manager’s work; each situation is addressed based on the requirements of the issue and not on a scientific theory of what a manager should be expected to do.

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 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”. We will briefly review each of these categories.

Thinking Conundrums

“Thinking Conundrums” include “The Syndrome of Superficiality,” “The Predicament of Planning,” and “The Labyrinth of Decomposition.” These conundrums are about how to get 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 include the manager’s problem of being separated from the things he/she is managing; how to delegate when much information may be propriety, 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 how to make the appropriate changes in the face of continuity issues.

Overall Conundrums

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 problems separately when they appear to be the same problem?” In this category, the manager might view all of the conundrums as overlapping each other, and the manager might not view each problem individually but instead as one big 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 beginning of management, which is the effectiveness of managers. He opens with the notion that, like all of us, every manager is flawed. However, these flaws do not necessarily mean that the manager cannot be a good one. The key is to maximize the manager’s strengths so that the weaknesses become irrelevant.
Some flaws, however, cannot be overcome, resulting in managerial failure. Some individuals may not be right 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. Others 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 the fit between a manager’s skills and his or her position is not a good fit. Success failures describe those managers who have transformed from humble and successful individuals into arrogant individuals who have come to take themselves too seriously and erode their standing.

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

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 the manager’s skills, abilities, resources, and experiences, and a manager’s role should not single out any one aspect of the position.
- In Mintzberg’s study, on any given day, traditional managerial factors were much less important than factors not considered by other theorists.
- The form of organization has more of an impact on a manager’s approach than any other factor.
- 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 the weaknesses.
- Some individuals fail as managers, because they may not be the right person for the job or the job may not be the right fit for them.
- Effective managers exhibit a combination of skills and abilities that rely on experience, flexibility, interpersonal skills, and passion.