



SIM 2015 / 13th International Symposium in Management

Towards an Agreed Body of Knowledge, Understanding, Skills and Expertise for Managers:

Managing in Turbulent Times

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to set out the state of knowledge and understanding to date on what constitutes the expertise of management, how this works, and what it is required to deliver in terms of performance, profitability and sustainability. There have been numerous attempts to clarify, define and codify this expertise. The contention is that there is a capability and understanding in specific activities relating to people, performance, profit, finance and organisation, that if understood, learned and implemented, set organisations apart from others, and deliver sustainable performance, both in steady state and also turbulent times.

This paper covers these issues from the point of view that it is essential to define and develop a professional body of skills, knowledge, approaches and expertise for managers and leaders. This is in order to establish the key deliverables and performance that can then be expected and insisted on.

This paper starts with a review of the immediate and present state of what management is and is understood to be. This is in order to define the foundation for developing and addressing key concerns of the present. From this it goes on to emphasize the lessons for the future and the actions that must be taken in order to ensure that the leadership, direction and management of organisations of all sizes, locations and activities, delivers performance which is sustainable and effective, to a much greater extent than at present.

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Peer-review under responsibility of SIM 2015 / 13th International Symposium in Management

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1. Management

It is necessary to start with some basic but clear and comprehensive definitions. 'Management' is a body of knowledge, skills and expertise which must be applied in ways demanded by the particular organisation in which the individual manager is working; and in ways demanded also by the particular environment in which activities are being conducted. The knowledge, skills and expertise required are as follows:

- achieving things through people;
- achieving things for people;
- making a profit and delivering performance;
- using scarce resources; and planning, organising, controlling and accounting for resources;
- improving and developing products, services, service and processes;
- identifying and assessing risk;
- coping with change and uncertainty.

Management is conducted in organisations; and organisations operate in their environment. Organisations may be described as: 'systems of inter-dependent human beings' (Pugh 1973); a 'joint function of human characteristics, the task to be accomplished and its environment' (Simon 1967). Organisations are therefore combinations of resources brought together for stated purposes. Organisations have their own life, direction, permanence and identity; and are energised by people, and their expertise, skills, talents and commitment. Organisations and the practices that go on within them, and the direction that is chosen for them, make a more or less universal contribution to economic, social, productive and commercially viable ('profitable') activity.

2. Achieving things through people

Achieving things through people is a key priority because no managerial activity takes place in isolation from staff and their expertise. Capabilities of people have to be harnessed in ways that are of value to the organisation; and their willingness to work has also to be engaged. This part of management expertise is therefore to engage, energise and harmonise the organisation's staff in pursuit of the stated goals, targets, aims and objectives. To do this effectively requires a knowledge and understanding of organisational, collective and individual human behaviour, with especial reference to how people act and react in particular situations and circumstances; and how people act and react in response to crises, emergencies and change.

3. Achieving things for people

Achieving things for people, in particular meeting and responding to the legitimate demands and expectations of customers, suppliers and shareholders, is the next key priority. Each of these groups have particular requirements of every organisation. These requirements must be satisfied or else the customers will go elsewhere, suppliers will seek other outlets for their materials, and backers will seek alternative organisations and ventures into which to put their funds.

Customers require confidence in the products and services on offer. Customers require that their demands for quality, durability and volumes of products and services are met. Customers expect to be able to return to the company or organisation for product and service upgrades, maintenance and repairs. The implication is therefore that successful organisations are managed for the long-term as well as to give immediate satisfaction.

Suppliers require steady and assured volumes of business; and so they will gravitate towards those organisations that deliver this. Again, the clear implication is the need to be confident that organisations being supplied will remain in existence over the long-term.

Shareholders and backers require assured levels of returns, both in share values and also in dividend repayments, as a prerequisite to investment; otherwise they will move their investments elsewhere.

Overall, achieving things for people is based on perceptions and understanding of expectations, assurance and permanence which, together with the delivery of good quality products and services, all add up to immediate and enduring confidence. Confidence in managerial terms is hard to define more precisely. The presence, knowledge and understanding of confidence is an absolute priority in achieving things for people; and it is also the case that, where confidence is lost or not fully assured, organisation decline quickly sets in.

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