

Managing – a never-ending Learning Process!

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The Manager Role is a unique Role

What makes the manager role so special is that its contents are generally undefined and must be given substance by each individual manager. Or in other words: It is a relative role that can best be understood in relation to the results obtained through managing! Based on commitment and interaction the manager role is developed in a relationship between the manager and the individuals the manager is set to manage, with management colleagues, customers and suppliers in addition to the people the manager is reporting to. The ability to develop good personal relations is an important prerequisite for cooperation, and every manager's challenge is to successfully engage and inspire the people involved to cooperate closely and fully develop their potential.

Another characteristic of the manager role is that it generally involves very little routine work, but it puts great demand on personal initiative and energy. The individual manager must decide own work priorities, choose the most important tasks to give attention to and also determine content and tempo in performing the work. Typical is also that the manager's work is characterized by great variation, and most managers will experience their working day as fragmented and "chopped up" in short, brief work sequences.¹

Learning in a Manager Role

"A manager who considers his or her management development finished, is not fully developed, just finished" it is rightfully asserted! It is the complicated and relative dependence of personal initiative, relations to other people and results obtained that makes learning in the manager role such a special challenge! And it is this relative dependency that makes a manager role a practical role primarily learned through the manager's own actions and experiences. Learning in the manager role means learning management skills, and these skills are gradually learned by trying alternative steps of action in a trial and failing process.

The Purpose of Managing is to assure Results

Managing means steering, and it is the steering responsibility a manager is expected to exercise. Steering is a natural and central part of the job. Like in a sailboat, "somebody" in the organization should have a firm grip of the tiller and know where the boat or company is headed. "Somebody" in the organization must take responsibility for navigating and steering – making sure that decisions regarding forward thrust is taken and that the course is corrected whenever necessary. For regardless of efforts, ambitions and goals, nobody knows the exact result - until it is obtained! Steering means learning how resources are used to influence results and how steering measures are used to move in the right direction.

The means – or “tools” – used in steering are goals and values agreed upon; goals to describe desired results, and values to describe the agreed framework within which to take action. With goals as targets to aim at, steering means constantly giving priority to use the relevant resources and see to it that the proper action steps are taken! The purpose of this is at all times to assure necessary action steps to keep the business on the planned course and within the company’s values.

It is easy to understand in theory that steering is based on giving priority - but for the practicing manager it becomes one of the greatest challenges in management. And it is the manager’s personal experience with giving priorities to actions in own management work that gives learning; not copying the prioritizing other managers do to meet their goals!

The Professional or Specialist Role is confused with the Manager Role

Many managers have qualified for a manager role through a professional role or a specialist role, but high competence and experience from this kind of work is not automatically giving management competence as such. Unfortunately, nobody becomes a good manager solely by being a competent professional with good results in the role of for instant a medical doctor, lawyer, economist, engineer or scientist.² On the other hand, a professional career can be a valuable stepping stone or a good starting point for developing a future successful manager role!

Prospective managers with background and competence from professional or specialist roles must accept the fact that management competence primarily is learned by practical experience, and they should therefore concentrate more on learning management by doing management work. Introducing result assurance within one’s own area of responsibility³ can be a simple step in the right direction for managers who want to obtain the planned results and at the same time improving management skills.

Managers fail to utilize their own Learning Potential

Unfortunately many managers miss the learning opportunities in their jobs by not realizing what their role is all about and directing their attention to other things than result assurance, personal initiative and good personal relations. The following describe situations where managers make it difficult to learn sufficiently and fast enough from their management work:

A Culture creating Obstructions to Managers’ Learning and Development

It is a paradox when managers insist that results are their top priority - but consistently develop a culture where results are not given a central position. Instead of focusing on result assurance they primarily spend time and energy trying to explain away results not obtained. As an effect of this we see a culture where managers choose to disregard important management tools like steering, goals end results.

Here are some explanations for such a choice: “It is difficult to manage somebody who don’t want to be managed”, “nobody likes to be controlled/steered” or “too much steering is dangerous or unwanted”. Other excuses may be: “We think differently”, “we have another ideology” or “we dislike putting too much emphasis on goals and results.” This kind of thinking fosters a culture where everybody in the company may be working hard, but where nobody has a solid grasp of the tiller – nobody is responsible for steering!

It is unfortunate that the concept of “steering” has a negative meaning for many managers and something they are set against. These people may in the past have seen managers misusing their power or have experienced negative “steering” by authoritarian and destructive managers. Such negative experiences may in many companies create a basis for a culture not practicing result steering, thereby denying management potential learning from their own results!

Another strange effect we often see in a culture where result steering is not taken seriously is the tendency to copy other managers and their actions. Professor Jeffrey Pfeffer from Stanford University describes⁴ how American companies reduce their personnel both in good and bad times. Even though the effect on results is unclear, this downsizing is primarily practiced because other leaders are doing it. “This is an example of how contagious management behaviour can be and how it spreads like “the flu” across companies” writes Jeffrey Pfeffer.

Wrong Steering Questions prevent Learning

With the question: “Why do we have deviations from goals?” managers set an unintended trap for themselves. “Why” unfortunately only takes us back in time⁵ and is only helpful to find explanations to what we know has already happened. However, it is not very useful when it comes to improving results and finding new steering actions – what the company must do to move forward!

The “correct” steering question when we have deviations from our goals is: “How do we get back on course?” What do we do in order to move ahead and achieve our goals?” “Why” we are off course is less important than “How” (by which means or actions) we can get back on course. It is from here and *forward* in time managers must have their focus – not from here and back to the past.

When it comes to steering, looking back is “history”. But there are strong forces trying to press managers and management teams to dwell into the past – on things that have already happened! Both private and public companies put strong demands on formal and informal result reporting, and great resources are spent looking back. “*What happened - and why?*” are typical issues. Unfortunately, however, comprehensive analyses and reports on what happened will most likely tell management very little about what to do to get better results for their company!

An even “worse” question dwells right around the corner: “Who is to blame”? Somebody must take the blame? This is obviously a relevant question when it comes to violations of law or in a court of law – but should not be asked in a normal management or steering situation. To avoid the question of blame it is common to dig even deeper into what has already happened and look for even better reasons, explanations and excuses. In this way managers rapidly put themselves on the defensive, and very little energy is spent on the most important issue – what to do to move the company forward!

How can Managers learn more from their Management Work?

In a busy workday full of practical problems, the idea of learning more from own daily management work may seem very theoretical and irrelevant. Is learning from performing the manager role really that important? Yes, it certainly is! Learning from own management work is a lifelong affair, and nobody but the manager him- /herself can take the initiative to this learning. Here are some tools which can be applied to secure both better results and better learning.

- **Prepare for a Manager Role**

”Experience is the best school master – but it is rather costly”, says a proverb. And for managers, learning from own experience and own actions is the only passable way to really master the manager role. To make this learning process less costly, there is all reason to be well prepared for it.

Today universities, colleges and other institutions offer management courses on all levels, and as preparation or supplement to a manager career such competence may facilitate learning in a real manager role. Obviously, managers well prepared with such a background should have an advantage when putting this theoretical competence into practice.

- **Clarify Result Expectations**

When managers involuntarily lose their job it often appears that they have had only vague understanding of the company’s result expectations to them. It turns out that they have clear contracts on their salary, pension, company car, possible bonuses, etc. but little effort is made to agree on and clarify the specific results the company expects these managers to obtain.

Most companies today have regular strategy and management processes, but here goals, budgets and strategies are to a very little extent used to clarify expectations by establishing personal result contracts for managers. The only “document” the managers are expected to be committed to is the action plan. This is, however, not a contract or agreement about obtaining results – but an agreement about doing activities!

Therefore, a good advice to all managers is to make sure they have an updated contract about result expectations. Take the initiative yourself to have regular result clarification meetings – both with the people you work for and with those who work for you!

• Ask for Feedback

Managers cannot by themselves decide how others judge their work, but they are quite dependent on knowing this to improve their work in the manager role. The simplest – but rarely used - method of finding out is to ask for feedback about the effect of own management work. Managers must learn to ask questions about own performance!

The questions may be:

What do I do right? What do I do wrong? Most positive? Most negative?

What happens to those who work for me? Any ideas for improvement?

These are simple and straightforward questions but not easy to get answered unless the manager openly asks for feedback and views on his/her role.

• Invite to Team Work

Managers can create an effective learning arena in the company by developing good team work. The advantage with team work is that it is a continuous learning process – both when it comes to increased competence in the team and the individual participant's personal growth and development. When a team works with clear goals it is easy to see how each individual's contribution influences the results. Do we achieve the results we want? Are we doing the right things – or not?

• Develop a Result Steering Culture

Result steering means to create a culture to ensure the company's results and at the same time developing better managers. The most important values in a result steering culture are:

- Willingness to take responsibility and be committed to the company's goals and values
- Be open about deviations from goals – not hiding or explaining things away etc.
- Be honest and frank – not lying, presenting incorrect or incomplete information, manipulating accounts/reports, blaming others, etc.
- Show compassion and respect for each other through participation and engagement

In a result steering culture there is an apparent connection between result planning, use of resources and the results achieved! The management's learning potential is dramatically increased in a result steering process – in contrast to only working harder and doing ones best. The manager role will also be special as it involves helping and cooperating with others to achieve the wanted results. Management means supporting and “being there” for the employees – not the opposite, as is common in other cultures.

1 Mintzberg, Henry: *The Nature of Managerial Work*. Harper Collins 1972

2 Boyatzis, Richard E.: *The Competent Manager*. John Wiley & Sons 1982

3 Folge, Terje: *Result Assurance*. Theses nr.5 Considium Consulting Group AS 2008

4 Pfeffer, Jeffrey: *Lay off the layoffs*. Newsweek, February 15, 2010

5 Watzlawick et al: *Change: Principles of Problem Resolution*. W.W.Norton & Co New York 1980