Executive development: History lessons learned from Barnard

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to derive practical lessons from Barnard's less well-known contributions to our understanding of leadership, leadership development and executive education. The main contributions of this paper are the introduction of Bevir's logic to the leadership studies and revelation that Barnard might have established the early foundations of pragmatic leadership. The introduction of Bevir's logic from the history of ideas may be instrumental to overcoming biases toward historicism and presentism, which are latent, yet common in leadership studies. The recognition of Barnard's historical contributions to the conceptualization of leadership, leadership development, and executive education is significant. These contributions are not widely known because they are not a part of his well-known book The Functions of the Executive. Barnard has much to say about these issues and we should listen and heed his suggestions.

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1. Introduction

Executive development has become increasingly important in flat organizations with few opportunities for promotion and on-the-job learning of leadership skills (Baird, Briscoe, Tuden, & Rosansky, 1994; Humphreys, 2005; Zenger, Urlich, & Smallwood, 2000). Organizations, therefore, are searching for the best practices of how to design and implement executive development programs so that high effectiveness in learning and development is both insured and facilitated (Conger & Xin, 2000). Effective programs of executive development are valuable not only to their individual participants but also hold much value for their organizations in that they foster the development of an organizational culture supportive of business teams with emphasis on human and social capital (Vloeberghs, 1998).

Today, executive development has evolved into myriad university-based and corporate-based programs (Crotty & Soule, 1997). An organization's primary purpose in designing and nurturing executive education programs is to build leadership talent, as effective programs are likely to insure that executives acquire the necessary skill sets and become socialized to the values, mission, and vision of an organization (Ryan & Lane, 1998). These outcomes of executive education are instrumental for promotion of managers to more senior levels, as they facilitate the cultural processes of sharing the organizational vision across units and geographies (Vicere, 1998).

The success of executive education depends not only on executive acquisition of specialized knowledge and management concepts but also on their understanding how to be persuasive in organizational politics and culture, responsible in delegation, and decisive and creative in the generation of ideas. To be enhanced, these qualities of leaders require a careful design and implementation of programs for acquiring them in an effective manner (Lippert, 2001). While the primary historical credit for conceptualization and practice of executive development is given to Fayol, it is little known that Barnard (1938, 1939, 1948, 1958) provided some seminal insights on how to develop leader qualities through executive education and development.

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Chester Barnard was a business practitioner who started his career as an AT&T statistician in 1909 to become the first president of the NJ Bell Telephone Co. in 1927. His Harvard lectures held at the Lowell Institute in Boston were eventually published in 1938 as *The Functions of the Executive*, the seminal book of organization studies. Williamson (2005: 24) posits that Barnard was the first to introduce the "concept of cooperative adaptations accomplished through administration within the firm." In his second book *Organization and Management* published in 1948, Barnard explained how leadership is crucial for cooperative adaptations within the firm to occur. Is his view, cooperative adaptations refer to the followers' voluntary and coordinated change of behavior to accommodate the change initiative pursued by the leader.

The purpose of this paper is to derive practical lessons from Barnard's contributions to our understanding of leadership, leadership development and executive education. First, we examine his conceptualizations of leadership, and derive what lessons can be learned to enrich our understanding of leadership in contemporary studies. Second, we investigate Barnard's suggestions for leadership development and executive education and evaluate the lessons that can be informative to the current design and implementation of executive development programs. Finally, we outline how the main lessons learned from Barnard can provide a systemic and coherent analysis that can advance the theory and practice of executive leadership.

Issues of executive development become particularly salient in times of major institutional and organizational changes when scholars tend to revisit classics in search of the best historical practice to develop managers. By revisiting management classics like Barnard's works, as the privileged works of the past, and by exploring the cultural meanings of management phenomena that they convey, we strive to develop an alternative, *post-hoc* approach to inquiry of executive development. This specific approach to historical interpretation may facilitate new "possibilities of reinventing theory, reinterpreting evidence, and rediscovering voices and issues" (Kilduff & Dougherty, 2000: 778).

2. *Post-hoc* approach to historical interpretation

2.1. Post-hoc interpretation from historical meanings

As a part of an ongoing discussion on different ways of theorizing, DiMaggio (1995) suggested a historical, *post-hoc* approach to construction of management knowledge. This approach is based on the use of insightful inputs derived from the contributions of management classics. For instance, DiMaggio pointed to the Nobel laureate Herbert Simon as an outstanding example of a great scholar who developed a theory of administrative behavior incorporating Chester Barnard's insights. Simon's theorizing seemed to complement Barnard's practical insights because "Barnard proposed an analytical scheme for understanding the management process," while "Simon was pushing for inductive science in management based on Barnard's deductive scheme" (Mitchell & Scott, 1988: 367). Simon, however, left no code or schema to assist future scholars in interpreting the meanings conveyed by Barnard's works.

Scholars face substantive problems when decoding historical meanings conveyed by Barnard's works, although his texts, just like Simon's texts do, "conform to positivist conventions and, therefore, give the appearance of straightforward objectivity" (Kilduff, 1993: 13). Kilduff (1993) and Kilduff & Mehra (1997) pinpointed specific interpretative problems by demonstrating how the classical texts could be susceptible to deconstructive textual analysis (and thus their interpretation can be problematic). These post-modern revelations of the duality of objectivity and relativism in the interpretations of classics indicated that a shared logic of interpretation was needed. Recently, Bevir (1999) proposed a new interpretative logic that can be applied to the history of management ideas to facilitate the implementation of DiMaggio's suggestion.

2.2. Interpretative logic of deriving historical meanings

Management phenomena may convey specific cultural meanings, as shown by the evolving research on management fads and fashions (Abrahamson, 1991). The only way to acquire knowledge of how management phenomena evolve as meaningful cultural phenomena is through historical studies. In particular, the discipline of the history of ideas involves studying cultural meanings from a historical perspective, as historians try to interpret cultural phenomena in terms of historical processes (Bevir, 2000a).

The primary challenge that we face when acting as historians of ideas is determining what logic (i.e., forms of reasoning) is appropriate for studying the ideas/concepts of interest (e.g., executive development). Bevir (1999) argues that an appropriate logic to interpret classics should be based on Ludwig Wittgenstein's assumption that we share a "grammar of our concepts" (i.e., a common web of beliefs reflecting our shared traditions). The use of this logic cannot help us develop an historical account (i.e., how to uncover historical facts), but it can help us develop a normative account of reasoning (i.e., how to uncover specific meanings). In other words, normative reasoning grounded in an appropriate logic of interpreting classics can provide us a rational means to justify the meanings that we have uncovered and developed (Bevir, 2000b).

The meanings that can be uncovered rationally from classics are hermeneutic meanings (i.e., the author's expressed beliefs). These meanings are different from "both semantic meanings, understood in terms of truth conditions, and linguistic meanings, understood in terms of conventional usage" (Bevir, 1999: 27). Bevir (1999) claims that hermeneutic meanings should be equated with individual viewpoints (i.e., the assumption of 'individual proceduralism') that are not necessarily limited to those of the author (i.e., the assumption of 'weak intentionalism'). Rather, individual viewpoints can also be those of the reader, as long they are embedded in shared traditions, as common webs of beliefs about specific concepts and practices.

By opposing both objectivism (i.e., modernist logic of discovery) and skepticism (i.e., post-modernist relativism and irrationalism), Bevir (1999) carves a 'middle-of-the-road' path to focus on shared traditions that connect the author's intention and reader's interpretation in the process of uncovering historical meanings from the classic writings. Specifically, he posits that