

Management Philosophy: A Reflection

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As one among many possible entry points into a discussion of management philosophy, it may be worthwhile to return to an early assignment in which we considered personal and organization values. We were given a list of professional values and asked to identify the three that are “the most central to you,” and then reflect on which of these three are most essential to “organizational effectiveness.” Based on my own experience as both manager and employee in a variety of job contexts, I selected “rewarding and supportive relationships,” “honesty and integrity” and “personal growth and learning” as the most vitally important characteristics of a healthy workplace, and “rewarding and supportive relationships” as most key to a successful organization. I believe this last choice has held up quite well in light of our diverse readings in management theory over the course of the semester to date, though naturally my understanding of this basic concept has become more nuanced and multifaceted along the way. While supportive relationships remain at the core of my concept of an effective workplace – and I view them as tightly coupled with an organizational ethos of “personal growth and learning” - this ideal alone can only be one strand, however well braided together with others, in a more comprehensive philosophy of management.

However, I do want to spend some more time looking into the role of relationships in management practice. In their meditation on what they call the “collaborative mind-set” in their article *The 5 Minds of a Manager* (2003), Gosling and Mintzberg argue that management should not be about “managing people” but “managing relationships among people,” an idea they attribute to their “Japanese colleagues,” who call this approach “leadership in the background.” The strategic implications are weighty, as a holistic concept of a group made up of individuals who thrive through connectedness becomes more important than the fixed roles

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of the org chart, upending the managerial imperative “I deem and you do” with a “we dream, so that we do” collective paradigm.

To some extent supportive relationships in the workplace can flow both ways between managers and members of her team, with everyone vested in the success of each individual and their shared business goals - but the collaborative mind-set is not all about replacing the entire chain of command with fuzzy, de-centered peer-to-peer relationships. Collaboratively minded managers still need to “help establish the structures, conditions, and attitudes through which things get done” (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003, p.60). My experiences managing small teams bears out the importance of these two complimentary insights. Employees need to know that they have a voice and some measure of influence within the team dynamic, and that their colleagues and manager want them to thrive. At the same time, they must understand the necessary “conditions and attitudes” – the context - in which they may make a meaningful contribution, by which I mean both “getting things done” and adding value towards the fulfillment of the departmental structure and mission. On the question of my own management style, I believe my approach was similar to what Mintzberg and Gosling call “managing throughout,” that is, not on “top” of a “network,” which they warn is tantamount to being “out” of the network altogether. On the best days I may have lived up to the ideal of “distributing [management] so that responsibility flows naturally to whoever can take the initiative and pull things together” (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003, p.60). Of course, executing work orders, presenting deliverables on time, collaborating with other departments, evaluating employees, and a hundred other responsibilities that land on the manager’s desk create limits on “distributing management” to subordinates, but one of the rewards of supportive

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relationships, if they've been cultivated, is added flexibility and resilience in the face of various stressors. In my experience, people who believe they have "relational equity" with their co-workers and bosses will step up to the plate in times of outside pressure or internal strains, knowing that in doing so their own positions are strengthened.

Chapter 12 of Harter & Wagner's "12" (2006) - "Opportunities to Learn and Grow" – quite obviously echoes the value of "personal growth and learning" that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. This chapter resonated with me because of several work situations I've found myself in over the years, some in a positive sense and one in a sharply negative way. Wagner and Harter's explanation of the psychological and neuro-biological underpinnings of humans' desire to "flourish," to pursue "self-determination" and to enjoy a career defined by "progress" turned a key in my thinking, and is now baked into my own management philosophy (Harter & Wagner, 2006, pp.172-173). I recently had the unpleasant experience of having all these instincts thwarted over an extended period of time; the one positive takeaway is that I'm determined to never settle for a lack of opportunity for professional development again. I now have a stark comparison to make between this job and previous ones where at the time I didn't fully appreciate the latitude I had been given to learn new skills and aspire to promotion. If I find myself in a management position again, I hope to take to heart Harter and Wagner's observation that "a wealth of research – at least 200 studies – proves that challenging employees to meet goals motivates higher performance ... What are commonly called "stretch goals" are psychologically invigorating and good for business" (2006, p.174). Harter and Wagner develop this insight further, admonishing the reader that this isn't simply a recommendation of some best managerial practice, but a responsibility managers must feel

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towards their employees and act upon (employees themselves are called to take responsibility for their future as well) : “Because each person is unique in her talents, strengths, situation, hopes, and personality, it is incumbent upon the employee and her manager to chart her future progress” (Harter & Wagner, 2006, p.175). Again, this principle can be seen as an extension of the “supportive and rewarding relationships” value that I believe is so crucial to a high-functioning, emotionally intelligent work environment.

My encounter with Henry Mintzberg’s *Simply Managing* (2013) opened up new dimensions to my understanding of management and organizational dynamics and continues to shape my emerging management philosophy as I review it for this assignment. I found Mintzberg’s discussion of the importance of confidence for managers – which went so far as to question its very definition - particularly compelling and helpful. My initial assumption when beginning chapter 6 of *Simply Managing* was that confidence – solid, unwavering, high EQ confidence - is a necessary prerequisite to manage effectively, and frankly I was intimidated by that idea in terms of my future career prospects. Upon further reading and reflection, I began to think that confidence should be seen more as a spectrum, perhaps definable as crippling self-doubt on one end and narcissistic power tripping on the other. As it turns out, Mintzberg himself does not think highly of an over-confident – what he often calls the “heroic” - management style. For example, he argues that instead of a manager taking the attitude that she knows best how to develop her subordinates, “the responsibility for development is perhaps best seen as managers helping people to develop themselves” (2013, p. 49). He then addresses managerial confidence directly, conceding that managing “takes a good deal of confidence ... is no work for the faint-hearted or insecure ...[and that] managers often have to

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feign confidence” (2013, pp.131-132). Yet he then goes on to deconstruct “the supremely confident,” arguing that even “reasonable confidence ... can carry the manager over the edge, and down a slippery slope to arrogance ... [in which they’ve] stopped listening, become isolated, and think of him- or herself as heroic.” To avoid “crossing over into arrogance,” Mintzberg makes a case for the “modestly confident,” which he interestingly ties to “inner confidence,” one that enables the manager to listen to friends and advisers who attempt to warn her of “crossing over.” So maybe there’s hope after all for those of us who feel removed from what seems like an impossible level of confidence – which we associate with mastery of a difficult job, and a necessary reservoir to draw upon to lead, decide, and ultimately “win” – but can instead start from a position of authentic humility and build from there. A bit later, reprising his work with Gosling in *The Five Minds of a Manager*, Mintzberg again visits the notion that managers need to manifest a “reflective thread,” one that plays a key role in establishing a kind of temperament – what he calls a “certain humbleness” about what they do and don’t know - that is crucial for good managing: “they know how to learn from their own experience; they explore numerous options; and they back off when one doesn’t work, to try another” (2013, p.152). If I were to pick out just one idea from the rich vein of management and organizational theory we’ve explored this semester, and the assignments that have accompanied our readings, and call it the most important or influential one, it is Mintzberg’s discussion of confidence here that has changed my concepts about the career challenges that lay ahead of me. What seemed like a hard, limiting self-belief in terms of what to expect from myself in an LIS management context now seems far more workable and even exciting.

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References

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