ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON MANAGEMENT (APPGM)
Parliamentary Commission on the Future of Management and Leadership

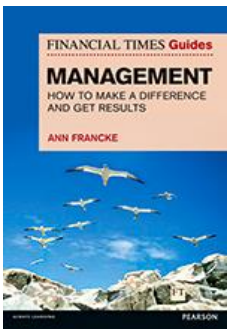
Forward to Basics: A New Primer

Bringing a fresh look to the building blocks

Evidence submitted by Dr William Tate, The Institute for Systemic Leadership

We need to talk about 'management'

- If we are to construct options for the future in contentious territory, we first briefly need to establish a sound footing in how we use the language of management and leadership.
- Managers' professional field of practice, as well as their skills, qualities and qualifications, are expressed by the nouns 'management and leadership'. But managers don't *do* management and leadership as such, certainly not alone: what they personally do is 'manage and lead' – verbs that actively denote managing and leading. The problem with using nouns formed out of verbs (called 'nominalisation') is that they cloud agent behaviour concerning who is doing what.
- This grammatical nicety matters because using 'management' to mean what the individual manager does collides with two other uses of the term 'management': first, management as an organisation process or system that involves several people, including other managers, interacting with various policies, procedures, targets, etc. (e.g. management of a hospital's beds and waiting list); and secondly, management as a position in a hierarchical structure.
- Managers who hold positions of authority get referred to as 'the management' (or at a senior level as 'the leadership'). But that doesn't say anything about what they do or how well they do it; it is simply hierarchical.
- When people blame 'management', it may be unclear what or who they believe was faulty? If it's a 'who', precisely who? 'Management' hides the parties behind an anonymous mask.
- Position, abilities, roles and activity are all different though related aspects of management. Distinguishing more clearly between them helps build understanding.
- Books and other sources of advice would be clearer if they referred to the 'MANAGING' that individual managers do – if and where that is its purpose.



(EXTRACT FROM A BOOK'S PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL)

'We've all worked for bad bosses, and know that they can make life miserable. Equally, I hope you've worked for good managers who have inspired you. This book is about how to recognise the difference between good and bad management and develop your skills as a good manager.'

- The habit of nominalisation of "management" dies hard, especially when it sounds more impressive and implies that an organisation-level outcome will result from individual action. But this connection is more tenuous in practice than it sounds. Development interventions and campaigns frequently fall into this trap: assuming that the individual can deliver the change that the organisation needs.

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Developing the foundation stones

- Research shows that businesses cannot successfully delegate to individual managers the responsibility for how well the organisation's management process works as a system. No amount of training of individual managers' skills, or specification and assessment of individual competencies, or use of psychometric measures of personality, can bridge the system management gap. Something more is needed to elevate the action of managing to that of 'management'. This something reaches deeper than managers' skills and behaviour, and the key is to be found in organisation factors that surround the managers.
- Yet most advice on management is still concerned with what independent managers should do. Such advice implies that if all managers follow best practice, then all will be well for the organisation as a whole (even for UK Plc). Such hope is misplaced. It overlooks a crucial organisation dynamic: it neglects the way the management process behaves as a system. How it works depends on the relationship and interconnections between component parts. And the parts include, but are more than, other individuals. This enveloping system is different from but feels somewhat akin to culture, raising the challenging question of where responsibility sits for improving organisation dynamics, phenomena and holistic success if it doesn't sit with individual managers.
- Advice at the individual manager level may be limited to the manager's relationship with members of staff and colleagues, exhorting context-free timeless truths about people management. Responsibility for that relationship may wrongly be assumed by the employer to rest in just one of the parties – the manager. The manager will often think differently. And wider issues of the manager's *role* (rather than abilities and behaviour patterns) may receive less attention.
- The question of managers' purpose and role, what they are expected to use their skills and qualifications to achieve for their employer, is often less discussed. Is it, for example, to run a departmental function effectively and efficiently, or is it to challenge the status quo by asking questions such as 'why are we continuing to conduct this procedure this way?'. Should managers be employed to make the way the work works better for the future as well as delivering today's operation according to today's rules? How reforming does an organisation need its managers to be, and are they encouraged and permitted to perform such a role? And when does such a future-oriented improving role draw upon and justify the label 'leadership' rather than 'management'?
- Responsibility for those big management/leadership culture and system questions rests – at least in part – at the door of other individuals, especially senior leaders. But at some level 'the way the system works' becomes so pervasive that no one feels able practically to own and accept its challenges as their responsibility. And the governance implications usually go begging.
- Organisations' most important management challenges are systemic: banking sector mis-selling, Stafford Hospital abuse, poor police handling of indiscipline, local authority financial pressures. These require improvement in the way their management and leadership systems work. Seeing, understanding and directly acting on these systems is required if they are to be improved. In the widely used metaphor, it's like needing to notice and tend to the fishtank as well as the fish; fixing the fish doesn't fix a fishtank that's become toxic.
- At a level up from individual managers and their jobs are system properties that comprise a manager's enveloping context, the intention being to channel and combine efforts and outputs to beneficial effect. Among other things, these systems are responsible for most of what managers are called upon to do, what they choose to do, what they are allowed to do, and what happens when they do do.

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- In network terms, trying to bring about system change by regarding it as an individual manager responsibility confuses nodes with their interconnections. In development terms, what usually needs most attention is what is going on *between* managers (both colleagues and hierarchically) and what is going on *around* managers – how they connect with such system things as targets, incentives, protocols, rules, power structure, etc. If an organisation is to improve and become better led as a whole, these social and system forces must be recognised as more powerful and influential than the individual manager's skills, behaviour and personality. When improvement in 'management' is needed it is this systemic context itself that must be targeted for change.

When managers need to lead rather than manage

- Managing is the job of a manager, can be and often is specified. Such activity is unavoidable if managers are to keep their job. In contrast, leading is often unspecified other than in positional terms; e.g. 'provide project leadership to …'. Leading is discretionary, political, risky and lacks agreement on what it is. And leading is less amenable to training than is managing. People will acknowledge that they are being managed more readily than they are being led.
- A manager is usually left fairly free to work out what leadership means and to choose whether to and when to don the appropriate hat. More than the individual's personal qualities, it is the context and what surrounds the manager that largely determines whether and when the manager chooses to take a lead. The safe default for a manager is to manage, not lead.
- Leadership is a relational phenomenon. It happens in the engaged space between people, not inside any one of them acting independently and alone. Leadership is thus an 'emergent' property of that relationship. In a different relationship the expectation and the assumed need for leadership will be different, the leadership behaviour displayed will be different, and how such leadership is assessed will be different. The assessed quality of a manager as a leader lies in its perception: it is not an assessable or constant truth.
- Much of what a manager does is grandly called leadership but it is actually good managing that derives from having positional authority.

What problems arise from the above?

- As we have seen, the word 'management' spans different spheres of interest in the life of an organisation and how well it functions. The word is used for what is going on in individual managers as they do their job, as well as what is going on at an organisational level and how it behaves as a system. The individual level is about a manager's actions, qualities, behaviours, skills, competence and qualifications. The organisation level is about processes, measures, controls, activities, arrangements, structures, relationships, collective behaviour and outcomes.
- The organisation surrounds managers with an appropriate environment so that they can perform as managers, and it adds value and synthesises their individual work to capitalise on their managerial efforts. It is when the management environment is inappropriate that we become most aware of the context's deep impact on individual managers' behaviour.
- Loose use of 'management' runs the risk of distracting us from the systemic perspective and the need to act on the system. By appropriating the word 'management' for what the individual does we risk overlooking what surrounds managers if they are to be free to manage purposefully and in an integrated way that enables the organisation as a whole to be effective, well managed and led.
- The upshot is that many organisations underplay their synthesising management role where they can add strategy, direction and integrating value. Instead they analyse the poor managers

to death using reductionist thinking based on the outdated metaphor of the organisation as a physical machine. That is, HR breaks down the organisation and its people into the smallest parts, seeks parts that are defective or broken, fixes them via training and development, stands back, and assumes that once the parts are fixed, the whole mechanism will perform correctly.

- This Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm – named after René Descartes (1596-1650) and Isaac Newton (1643-1727) – gave rise to the *scientific management* way of thinking, organising and managing. But this model began to lose favour in the mid-1900s when it was realised that organisations were complex, social, political, organic systems. The 'new sciences' of systems thinking and complexity gradually gained prominence and began shaping an alternative paradigm. This new way of thinking recognises that organisations are unpredictable and uncontrollable at an individual level, with cause and effect linked only loosely. Yet the individual-focused, micro-managing, atomistic, hierarchically instrumentalist, mechanical myth remains. Power and human nature have ensured that this mindset still holds sway for many. It costs organisations dearly and undermines attempts at modernisation.
- Many organisations end up with grotesque, highly detailed and bureaucratic specifications of what the ideal manager is required to have and do (qualities and behaviours), detached from the real organisation dynamic that either frustrates or enables them to perform. But it is usually the dynamic that is inherent in the organisation context that needs the greater improvement attention. Such obsession with the small print of individuals' make-up is a huge misdirection of energy – by professional institutions, business schools, publishers and businesses alike.
- If organisations and managers become aware of the clash between the old and new worldviews they may recognise the need to modernise and change their concept of management and organisation. But the managers who have most authority to lead change are usually those who are most steeped in and vested in the traditional concept, values and beliefs. Even wise managers who can overcome personal hesitation have no choice but to work with the system to change the system. Hence the system's in-built tendency favouring the status quo.

What can we do to improve management and leadership?

1. If it is to be the main strategy for improving the system's performance, abandon the idea of generic management skills training for individual managers. Instead, work on the system and the interconnections. For example, get people together to ask them how the system is getting in the way of them doing their job, and how it can be improved, refashioned and re-purposed.
2. Don't conflate *leadership development* with *applied leadership activity* (as most studies into improving leadership do; e.g. Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership). There are other ways of improving leadership than through development activity. First stop wasting it.
3. Ensure that the actions that managers take, and what the organisation does in the name of 'management', is a pulled response to people's needs, and is not what 'management' or HR wants to push on them regardless of their needs and wants.
4. Recognise that leadership is a strategic safeguarding and governance-related activity, ensuring that tomorrow works better than today. The more senior the managers' position, the more time they should spend on safeguarding the future using their leadership role. This is the most important thing that leadership capability can be used for.
5. By contrast, delivering against today's short-term needs is mainly a management activity. It links cause and effect more closely than does leadership. And it will usually be less contentious because it doesn't pose such a strong challenge to the status quo.
6. Weaken strictly hierarchically-based authority and grade-based involvement in decision taking.

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7. Expand the population from which you want managers to take on a leadership role when it is called for. Let them loose to use it. Don't rule out anyone from being able to display leadership qualities and activities.
8. Spend more time managing what surrounds people in their work and less time in managing the individuals and their detailed work. If given a worthwhile and interesting job, the right context and a healthy environment, most people can largely manage themselves. Semi-autonomous self-managing teams are an alternative to strong hierarchical management control.
9. Recognise that the organisation's success comes from what is happening between people as much as what is happening within them. Improved system performance is informed by socially conscious disciplines as well as and possibly more so than psychological ones. Therefore, manage the spaces and gaps in the relational networks. Prompt and value conversations more than individual competence. Lighten the protocols that govern access and exchange.
10. Engage multiple perspectives when problems are complex or 'wicked'. And get help in identifying the right questions before deciding who can help with answers. Don't assume that it is your job to tell people the answer. Once leaders step into the management system as an assumed super-manager, they forfeit their authority and undermine their ability to perform a governance role on the system. Their ability to ask the appropriate questions of the system is compromised, both because they are personally involved in providing everyday answers and because they lose the objectivity that comes from an external stewardship perspective.
11. Don't just make managers accountable by telling them that they are accountable and by giving them responsible jobs: hold them to account practically for getting things right as far as possible, including improving the system, and do this at a management team level when appropriate.
12. Focus performance management energy on the system's workings and performance and how to improve it, as opposed to judging individuals using hierarchical authority. Allow the system to enter into conversations about improving performance.
13. Make appraisal more systemic by considering (i) how managers achieve things jointly with other managers, (ii) how they make it easier for other managers to be successful, (iii) how they improve their workers' environment in systemic terms, (iv) how they lead by challenging the status quo to make tomorrow better than today, and (v) how they seek and achieve continual improvement in their bit of the organisation.
14. Make the act of continually improving count for more than hitting fixed and arbitrary levels of attainment such as numerical targets. Improvement is more important to quality than achieving targets because it doesn't matter where you start, and there is no end. It is less hierarchical, less instrumental, and avoids the problem of gaming the system to achieve someone else's view of what matters and thereby collect personal rewards or avoid punishment, often at the expense of something else that is important.
15. Ensure that the role of specialists, inspectors, regulators, auditors, etc, is to work with, support and help managers and their organisations improve rather than to police them, measure them, catch them out and humble them.

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