

Managing

By Henry Mintzberg

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Introduction

It has become fashionable to distinguish leaders from managers. One does the right things, copes with change; the other does things right, copes with complexity.

But the distinction doesn't mean much in the everyday life of an organization. Sure, we can separate leading and managing conceptually. But can we separate them in practice? Or, more to the point, should we try? How would you like to be managed by someone who doesn't lead? That can be awfully dispiriting. Well, then, why would you want to be led by someone who doesn't manage? That can be terribly disengaging. As organizational expert Jim March put it, "Leadership involves plumbing as well as poetry."

[John Cleghorn](#), chairman of the Royal Bank of Canada, developed a reputation in his company for doing things like calling the office on his way to the airport to report a broken ATM machine. The bank has thousands of such machines. Was he micromanaging? Maybe he was setting an example that others should keep their eyes open to such problems.

In fact, today we should be worried about "macroleaders" - people in senior positions who try to manage by remote control, disconnected from everything except the "big picture." It has been popular to talk of being overmanaged and underled. In fact, we're now overled and undermanaged.

[Konosuke Matsushita](#), who founded the company that carried his name, claimed, "Big things and little things are my job. Middle-level arrangements can be delegated." In other words, leadership cannot simply delegate management - instead of distinguishing managers from leaders, we should be seeing managers as leaders, and leadership as management practiced well.

Whether in the confines of academia or the columns of newspapers, it's a lot easier to muse about the glories of leadership than it is to come to grips with the realities of management. Obviously this comes at the expense of management, but it has also undermined leadership itself.

The more we obsess about leadership, the less of it we seem to get. In fact, the more we claim to develop leadership in courses and programs, the more we get hubris. This is because leadership is earned, not anointed.

The Management Conundrums

Management is rife with conundrums. Every way a manager turns, there seems to be some paradox or enigma lurking. Thirteen conundrums bear special attention.

The three thinking conundrums are:

- The Syndrome of Superficiality
- The Predicament of Planning
- The Labyrinth of Decomposition

The three information conundrums are:

- The Quandary of Connecting
- The Dilemma of Delegating
- The Mysteries of Measuring

The three people conundrums are:

- The Enigma of Order
- The Paradox of Control
- The Clutch of Confidence

The two action conundrums are:

- The Ambiguity of Acting
- The Riddle of Change

The two overall conundrums are:

- The Ultimate Conundrum
- The Similarity Conundrum

The Syndrome of Superficiality

This is the most basic of all the conundrums of managing, the plague of every manager, although it can be especially frustrating for new managers who come from specialized jobs as well as experienced managers who, in their souls, never left such jobs. It's how to get in deep when there's so much pressure to get it done.

The prime occupational hazard of the manager is superficiality. Managers have to become proficient at their superficiality - for example, dealing with complex issues by breaking them into small steps taken one at a time.

They also have to hone their capacity to reflect in their work. They have to find time to step back and out. Reflection without action may be passive, but action without reflection is thoughtless.

The Predicament of Planning

A variant of the Syndrome of Superficiality is the Predicament of Planning. If the former looks in from the outside, about the pressures to be superficial, then this conundrum looks out from the inside, about how to plan, strategize, just plain think (let alone think ahead) in such a hectic job.

Strategic planning is not the solution - it never worked as intended. Instead of strategic planning, we must craft strategy. Strategies can form without being formulated - they can emerge through efforts of informal learning rather than having to be created through a process of formal planning. Managers who deal best with the Predicament of Planning exhibit an engaging style, by letting a thousand strategic flowers bloom in their organizations, and an insightful style, to detect patterns of success in these gardens of strategic flowers, rather than a cerebral style that favors analytical techniques to develop strategies in a hothouse.

The Labyrinth of Decomposition

The world of managing is chopped into little pieces, some natural, some not. Organizations are decomposed into regions, divisions, departments, products and services, not to mention missions, visions, objectives, programs, budgets and systems. Likewise, agendas are decomposed into issues.

Hence we get the Labyrinth of Decomposition: where to find synthesis in a world so decomposed by analysis? To counter this, the manager must paint the big picture, stroke by stroke, experience by experience.

The Quandary of Connecting

A major occupational hazard of managing is to know more and more about less and less until finally the manager knows nothing about everything. The Quandary of Connecting addresses what lies behind this: how to keep informed - in contact, in touch - when managing by its own nature removes the manager from the very thing being managed? In other words, how does the manager connect when he or she is intrinsically disconnected?

Some people claim that detachment can make a manager more objective. Surely so. But someone else remarked that to be objective is to treat people like objects. Is that what we want of our managers?

And then there are those who believe the Internet puts everyone in touch, no matter where they may be. In touch with a keyboard, to be sure, but in touch with the nuances of organizational life?

The Dilemma of Delegation

Here we reverse the previous conundrum: managers have difficulty delegating because they're better informed than the people to whom they have to delegate.

Is this a contradiction? Not when we appreciate the kinds of information in question. The manager, as nerve center of

the unit, should be its most broadly informed member, but not its most specifically informed. He or she has formal access to all the members, and usually to a wide array of the unit's external contacts as well, many of whom are nerve centers of their own units.

Given that breadth of information, the difficulty a manager faces is how to delegate when so much of the relevant information is personal, oral and often privileged. Managers seem damned by the nature of their personal information system to a life of either overwork or frustration when they delegate to others who lack the manager's information. It is, after all, common to witness people being blamed for failures that can be traced back to the information necessary to perform their delegated tasks.

The Riddle of Change

We hear a great deal of hype about change these days. It seems that no management speech can begin without paying homage to the claim that "we live in times of great change."

Really? Our car uses the same basic internal combustion technology as the Ford Model T. We all dress in many of the same fabrics we've been using for decades. We only notice what's changing, not what isn't, which includes most of what's around us.

What we need to hear more of is that too much change leads to a perpetual and dysfunctional angst, among other problems. Every manager has to manage continuity as well as change, which gives us the Riddle of Change: how to manage change when there's the need to manage continuity? Again, the trick is to get the balance right.

The Mysteries of Measuring

It has become a popular adage in some quarters that if you can't measure it, you can't manage it. That's strange, because who has ever measured the performance of management itself? That means management can't be managed.

Indeed, who has ever even tried to measure the performance of measurement? Accept this adage, therefore, and you have to conclude that measurement cannot be managed, either. Apparently we have to get rid of both management and measurement - thanks to measurement.

In fact, the only reliable conclusion to draw from this is that measurement is loaded with its own conundrums, not the least of which is how to manage it when you can't rely on measuring it.

The Enigma of Order

Organizations need order. They sometimes need disorder too - shaking up - but most of the time most organizations need to concentrate on the stable delivery of goods and services.

Someone, however, has to deal with what's not expected, and often that's the manager. In a sense, the manager is the sink for organizational disorder. Thus if managing is getting order out of disorder, then the Enigma of Order reads: how to bring order to the work of others when the work of managing is itself so disorderly?

The Paradox of Control

All but the smallest organizations tend to have managers neatly stacked up in hierarchies of authority, down which pass the directives emitting from "above," designed to impose order.

The problem is that subordinate managers have to deal with pressures from customers, communities and others. For them, the Paradox of Control is: how to maintain the necessary state of controlled disorder to respond to circumstances when the manager above is imposing order?

The Clutch of Confidence

It takes a great deal of confidence to practice management effectively. The trouble with confidence, however, is that it can go over the edge and put the manager on a slippery slope - to arrogance. It does not take much for someone to stop listening, become isolated or think of himself or herself as heroic.

The line between confidence and arrogance can be not only thin but also vague. So the Clutch of Confidence reads: how to maintain a sufficient level of confidence without crossing over into arrogance?

The Ambiguity of Acting

If managing is about making sure that things get done, then managers have to be decisive. They can't hedge too much, and they can be reflective only to a point. They have to take stands, make certain decisions and provoke

actions that move their units forward.

The problem is that this has to be done under difficult circumstances, full of ambiguities, not to mention the conundrums so far discussed. That gives rise to another conundrum: how to act decisively in a complicated, nuanced world?

The Ultimate Conundrum

How can any manager manage all these conundrums concurrently? That is the Ultimate Conundrum.

The Similarity Conundrum

One last conundrum: how do we reconcile the fact that while all these conundrums can be stated apart, they all seem to be the same?

Conclusion

Managing is difficult. It requires watching the big thing and the little things, and grappling with the 13 conundrums of managing.

- End -

About the author: [Henry Mintzberg](#) is a professor of management studies at McGill University.

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Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development, by Henry Mintzberg, Berrett-Koehler, 2004, ISBN 9781576752753. [A](#) [B](#) [C](#) [E](#)

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