



What's a manager to do?

In 1916, Henri Fayol, the French Industrialist suggested that the role of a manager was to organize, co-ordinate, plan and control. Perhaps back in 1916, it was possible to manage with these objectives in mind but in today's fast paced business world most managers are lucky to have 10 minutes to themselves let alone an hour or so for reflective planning and organization.

Indeed if any manager of a reasonable sized business cares to analyze their working day, they will find it broken up into a series of 10, 30 or 60 minute activities interspersed with a variety of conversations both within and without the organization, all generally quite unrelated, all of value in their own right, and all a far cry from Fayol's description of the Manager.

In general, anyone in a management role faces an unrelenting stream of disparate activities that call for a quick decision, generally made without recourse to external sources of information and made on the basis of the managers own well-spring of experience. Needless to say some of these decisions are short sighted and perhaps even wrong but there is little time to deliberate and any decision whether right or wrong is better than no decision.

It is not that managers desire to act in this way. In fact, if sat down and asked how they would handle a problem, 9 out of 10 managers would expound on the need to seek advice, to consult and to plan an organized response to the problem in question. Rather they are simply responding to the pressures of the job, the demands of their role as it has now become.

When planning is called for such as in preparing budgets and business plans, much of the effort is put in not to satisfy the plan or business itself, but rather to satisfy those demanding the plan. The true plans of the manager often remain as specific intentions in his/her mind, rather than as those committed to on paper.

As such the plans or intentions change as the situation changes thus giving flexibility to the management role and allowing the business to cope with changing external stimuli.

Perhaps as a result of the need for managers to work "live" rather than in a "delayed" manner and the constant refrain by them that they just don't have time to think, much advice is given to them to delegate more and to spend more time "planning" rather than "doing".

However, the plain fact is that to keep a business profitable managers must be engaged. They must be involved with the customer base, they must represent the company at industry functions and they must spend time with employees.

Furthermore, because managers suffer a lack of time they tend to favor verbal advice rather than detailed memorandum. Thus, they will rely on what has been said in meetings and in phone calls over a hurriedly read document, even though they would be the first to admit that reliance on the document would bring about superior decision making capability.

So, the picture is painted that the modern day manager, rather than the supposed "Symphony conductor" style manager of yesterday is a far more "Seat of the pants" style operator.

Quick thinking and quick fire, able to adopt to changing situations without losing the overall intuitive framework of where he or she as manager wants to see the business go.

But have things really changed in the way a manager operates or was Fayol and indeed most people since, interpreting the role of manager incorrectly?

Perhaps managers in business have always been the same. Figure head one minute, entrepreneur the next, later a referee, then a spokesman still later a negotiator, like an actor changing roles to suit the need and with a repertoire of characters that would do Gielgud proud.

This most likely, is really the true role of a manager. So whilst plans must be made and tasks delegated the best managers are those that can achieve a lot quickly and can turn their hand to many tasks in the blink of an eye, without the due preparation that existing courses and "How to" books would suggest. Not to say that a manager should run rampant or that due diligence or preparation is not important. It is, and the good manager will recognize this point carefully preparing where it is important to do so, but never becoming bogged down in ritual, always working to the need or problem in hand rather than to a desired formula or routine.

The other characteristic that makes a good manager is that they be demanding both of themselves and of others. Thus, whilst they will make things happen quickly, nothing about what they do is in any way slipshod or unprofessional.

Indeed, that is the hallmark of the modern manager - professionalism - and that is perhaps the real difference from the manager of 1916. The job has not changed but the quality of people doing it definitely has.

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