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Becoming a Manager

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In this chapter the role of the manager is discussed in order to investigate the many roles they play and the skillset required to be a successful manager.

Witzel's *Dictionary of Business & Management* (1999) defines a 'manager' as:

"anyone within a firm who bears responsibility for planning, direction and controlling the work of others " pp.186

while 'management' is defined as:

"a general term for the coordination and direction of resources, capital and labour to ensure the organisation meets its goals" pp.184

Definitions of both management and manager have changed little over the decades, but from these short descriptions it is clear that the area is both wide and complex, including all areas of the business, both at the operational and the people management levels.

What is a manager?

So what exactly is a manager? A person, acting as a manager, can be in charge of people, processes, budgets, decision-making, manufacturing, recruitment, marketing strategies or the overall running of a business. In any business there are likely to be a range of management duties at junior, middle and senior management levels which require varying skillsets and are either closely or loosely aligned to the functional departments of the business. In addition to the differing skillsets, it is also important to understand the different tasks which managers undertake in specific roles and how progression from junior to senior management takes place.

This chapter investigates the theories surrounding managerial competencies whilst looking at the different contexts within which managers perform their tasks. Being a manager in a large global firm and being a manager in a small firm of five people are very different environments, so the context and

the culture of the business will have a direct impact on how managers behave, perform, communicate and ultimately succeed. The manager operating in an international business will also require a level of intercultural awareness when dealing with both international clients and colleagues across the group.

The first section of this chapter discusses the key theoretical managerial studies, while the second looks at the culture and context within which management takes place. A range of quotes are provided by three UK based managers from different sectors who provide an insight into their practical experience of management and the skills learned along the way. These senior level managers range from the small business sector, namely Arran Aromatics, a large emergency public services organisation, the Fire and Rescue Service, and Iberdrola, a large international group based in five countries, with their HQ in Bilbao, Spain. The chapter includes a short vignette relating to each business to provide detail on the context and background within which each of these managers operate.

Managerial studies

In the literature there has often been confusion between managerial jobs, managerial behaviour and managerial work. Henri Fayol, who wrote about his own experience, was one of the earliest theorists and stated in 1916:

To manage is to forecast and plan, to organize, to command (now motivate), to coordinate and to control.

Although these concepts are still valid today, they offered little to explain how managers behaved, so the last century saw the evolution of a series of studies dedicated to understanding managerial behaviour.

Sune Carlson in 1951 undertook the first piece of research in this area entitled *“Executive Behaviour: A Study of The Workload and Working Methods of Managing Directors”*. This study concentrated on understanding what tasks senior managers undertook, whilst at the same time attempting to understand the environment within which these tasks were conducted. The author studied the diaries of Chief Executive Officers over a four week period. The study consisted of seven senior executives operating in Sweden in the 1950s, with the author acknowledging that the Swedish community was rather small and the homogeneity between the CEOs relatively high. An important feature of the Swedish economy at the time was that it had a high degree of centralization, where the freedom of activity was curtailed by an increasing number of government regulations and restrictions imposed by trade associations, trade unions and employers’ federations. As a consequence of this environment, the CEOs had to devote a considerable amount of time to public relations. The dimensions in the study looked at:

- 1 The place of work
- 2 The contacts the manager had with people and institutions
- 3 Communication
- 4 The activities undertaken

With reference to **place of work**, the study found that the CEOs spent around 32% of their time outside of the firm, leading to a lack of visibility in the firm as leaders and little in the way of delegation taking place. When looking at **contacts** and **communications**, the CEOs in the study rarely met with suppliers or clients and used little in the way of paper-based communications, but were more focused on networking and accessing information. There were however large differences in the behaviour of those in centralised versus decentralised companies. The **activities undertaken** indicated that the CEOs undertook a wide variety of tasks, often in an inefficient way and were often perceived as far removed from the main workforce.

The main conclusion from this research was that managerial work needed to be studied in its social context and the focus required to be on the **objectives, attitudes and goals** of those involved. Getting inside the manager's mind and understanding the social influences and those of the physical environment within which the manager is operating, are key to understanding behaviour.

This early study, although undertaken over 50 years ago, initiated the interest in studying managerial behaviour in order to identify common managerial activities, distinguish the differences between managerial jobs, offer guidance for managerial selection and training and make suggestions for improving effectiveness.

These early studies were referred to as the Work Activity School, where researchers investigated the content of managers' diaries in order to provide an insight into their activities. The findings of the diary studies suggest that managers spent the *majority of their time talking and listening*, in some cases up to 90% of their time and also indicated one common factor that managers *undertake a high number of small tasks in one day*, often being interrupted, rarely with more than half an hour alone.

Managerial competencies

An ability to multi-task, be a good listener, have excellent communication skills and an ability to organise are therefore key and are still valid for managers today.

There were a number of flaws with this approach, not least of which was an inability to compare what managers were doing with where, when and with whom they were working. Notwithstanding this, these studies provide valid contributions to our understanding of managerial behaviour.

Following on from these, the focus shifted to investigate *what* managers were doing, with three major US based studies looking into managerial behaviour and work. The first of these was by Leonard Sayles in 1964. He studied 75 lower and middle level managers in a large US manufacturing firm and the study was ethnological in nature, taking place over several years and including observations, interviews and feedback. Sayles described managerial work as **part of a social system** and emphasised the importance played by relationships which had a major impact on work efficiency. He highlighted the dynamics of social relationships:

“Enormous personal energy is required to interact in as diverse and multiple roles as those encompassed by the typical executive position.” (Sayles 1964, p. 260).

He identified lateral relationships as being particularly important as opposed to vertical relationships which had been a previous focus in the literature. Sayles' research identified managerial work as often mundane in nature and with high levels of frustration when managers were dealing with different business units' priorities. He suggested that managerial success was dependent on building and maintaining a predictable, reciprocal system of relationships across the firm. He argued that it was wrong to see planning and decision-making as separate activities, rather decision-making is a social process that is shaped by interactions with others. Stewart (1999) in her review of Sayles' work notes his focus on the amount of scope managers have to use their personality skills and energies to constantly re-stabilize the work processes and to introduce change, saying:

“When the organisation is viewed as a complex series of interlocking patterns of human relationships, work-flow patterns and control patterns, the opportunity for the individual to innovate and shape his/her own environment becomes apparent.” (Stewart, 1999, p. 106)

This quote from Sayles' work, although focusing on what managers do, demonstrates the overlap with managers' leadership skills, personality and the