

Understanding Characterisation of Managerial Process : Is It Useful For Managers ?

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Some research findings indicate that there are different views of what managers really do in managing their organisations. One of them shows that what managers actually do cannot be classified into planning, organising, leading, and controlling.

As a result, one might claim that understanding characterisation of managerial process is useless.

However, in this paper it is argued that understanding characteristics of managerial process is useful for managers to help them cope with the rapid changes in business environment.

It is also claimed that managerial process is a political system and a game that take place in a wide arena. It is highly interdependent, contextual, less systematic, and changeable.

Managerial process also involves the need for setting agenda, building network, and managing discourses, interactions, symbols, and organisational politics.

Finally, it is believed that understanding characterisation of managerial process lead managers to have deep understanding of organisational dynamics and changes in business environment, and to have special skills that are required to cope with the changing environment.

Introduction

MANAGEMENT plays an important role in helping organisations achieve their objectives. In general, management could be seen as a process of planning, organising, leading and controlling efforts of organisation members and the use of organizational resources in order to achieve stated organisational goals.

In practice, however, it is probably difficult to identify the nature of managerial work that can be classified into planning, organizing, leading and controlling. This means that managerial process could have different characteristics in theory and practices. Indeed, by assuming that managerial process can be analysed from the kinds of activities that managers do, a number of empirical researches show that there were relatively different views of what managers do (see Stewart, 1963 and 1967; Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982; and Luthans et.al, 1988). Consequently, the different views might result in different characteristics of

managerial process.

This paper discusses characteristics of managerial process by integrating those different views. It also discusses whether understanding characterisation of managerial process can help practicing managers do their daily work. Finally, conclusion and implication are drawn.

Managerial Process and Environment.

It is widely known that business environment has been changing rapidly. The changes influence the existence of organisations.



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Organisations tend to be complex, surprising, deceptive and ambiguous, and it is difficult to understand and manage them (Bolman and Deal, 1991). Under such conditions, thus, managers need better understanding about organisations. This is likely to be achieved by understanding theories underlying organisational practices, especially understanding managerial process of organisations. (See diagram 1)

There is perhaps no exact definitions of managerial process. In fact,

management theorists have different views in defining managerial process. Managerial process, however, might be defined as an on-going process that entails achieving important objectives and involves understanding how to perform major functions of management: planning, organising, leading and controlling (Carroll and Gillen, 1987). This means that the definition views managerial process as a dynamic and purposive process, a set of related and continuing activities. Managerial process might be well understood if it is described by analysing the diagram 1. From the diagram, it can be seen that in general, managerial functions are the central portion of the process. Meanwhile, to get management functions done, it needs work agenda, work methods and managerial roles. In addition, manager's work knowledge and key of management skills are required to achieve the goals of organizations. In details, the diagram can be explained as follows.

As can be seen from the diagram, the organisation operates its activities in ambiguous environment. Under such circumstances, managerial process must be responsive to the changing environment. In addition, managerial process takes place in a broad arena both inside and outside organisation. Because there is a closed relationship between the achievement of objectives and the

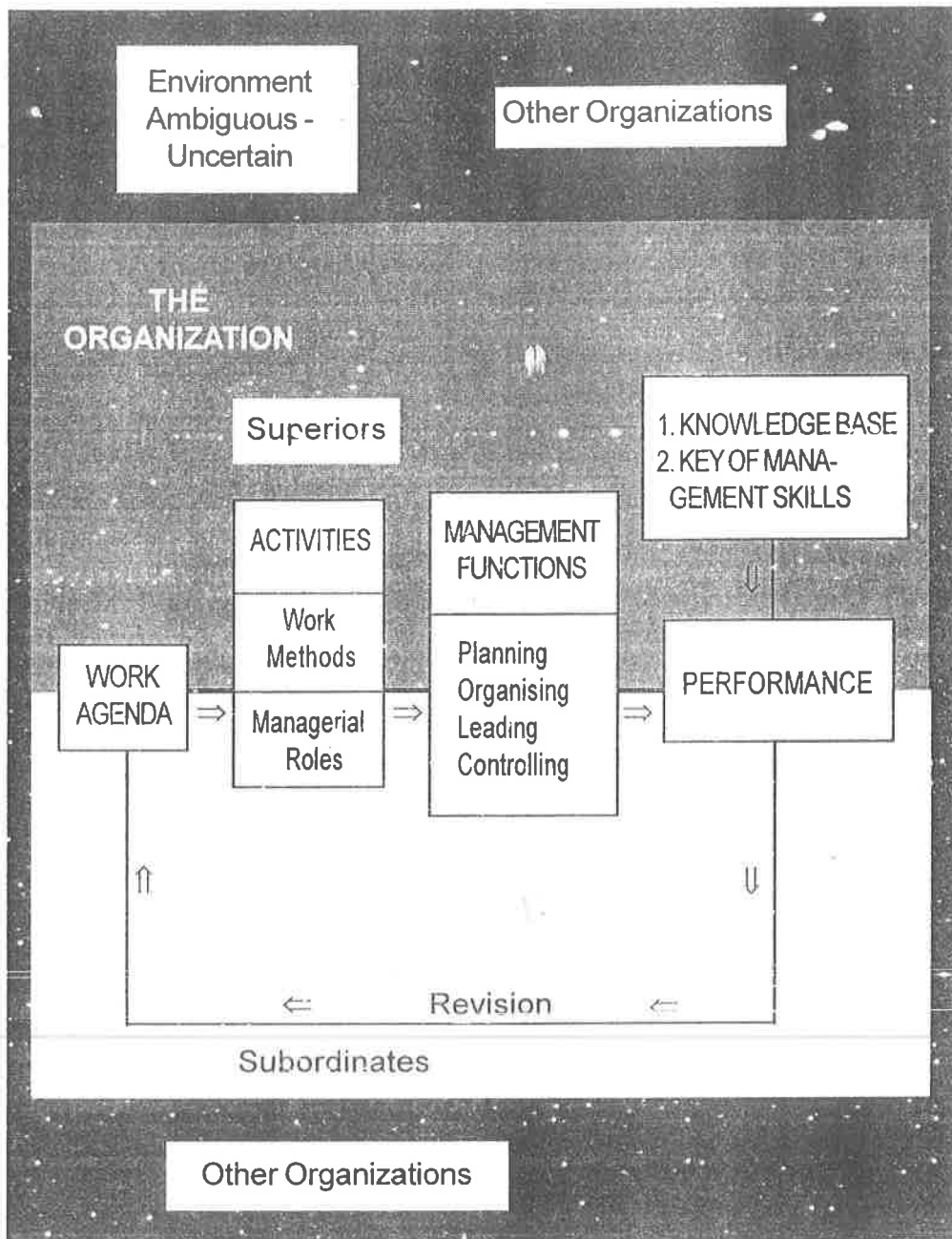


Diagram 1
 Managerial Process and Environment
 (adopted from Carroll and Gillen, 1987 with some changes)

ability to adapt with environment, and the interaction between people in the organization such as superiors and subordinates, managerial process is performed through a number of steps. In fact, there is an interdependent relationship between those steps.

The *first* step of managerial process is setting work agenda. Work agenda might be defined as "a set of desired future states that managers are trying to move forward and they have only tentative plans about how to get these states which are constantly changing as new information is received and new opportunity to make progress arises" (Carroll and Gillen, 1987, p. 45). Hence, setting work agenda plays an important role in achieving success of managing organizations. Indeed, as Kotter (1982) found from his research, managers focus their efforts through the use of work agenda.

After setting work agenda, the agenda is implemented through activities involving work methods and managerial roles. Work methods are characterised by unrelenting pace, brevity, variety and fragmentation (Mintzberg, 1973). In addition the methods are dominated by verbal contacts although to some extent, as currently popular belief, they could be reflective and systematic. In performing those activities, managerial process also involves roles that

managers need to achieve stated objectives. From his research, Mintzberg (1973) found 10 managerial roles that can be categorised into 3 groups: interpersonal roles, informational roles and decision roles.

Thirdly, the work methods and managerial roles might be stated in terms of carrying out the various management functions which are generally classified into: planning, organising, leading and controlling. Although, it is probably true, as Mintzberg (1973) claims, that those roles are difficult to be classified into planning, organising, leading and controlling, it can be argued that managers perform the roles in relation to such functions. Managers who make contact with various people during their daily work do not mean that they are not planning, organizing, leading and controlling.

The work methods and managerial roles might be stated in terms of carrying out the various management functions which are generally classified into: planning, organizing, leading and controlling.

It could happen that they really plan something although it is done in an informal way. For example, when talking with others, managers could develop a certain plan. They might also evaluate their previous plans. A number of research finding, in fact, shows that planning, organizing, leading and controlling are parts of managerial process. Mahoney, Jerdee and Carroll, as quoted by Carroll and Gillen (1987), reported from their empirical research that "managerial time can be allocated to a set of 8 basic

managerial functions which can be called the "PRINCESS" factors (Planning, Representing, Investigating, Negotiating, Coordinating, Evaluating, Supervising and Staffing)". Luthans et.al (1988) also found that 32% of activities conducted by managers were traditional management functions (planning, decision making and controlling). Those research findings implies that management functions are ways of thinking about what it is that managers do when they manage (Kotter, 1982). Accordingly, it is clear that planning, organising, leading and controlling are parts of managerial process. The functions can be characterised by activities such as building network, managing discourses, interactions and symbols, and managing organizational politics.

The next step of managerial process is the need for having knowledge base and managerial skills to develop work agenda, accomplish roles and engage in planning, organising, leading and controlling. "A knowledge base includes information about an industry and its technology, company policies and practices, company goals and plans, company culture, the personalities of organisational members, and important suppliers and customers" (Bartol et.al., 1992, p. 23). Meanwhile, management skills are needed to carry out various functions of management. Boyatzis (1982) defines skills as the ability to engage in set of behaviours that are functionally related to one another and that lead to a desired performance level

in a given area. In general, there are three skills which managers should possess: technical skills, human skills, and conceptual skills (Bartol et.al., 1995). In relation to human skills, they might be characterised by the need of skills for managing interactions, symbols, discourses and politics.

This will be discussed later in the characteristics of managerial process. The last step of managerial process in an attempt to determine the performance of organisations which consists of two dimensions: effectiveness and efficiency (Bartol et.al., 1995). Based on the performance, work agenda is evaluated and revised. This process goes continuously, although it could be un-systematic and changeable.

Characteristics of Managerial Process

By analysing the above diagram, characteristics of managerial process can probably be inferred as follows.

1. *Managerial process is highly interdependent and contextual.*

This characteristic implies that management activities are pervasively concerned with the efforts of planning and organising of resources in an integrated way. This is because to achieve stated organisational goals, managers of organisations need to plan and control efforts of organizational members and the use of other organisational resources. Without integrating such efforts

and resources, managerial process might be useless. Indeed, Whitley (1989) argues that individual managerial tasks and problems are highly interconnected and their outcome are evaluated in terms of systematic outcomes. The interdependence also means that managerial activities are closely linked to their organisational contexts. Thus, if organizational activities change, managerial activities will also change.

2. *Managerial process is relatively unstandardised, less systematic and changeable.*

This characteristic means that the degree of standardisation of managerial process is relatively low. This could be caused by discretionary nature of managerial activities and their interdependence (Whitley, 1989). Since organisations are surrounded by ambiguity, there is no standardised and systematic managerial process which can be applied in different situations. In fact, as Whitley (1989) believes, "although organizations in the same industry often share the same 'recipe' and form, each firm retains some discretion over division of managerial labour and how particular tasks are coordinated and each management team institutionalises general recipes and rationality in different way".

Furthermore, as a consequence of the fact that business environment is

ambiguous, managerial process tends to be changeable and developing in accordance with the changing environment in which organisations operate. Accordingly, managerial process is dynamic and developing. It cannot be run by rigid procedures which assume constancy and stability.

3. *Managerial Process is a game*

Managerial process is a complex process involving many actors with divergent special interests and actual outcomes cannot be satisfactorily explained without a through analysis of the institutions and the dynamic process involved. Managerial process is not implemented by organisations but by people or players who have positions to influence what actually happen.

Thus, organisations have been characterised as a system of roles tied together by 'string' of communication. Moreover, each player can be assumed to be acting in accordance with some set of priorities or goals and individual actions are directed toward achieving those goals. Each actor pursues different and perhaps contradictory interests. In organizations, in fact "there are actors who have different background and interests, different perspectives which bring the actors together in different ways and encounters between people that are di-

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ferent in different arenas" (Colebatch and Degeling, 1986, p. 23). As a result, issues arising in an organisation can move between different locations or arenas. In these arenas, not all of actors are interacting with one another at the same time or under the same circumstances. Hence, managerial process can be seen as a process of winning a game.

4. *Managerial process involves the need for managing discourses, interactions and symbols.*

Activities in organisations are surrounded by discourses, interaction and symbols. Discourse might be defined as: "the intellectual activity of constantly striving for the truth about things.... It is the general give and take of ideas... that defines an arena in which ideas will compete for attention and reward. Discourses assume that progress in ideas and new insight derived from a process of active argumentation and open critique. What is expected from understanding discourses in that participants have nothing less than an expansive, multidisciplinary and inquisitive view of the issues" (Spich, 1995, p. 6)

The definition implies that discourses could lead to problems in an organisation. This is because participants in organisations have different backgrounds and interests. As a result, issues surrounding an organisation can be viewed by the participants in different ways. Problems come into discourses and therefore into existence as reinforce-

ment of value or ideologies, not simply because they are there, or because there are important for organisations.

Instead, as Edelman notes:

"They (problems) signify... which action will be rewarded and which penalised... they create beliefs about the relative importance of events and objects. They are critical in determining who exercises authority and who accepts" (Quoted by Spich, 1995, p. 8).

Since discourses can lead to problems, they must be managed properly.

In relation to managing interactions and symbols, it can be claimed that to understand managerial process, attention should also be focused on the symbolic features of managerial activities in which they show how managers perform their work and participate in social construction of organisational reality. Trujillo (1983) argues that human behaviour is best understood as a symbolic process with important expressive functions as well as instrumental ones. Because managers and other organisation members could perform their activities differently in various scenes, from the views of them interactions and symbols can have different meaning such as friendship and social interaction. Dunford (1992, p. 23) also believes that "managing is vitally concerned with the management of meanings in which managing needs construction and perpetuation of a notion of

why we are all here, what we do, and how we do it". For example goals could have different meanings that could be ambiguous and unclear for organisations members. Thus, managers must be able to articulate the meaning of the goals for the members.

5. Managerial process involves the need for building network

The need for building network characterises managerial process. Networking might be defined as a mean of building up knowledge of what is going on, what might be done about it and developing influence over outcomes (Hosking, 1988). Networking could be building image, building support for ideas, forming coalition and building alliances. This is developed with superiors, subordinates, peers in other parts of organisations, subordinates of peers, outside suppliers, customers, competitors, and many others.

Networks play important roles in helping managers perform their daily work because they can be used to obtain information relevant to manager's work agenda and implement the agenda (Kotter, 1982). Since managerial process generally involves getting thing done through people, it is not surprising that abilities to build network can influence the success of managing organisations. The most important thing which must be taken into account in building network is trust. Indeed, Powell (1990) argues that trust built by managers with other

parties can create ideas that possibly minimise transaction costs. He continues to argue that trust can reduce complex realities far more quickly and economically than prediction, authority and bargaining.

6. Managerial process is a political system

Organisations can be seen as a complex system which could be visualised clearly as "grids or spider webs of overlapping, interwoven and competing coalitions of individuals and formal and informal groups" (Ott, 1989, p. 426). Organisations are, in fact, characterised by consensus and conflicts, power, and different interests. As a result, organisations are political system entities. Because of such condition, managerial process in organisations can be seen as a political system. Drucker (1977) points out that "management is a social function, embedded in a tradition of values, customs and beliefs, and in governmental and political systems.

As a political system, managerial process is characterised by conflicts and power. In terms of conflicts, Mitzberg (1985) believes that there are four basic forms of political arenas which must be understood by managers, namely "confrontation, shaky alliance, political organisations and complete political arenas".

Meanwhile, power exists in organisations because individuals are dependent on others for all things that are needed to perform their tasks. The dependence is usually caused by

specialisation and division of labour (Ott, 1989). A manager can be dependent in varying degree on superiors, subordinates, peers in other parts of organisations and many others (Kotter, 1977). However, some people could be uncooperative because their goals, beliefs and values might be different and sometimes in conflict with manager's ones. This will eventually result in ongoing conflicts in organisations. Consequently, powers and conflicts must properly be managed.

In short, modern organisations tend to create a climate which promotes power seeking and political maneuvering (Luthans 1995). Accordingly, organisational politics must be considered if we want to describe characteristics of managerial process.

Is it Useful for Managers?

Although one might argue that understanding characteristics of managerial process is less useful for managers because the process is unstandardised, less systematic, and could be complex, it can be argued that understanding characteristics of managerial process is helpful for managers. As mentioned above, organisations tend to be surprising, deceptive, complex and ambiguous. Consequently, there might be no way of managing organisations except understanding theories underlying organisation practices and managerial process. In fact, understanding of managerial process is important

for managers because it will enable managers to manage their organisations effectively (Mondy et.al, 1990).

As understanding characteristics of managerial process cannot be separated from understanding organizational dynamics, it seems that there are two main issues which must be taken into account to help practicing managers manage their organisations. The first issue is the need of managers for understanding organisations dynamics. The second issue is the need of managers for having skills which are required to cope with rapid changes in business environment.

In relation to the need for understanding organisation dynamics, much literature has been published to help managers understand organizations from a wider perspective. Morgan (1980) argues that to understand the nature of organisations, it is necessary to have deep understanding of "the relationships between specific modes of theorising and the world of view that they reflect" (p. 606). To analyse how organisations are constructed, as he claims, managers need to understand three concepts: paradigms (a way of seeing), metaphors (basis of school of thought), and puzzle solving activities. Furthermore, Morgan (1986) proposes four images of organizations. Organisations can be seen as machine, organism, political system and culture. By understanding organisations from a wider perspective, managers will be able to see their own organisations properly in differ-

ent environment. This will eventually give managers ideas of what managers must do in managing their organisations.

Bolman and Deal (1991) also contribute interesting ideas which can expand and enrich the way of thinking of managers to overcome organizational problems or dilemmas. They claim that in rapid changing environment managers must be able to reframe organisations. They propose four frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic, that can be used to analyse organizational problems or dilemmas from different perspectives. Thus, by understanding what Bolman and Deal propose, managers will hopefully be able to manage complicated problems surrounding their organizations. This could be achieved if managers understand characteristics of managerial process and organizations.

In line with the second issue, the need of managers for having skills which are required to cope with rapid changing environment, some theorists have proposed ideas of how managers manage ambiguity and changes. One of those theorists is McCaskey (1982, 1988). He claims that to cope with ambiguity, managers can apply a number of steps such as how to consider stress which affect performance, how to map and understand problems and actions, and how to employ "dia-

lectical reasoning".

He continues to argue that to cope with ambiguity and changes managers need specific skills and attitudes such as ability to analyse controllable and uncontrollable events; and an ability to stir enthusiasm, commitment, and confidence. Since organizations are also surrounded by issues such as discourses, interactions and symbols, managers must be able to manage such issues. Indeed, those issues could be problems for organizations due to the fact that organization members have different value, symbols and beliefs in achieving organisation goals. Thus, as Pfeffer suggested, managers must be able to articulate and reinforce a clear sense and meaning of the goals, that is, making a notion of what going on in organizations meaningful and sensible for organization members (quoted by Dunford, 1992).

As a result, some managers who gain power or authority from hierarchical position might experience a loss of power.

Another skills which managers should have is political skills. This is because in competitive environment, managers might face value dilemmas and political pressure. Since organizations become flatter, and work units become more participative and team oriented, the distinction between managers and non-managers begin to erode (Kanter, 1989). As a result, some managers who gain power or authority from hierarchical position might experience a loss of power. To

overcome this problem, managers need political skills which enable them to understand power that they have, how to gain power and use it properly. In fact, to be able to plan, organize, budget, staff, control and evaluate, managers need some control over many people on whom they dependent (Kotter, 1977).

In competitive environment, managers also spend more time "working across boundaries with peers and partners over whom they have no direct control" (Kanter 1989, p. 89). Hence, managers are forced to delegate more responsibilities to their subordinates. Manager must also be able to negotiate properly and build integrated networks with outside parties such as suppliers, customers, government, and other organisations. They must also have capabilities of encouraging workers and building commitment. To realise those tasks, managers need political skills.

Moreover, Kotter (1979), in his book entitled *Power in Management*, describes how power plays an important role in managing organizations. It is believed that most managers would be both more effective and more successful if they had a better understanding of power dynamics and skillfully use their power to build political alliances and influence people (Kotter, 1979, 1982). Clearly, in doing their jobs, managers need political skills that enable them to negotiate with other parties, motivate subordinates, and build networks with outside parties, and manage discourses, interactions and symbols. Kotter

(1982), from his empirical research, also found that managers influence others through skillful use of symbolic methods, that is, "they use meeting, architecture, language, stories about organisations, time and space as symbols in order to communicate messages indirectly" (p. 74).

Conclusion and Implications

In view of the above, it is clear that managerial process is a political system and a game that takes place in a wide arena. It is highly interdependent, contextual, less systematic and changeable. Managerial process also involves the need for setting agenda, building network, managing discourses, interactions and symbols, and organizational politics.

From the above analysis, it can also be drawn some implications of understanding characteristics of managerial process. *Firstly*, it is important for managers to understand their organizations and changes in business environment. Managers must have deep understanding of how they view organisation process from wider perspectives under different environment. This will eventually create flexibility for managers to change their management style if they face different circumstances surrounding their organisations. Indeed, "the most successful managers are capable of altering their management styles according to changing situations and pursuing the interest of their organisations" (Lawson 1994, p. 12).

Secondly, in rapid changing environment, managers need skills that make them able to cope with uncertainty, complexity, and political and value dilemmas. In other word, managers need skills of managing changes, discourses, interactions, symbols and organisational politics. In terms of political skill, for example, managers must be able to understand how to obtain power and use it to support their ways of delegating responsibilities, negotiating with other parties, and building networks with outside suppliers. In fact, as Luthans et.al (1985) found from their research, to be successful, managers need power and political skills to get ahead in their organizations.

Finally, to be successful in managing organisations, it is probably interesting for managers to think and consider what McCorwack notes in his book, entitle What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School. He notes:

"Business is a competition, and any high level, sophisticated competition is almost exclusively a head game. The inner game of business, as this could be called, is understanding the business paradox: the better you think you are doing, the greater should be your cause for concern' the more self-satisfied you are with your accomplishments, your past achievements, your 'right moves', the less you should be" (p. 247)

Thus, success or failure of organisations is determined by the ability of managers to understand their

organisations, the influence of rapid changes in environment on their organisations, and the ability of managers to choose appropriate strategies and to adjust their organisations to the changes. All of this cannot be separated from the need for understanding characterisation of managerial process. ❁

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