Why Bother Teaching Philosophy to Managers?

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Abstract

This paper questions whether managers truly need philosophy and for what end. It

highlights the achievements of management before examining its deficiencies. Once

some basic foundation to support a case for the teaching of philosophy to managers has

been made, the paper considers two main issues: what types of managers are there; and

what type of philosophy do each of these types need. Using primary experiential data

and some management questionnaires analysed using pattern recognition Artificial

Intelligence the paper identifies a typology of five well-defined clusters: Disaffected

(Whiners); Converts (Shoppers); Tacticians (Cynics); Believers (Commanders); and

Workers (Jobbers). For each in turn we identify the type of philosophy most suited to

each cluster. The paper argues that in teaching philosophy to managers you must

consider who you are teaching as the dangers include counter-productivity.

Why Bother Teaching Philosophy to Managers?

Prelude

At the Philosophy of Management workshop held at Oxford University in 2007 there were themed sessions on the Teaching of Philosophy to Managers. Indeed most of the articles in this Journal edition come from that event. Whilst the material presented there was both interesting and engaging we were struck by their optimistic assumption that Teaching Philosophy to Managers was a good and purposeful activity. In our own lengthy discussion, intended to turn the conference style paper into a journal article, we were less than convinced that a strong argument for actually teaching managers how to apply philosophy had been made.

We felt that questions such as 'Why bother?' or 'Why should we want to do so?' in relation to teaching philosophy to managers had seemingly rarely been asked. The assumption seemed to be that it was proven that such teaching is the right thing to do. This seemed a somewhat strange assumption to us as our experience of managers generally was that they didn't appear to be obviously lacking something in their work and as a result wouldn't jump at the chance to undertake philosophical training or education.

Our reflection on our experience of Executives, Senior Managers as well as more operational staff also produced other fundamental questions that we felt needed to be asked including: 'What have philosophers got that the managers don't have that will improve matters?' and 'What does it mean by improvement?' Furthermore we felt the more cynical of managers might suggest that one may as well ask the astrologer or the mystic to help and this led in turn to further questions such as: 'What answers have they

ever produced?' and 'Whenever did you hear of two philosophers even agreeing

amongst themselves?'

So overall one needs to address just where has management failed since if

nothing is broken why fix it. Engineers and scientists are often highly critical of the

credit given to management claiming that it is the creation of product ideas that matters

not the organisation of the process around them. This was wittily caricatured, by

Douglas Adams, as the Golgafrinchans in the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy where

the captain of a spaceship, full of marketers and management consultants is 'kindly'

sent on ahead from a planet by the engineers and scientists.[1] However most would agree

that in getting the processes of the product working, managers have contributed to the

overall improvement in society.

In a competitive world managers must ensure that changes are made to products

and services. The competition has been fierce for decades with organisational

graveyards full of those who do not change. In a typical 10 year period between 30 and

50 per cent of Fortune 500 companies disappear with only General Electric having

survived intact in this list since 1908.[2]

Modern companies are managed for change and this sometimes produces quite

dramatic, but oft forgotten, organisational metamorphoses. Nokia originally produced

lumber, then Wellington boots and later toilet paper which led to paper and onward to

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[1] Adams, D. *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe (Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy).* Pan Macmillan, 2001.

[2] Hill, C. *International Business.* 7th Edition McGraw-Hill, 2008.

the 'paperless office' world of ICT. Continuing this change, Nokia have recently announced to abandon the production of mobile phones by 2010. Vodaphone Airtouch merged with Mannesman, who originally made steel tubes. Preussag, who started in Prussia with transport wagons for coal and steel, now own Thomson who in 2007 purchased Reuters.[3] Of course such change does not always work for every individual company with some companies damaged beyond repair but in terms of overall production management has delivered.

This change is also increasingly global with for example management at Citibank using software systems from India and IBM introducing the 24 hour team of support across the Globe. Managers have also utilised technology (e.g. Internet) to deliver an increasingly standardised global experience. The change to global management perspectives has been extremely effective with the volume of world trade in 1950 taking place each day in 2008.[4] So overall if one is to seek areas where managers have failed it would appear that one need look elsewhere than their ability to 'compete in time' or encourage the expansion or diversification of products and services.

Notwithstanding the improvements in living standards, many would argue that the cost of this change in terms of environmental damage is too high to justify the

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[3] Slack, N., Chambers, S. & Johnson, R. *Operations Management.* 5th Edition FT /Prentice Hall 2005.

[4] Rugman, A.M., & Collinson, S., *International Business.* 5th Edition FT /Prentice Hall 2008.

change. E.P. Schumacher argued that the Earth's resources are so plentiful that management and engineers could barely fail not to make a success but that they had succeed in many cases only of selling off cheap these natural assets with longer term catastrophic consequences.[5] Whilst sustainability, environmentalism and so called green issues are increasingly popular talking points which cover all manner of issues from factory farming to CO2 emissions the view of this paper is that the real failure of management is not in itself a non-ecological perspective in conducting their business but something much deeper.

Prior to meeting to prepare this paper from our Conference etchings, we had asked ourselves to reflect on some 'management stories' from either published cases or our own lives. In the end most of the data used was primary as we used real life situations that we had been involved with in some way. Although our experiences suggested that managers did not generally believe that much was wrong with their work, we were aware of some concerns that all was not well with management. Each of the two cases below are really a fiction in that they represent generic instances of which the authors found best resonated with and generalised our real specific examples.

A Vice-President of a UK based bank, Mr A had remarked to us how his job, which in his own words was 'excessively rewarded', had become all too mechanistic. However Mr A felt that, whilst his alternative options were few, the mechanical decisions he was making could so easily be doing something terrible to someone else in

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[5] Schumacher, E.P. *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered.* Sphere, New Ed, 1974.

the World. This hidden responsibility without the power to really influence such coupled with extremely long days had begun to impact on his health and family life. He decided to seek alternative employment within Education or local Government. He expressed his misgivings about his post to a panel of Executives and, having seemingly listened intently to his presentation, offered him yet more money. They added that management was essentially about ensuring that more income is generated and nothing to do with societal well-being. This theme of money being the answer to corporate people issues and the inherent frustration that staff felt about being 'a financial transaction' was all too prevalent among our interviewees.

Another thematic case of managerial malaise was from within a University. All academic and administrative staff were invited to a series of meetings to discuss the development of a new strategy for the University. In another (real case) form of the same generic form, the topic to determine was the quality and quantity of assessment. The meetings arranged were numerous and each quite lengthy. Cross fertilisation was encouraged by team interchange and the timings of the parallel sessions; this was advertised as intended to produce a truly democratic decision. Then during the final few sessions the tone changed and vague threats concerning the consequences of their selected decision were made. With their new-found light of seeming autonomy, the management threats were ignored. When management was informed of this refusal to give in to the threats, management quickly responded with a fully-documented solution which was presented as a fait accompli. This theme of democratisation of organisation decision making, quickly turning to a Boardroom imposed plan seems to be as equally

commonplace as the earlier case of 'money is the answer' with consequentially obvious traits of self-interest.

More broadly our cases seemed to point to management being ever willing to address 'What?' issues but rarely asking 'Why?'[6] Many seemed able to accept the evidence and the decisions formed from these, but often were uncertain or even unhappy about why such decision were being made in the first place.

Our discussion led us to the conclusion that since 'Why teach philosophy to managers?' is a difficult question we needed to simplify the ambition and form of the question into 'What kind of philosophy should we teach to what kind of managers?'

The Easy Answer

So we eventually decided that 'Why teach philosophy to managers?' to be a particularly challenging question. However we felt that without offering at least some obvious or attractive answer to it we might be read as people who look for issues were there are none. Our easy answer to the question is because managers can somehow benefit from studying philosophy.

The obvious retort to this is to ask what possible benefits there might be. Our discussion led us to the answer that a major benefit would be to make the management style more humane in terms of: effects and outcomes; a more humane management and

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[6] Preston, D. S. *Technology Management and the University.* Glenrothes Press, 2001.

control process; thinking through the goals of the organisations that are being managed; thinking through the goals of the management process itself.

We thought that teaching philosophy to managers would encourage thinking about 'the bigger picture' which in our terms meant: being self-reflective, critical and responsible about management. Furthermore it meant thinking through the 'why?' of management as well as the 'what and how' in order to reach which goals?

We believe that our experience strongly suggests to us that the goals of management should be more universally beneficial than the current state of self-interest. Reflecting on the voices of our data, we believe that in contrast to taking a short term view geared towards making more money, that management should consider wider social ramifications.

We also found some justification, for teaching philosophy to managers, in the wide array of recently published books about philosophy and management. This might suggest that there's something of a philosophy boom in management which in turn might point towards a higher degree of realisation of the goals identified above. In our discussion this latter point led us to ask two questions: 'Has management become more humane? and 'Has management become more universally beneficial?' Our experience as well as our data analysis detailed below suggests that these questions depend on two factors: (i) what philosophy you are talking about and (ii) what kind of managers you are talking about.

Management Types

Our discussion of 'What kind of managers?' led us to consider various ways of identifying any such types. Initially we mined our rich source of experience to identify behavioural traits of managers. Later we decided to use Artificial Intelligent (AI) tools for pattern recognition to analyse data from a specifically designed questionnaire containing scenario-style questions. We then tried to combine these two sources of data into a suitably defined typology.

For the pattern recognition software a questionnaire was used with 10 scenario style questions in all, each with five alternative multiple-choice answers. Some of these scenarios related to actions taken at work whilst others combined one's personal or social life. One such scenario question was:

You are working for Company X on a project with a USA partner firm Z. You are informed late one Friday afternoon that the partner firm Z representatives are arriving at short notice and demand to see you over the weekend to discuss the latest developments in the project. Your reaction to the situation is best summed up by which of the following statements:

(i) Dismissive that they should demand your time

(ii) Angry that you weren't given more notice

(iii) Delighted to have this opportunity

(iv) Upset that your team didn't call this meeting before Z did

(v) Worried about the true purpose of this meeting

A list of managers, known to the researchers, was identified consisting of those willing to complete our questionnaire. Fifty three managers completed the questionnaire and the answers coded into a form suitable for input to our chosen pattern recognition software, Snap-Drift.[7]

Pattern recognition AI software tools analyse the answers to such sets of questions. There are various techniques for the analysis but most essentially seek to find a pattern in the answers and to associate the individuals who answered these questions into meaningful clusters. A single cluster has essentially something connecting its members though of course the software does not say what this connection might be. A cluster with only one (or comparably very few) member is often termed an outlier. The recipient of the output from such software basically knows the membership of each cluster as well as how they answered each question but do not know why the cluster exists i.e. what they have in common. The identity of the reason for each cluster needs to be ascertained by the cluster analyst.

In deciding to use pattern recognition, we were aware that an alternative methodology could have been proposed using conventional statistical approaches where the research seeks to support or reject defined hypotheses. The main advantage pattern recognition has over traditional statistical approaches is that a much broader attempt is

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[7] Lee, S.W., Palmer-Brown, D., Draganova, C., Preston, D., Kretsis, M., *Question Response Grouping for Online Diagnostic Feedback in Advances in Computing Technology.* ICGES Press, 2009.

made to find relationships in phenomena as no defined hypothesis exists. Pattern recognition seeks to find clusters which may point to connections between phenomenon oftentimes where no such hypothesis would have been constructed in the traditional statistical approach since the internal relationship is too complex involving possibly many characteristics or question answers.

Cluster analysis can be a time consuming and intellectually challenging task. In the case of the cluster analysis for this paper the manager type categorisation was a difficult though rewarding task, particularly as we sought to bring appropriately generic names to our clusters. The final (large membership) cluster official names and their colloquial equivalents of our typology are the: Disaffected (Whiners); Converts (Shoppers); Tacticians (Cynics); Believers (Commanders); and Workers (Jobbers). Several other outliers existed but they defied accurate definition.

Typical symptoms of the Disaffected were: disaffection with their lot; genuine unease with actual practice of management; unconvinced by conventional management practice, principles and theories and against the hype that surrounds them; turning against the textbooks/ management thinking; preparing to leave the company; resentment; prepared to do damage to those unlike themselves. Their catchphrases might be represented as: 'Management theory is a fraud'; 'management is hype'; and 'emperor's clothes syndrome'. Their basic value is sincerity. One specific example of this cluster was the aforementioned Mr A.

Typical symptoms of the Converts were: trying to broaden the horizon of management thinking; firm belief in the idea that good management can provide the

answer, or can contribute to a better world; struggling; willing to try anything in the hope that it works; trying to experience things. Their catchphrases might be represented as; I must do better'; 'I must understand this more'; 'This really deepens my insight into human beings and the world'. Their basic value is newness. One specific example of this cluster was a senior bank manager who in our conversations with him would connect the latest ultra-trendy sound-bites into sentences that, on analysing after, were both extremely complex and of variable quality of meaning. Despite this occasional irregularity in the depth of his knowledge, we were impressed by the width of the disciplines from which he would regularly connect to his business world. He told us a story of how, in a former life within a software house he had a 'religious conversion' when he believed firmly that God through The Bible had produced his 'business oracle'. During another period he had believed firmly that all employees need the language and ideas of Tactical and Strategic War and had fought and won large funds to achieve this within his organisation.

Typical symptoms of the Tacticians were: few fixed loyalties; being ahead of the game: show your knowledge by using new language with 'philosophy' as one of the new languages; use buzzwords to impress; short-termism; and an exploitative attitude. Their catchphrases might be represented as: 'I don't believe in it, but if they do, its okay and useful'; 'must earn more'; 'what's hot, what's not'; 'Listen up, this is really hot'; and 'this is what *we* are going to do'. Their basic value is self-interest. One specific example of this cluster was a Vice chancellor of a university who remarked that he 'liked buzz words, perhaps they really don't mean anything, but you can *use* them to (re)focus a group and get them going'.

Typical symptoms of the Believers were: they know that management has failed, but this is not a result of some intrinsic problems in management theory, but because there are a lot of bad managers; long-term perspective; personality and experience trump management-theory; strong leadership. Their catchphrases might be represented as: 'You're fired'; 'this is what *you* are going to do'; 'meet your targets'; 'is this useful or just ballast?'; and 'Focus!' Their basic value is efficiency. One specific archetypal example of this cluster would be the TV self-portrait of Sir Alan Sugar.[8]

Typical symptoms of the Workers were: go to work everyday believing management as a job; medium level of critical awareness; on the whole they are decent people; try to act as the glue in the organisation; loyalty to organisation but also to larger issues/principles; they are the silent majority. Their catchphrases might be represented as: 'I know, but let's try'. Their basic value is realism and pragmatism. One specific example of this cluster would be a senior academic of our experience who is committed to her students. She spends much time in running a large department and regularly and willingly takes on extra work that is not part of her role, in the belief that this will make things better for all.

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[8] Sir Alan Sugar, former Executive of several companies, including Amstrad and Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, has become something of a cult commander through the TV series *The Apprentice*. Sugar, a self-made millionaire, in real life undoubtedly fits the commander cluster though his TV persona is even more strongly redolent of the cluster. Watching his performances on more serious TV programmes, before his popularised fame, it is clear that Sir Alan is acting a part and that his real character would appear to be much quieter and thoughtful decision maker than portrayed in *The Apprentice.*

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Management Types and Philosophy

Having identified the more obvious management types that exist, the obvious further questions to ask were: 'What is the source of any connection to philosophy that these types possess?; 'What form of potential engagement with philosophy might these management types engage with?'; 'What will be the goals of philosophy engaging with them?'

If they were to be connected with philosophy, The Disaffected may do so to give substance to their unease, trying to understand it more fully and reflect on their concerns. Given this cluster are most likely to 'drop out', it may be actually quite difficult to find many of these. The main goals would be to: ease their dissatisfaction with their lot; 'get better'; get them to reconnect to management theory and practice by showing them the value of themselves and how management can actually contribute to something good; show them there is a bigger picture in which management can take a meaningful place. Given these possible connections and goals, our analysis suggests that the most likely philosophical work to appeal to The Disaffected would be Philosophy as therapy as in therapy of desire (eg Nussbaum); Philosophy as existential knowledge; and critical philosophy of management.

The Converts are a broad set of people, often with fleeting concentration and a predilection for the latest fashions. Their main potential source of a connection with philosophy is likely to be: to make management more efficient; to use the learning to develop their own job prospects. As Shoppers they view philosophy as just one more item in their basket. The main goals in teaching them philosophy would be to: stop them

'shopping' and to reveal what's beneath the surface layer. Given this tendency to tackle issues superficially the philosophical tools both most likely to appeal to them and address this trait would be material such as Business ethics and generally to show The Converts that the ethical business is a possibility. The curricula must use more robust theories to make plain that philosophy is not a fad.

The Tacticians, who appear from our data to be a smaller group, generally are the group most opposed to being taught philosophy. Hence they represent the most difficult group as they are resistant to deeper issues. As opportunists they are most likely to turn to philosophy if they think it will work (or can be manipulated to do so) to their advantage. The main goals in teaching this cluster philosophy should be to: reconnect them to the wider community and widen their perspective from self to public interest. The type of philosophical tools most likely to deliver such goals would include: philosophical anthropologies which would examine how human beings are more than just consumers; Business ethics to encourage to let them think about themselves and their roles; use of robust theories that can't be misused or tailored to tactical needs.

The Commanders are the smallest group of all. They are generally very critical and, to use the bucolic words of one the subjects of our questionnaires it would appear that unless there is some 'networking' to be done they 'don't have time for bullshit'. As believers they are most likely to turn to philosophy not as an 'add on' but to argue for their deeply felt capitalist convictions, a la Friedman or to rationalise what they already know. The goals of teaching The Commanders philosophy would be to: make them human; soften and make more responsible to a wider audience. The philosophical ideas

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most likely to attend to such goals would be: Political economy; Social philosophy; Philosophy of leadership.

From our cluster analysis, The Workers form the largest group and are generally existential learners. They are consequentially less likely to have time to study philosophy: they are to busy and generally wrapped up in their 'Jobbing'. If they are not absent from the philosophy classes, they are more likely to question the purpose than other groups. As a result this is the group one needs to work hardest with to convince of the value of philosophy. They view Philosophy as a book section in the Library, next to other exotic material; none of which they read. Jobbers are closest as a cluster to (and hence likely to become) whiners or tacticians, presumably depending on their history and personality. As a cluster they are farthest from commanders and hence are unlikely to become one. The goals for this group are to: facilitate greater enjoyment and fun in their workplace; broaden their skills; increase their receptiveness and open them up to the bigger picture. The philosophical tools most likely to deliver such goals would be: Socratic dialogue; and philosophical skills.

Conclusion

Many attempts have and continue to be made to introduce formal philosophy teaching into management. In London alone we know of at least ten major companies who provide their staff with philosophical training. This paper has questioned the value of such training. Our experiential and questionnaire primary data suggests there are clearly

different types of managers out there and that, in terms of their potential relationship with any philosophical ideas, these vary enormously. There are different manager groups with different backgrounds and life histories, each with different wants, needs and attitudes towards philosophy. It would appear that in this case one cap does not fit all.

Our recommendation is that one thinks very seriously about the group you are teaching and to glean as much appropriate information about the individuals as possible. Ideally this should be done using pattern recognition to best understand your students. Teaching philosophy to managers without understanding the group itself is likely to prove counter productive: The Whiners will whine even more; The shoppers may be thrilled but keep on shopping; The Tacticians will harness their exploitative skills; The Workers will probably drop out because they view your teaching as simply more (voluntary) jobs to do; and The Commanders may buy your firm, sack you, and replace you with a cheaper teacher. The idea that you must understand your student body well to teach them, accords with Vygotsky.[9] There is also the need to think not only about what to teach them, but also about how to teach them but this is a topic demanding further research.

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[9] Though working with young children Vygotsky's insistence on knowing your student would appear equally important in the training of managers in philosophy. Vygotsky, L.S., *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes.* Harvard University Press, 1978.

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