

# Educating the metamanager: a new breed of leader

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**P**eople working in organizations are all more or less familiar with the process of management and know something about the role of a manager. Some people even get to be managers!

There is no lack of books about management or the activities of managers or how management is best carried out and how managers should work to be more effective.

Terms such as “planning”, “leadership”, “controlling”, “organizing”, “motivating”, “communicating”, “team building”, “empowering” and so on have become almost synonymous with management.

However, there still seems to be a great deal of controversy about the quality of managers. For example, Australian managers are claimed by some researchers to have problems in areas like long-term thinking, leadership and entrepreneurial skills. They are often urged to manage more like the Japanese or to look to the USA for new techniques in management. On the other hand, managers from these countries, amongst others, do not escape being attacked for similar failures. Witness the fall of Enron in the USA and, more recently, the problems associated with internet group Livedoor in Japan.

Many managers rely for knowledge on attending seminars in which a guru from elsewhere is prepared to give the locals the latest “snake oil” on management. The droves of managers who attend are willing to pay big money to be fed the new knowledge and to be entertained by the multi-media presentations generally utilized.

While initially motivating, such urging and seminar attendances do not normally result in much change back at the work place.

## Learning to be a manager

There is more to managing effectively than is commonly assumed. It is a more complex activity than is often presented. Many of the people who give advice to managers on how best to manage (and this includes academics and consultants) have never managed anything of substance in their lives.

To learn how to be a manager, one must ultimately do the job rather than read or talk about the job. The good news is that experience can be assisted and enhanced by education and training before or during the on-the-job process.

We have many tertiary institutions now involved in the management education business and many training organizations and training consultants conducting management training both on and off the job. Organizations themselves are also recognizing the value of upgrading managerial skills and are prepared to do this through the use of short in-house programs. The strategic approach to training and development in some large enterprises has led them to run their own “universities”. (It needs to be said, however, that in most Western countries,

The author suggests including a “dose of the liberal arts” in the management education curriculum, in addition to the traditional teaching of disciplines such as finance, accounting, marketing and organizational behavior. This would produce metamangers, who would be more ethical, sensitive, wise, tolerant and intellectually fortified and thus able to rise above the “tradesman” or technical aspects of the job.



## “With so much attention being given to educating and training managers, why are we not producing better managers?”

80-90 percent of businesses are small. Yet it's mostly big-business employees and public sector employees who attend external education and training programs. Managers of small businesses tend not to attend formal training courses or, if they do, they are catered to by small business management associations or technical-level colleges.)

The concern in the great bulk of this education and training is usually about the administration of a business and its specialist functions rather than about management *per se* – thus topics like planning, finance, marketing, staffing and the like, tend to make up the bulk of the curriculum.

### Is management education and training effective?

With so much attention being given to educating and training managers, why are we not getting better managers? An enormous amount of effort has been expended over the past 100 years or so to understand management and the managerial role, so why are we so bad at putting to use what we already know?

This view is echoed by management writer Alistair Mant (1979) in his book describing his thoughts on the rise and fall of the British manager. He suggests that we do not need to spend any more on research into management but to put into action what we already know.

Even the products of our prestigious management education qualification course, the MBA, are often criticized for not measuring up to the outcome standard noted in the advertising brochures. Much of the seminal work on management produced by people like Gouldner, Etzioni, Woodward, Follet, Argyris, Jaques, Mayo, McGregor and others would be far better learned, appreciated and, hopefully, implemented, if read in their original form instead of in expurgated summaries in modern texts.

Despite the passage of time and the changing context of work, most of this material is as relevant today as it was when published. Admittedly it requires some adaptation as a result of context change but, by and large, the ideas and principles espoused have stood the test of time. I would even be so bold as to suggest that MBA students and managers at large would gain more insights into management by reading the 170-page book by Pugh *et al.* (1971) than many of the latter-day texts written mainly by the American or British academic fraternity and running to 600 or more pages each – a requirement to be considered “worthy”. As one example among many, I note a 959-page book on organizational behavior (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004).

On the positive side, our education and training of managers has come a long way in the past 20 or so years, but largely on the side of making managers better at the mechanics of administration rather than the broader aspects of management that usually determine, in the long run, managerial success.

We still consider the process and the job in much the same way as we consider a trade with readily identifiable elements and with a rational and sensible foundation upon which to operate in what could be called almost a “rote” or “pedestrian” fashion.

The major emphasis is on specialist technical functions and techniques and on “how we do it now” in marketing and finance and production and so on. The “management wood” gets overwhelmed by the “technical trees”. We confuse the substance of management with its working tools.

Even courses on organizational behavior, leadership and strategy do not seem to redress the balance. Technical disciplines and their quantitative and analytical elements still tend to



dominate the approach to management favored by new graduates of either MBA or executive development courses.

The dangers of such an approach were spelled out over 40 years ago (but obviously not heeded) by Clarence B. Randall, an American industrialist and presidential advisor, in his book describing management myths (Randall, 1962). He devotes a chapter of the book to the myth of the specialist and claims that unless the danger is seen in time, galloping specialization can bring any company to the brink of chaos.

We have created, and are creating, specialists rather than generalists and breadth at the top cannot be built on a foundation of narrowness at the bottom!

The major problem is considering management from a reductionist philosophical perspective. That is, it can be explained best by reducing it into its constituent technical parts and assuming that knowledge of these parts will enable us to understand the whole. However, this ignores the very complex nature of the manager role and the need to see it from a holistic perspective that would highlight the meta level that should be a prime focus of management education.

The opposite of reductionist ideas is holism – the idea that things can have properties as a whole that are not explainable from the properties of their parts. It is my contention that study of the liberal arts would contribute to a holistic view of management and the manager role.

### A possible answer – metamangement!

The specialist approach is fine as far as it goes, but if we stop there we are failing to recognize the dimension that has the potential to really lift managers out of the realm of expertise in technical disciplines and into the realm of expertise in what I call “metamangement”.

Metamangement is a higher or second level of management – as metacommunication is a higher or second level of communication. It transcends technical expertise and basic skill in planning, controlling, organizing and directing and involves application of a whole range of relatively intangible and qualitative elements that are easier to recognize and observe in action than to describe and learn. The metamanager must be a skilled and practical humanist able to offer meanings and value judgments on all levels.

Thus, the second-level attributes that are needed to operate as a metamanager are:

- senses and feels as much as thinks and reasons;
- copes easily with uncertainty and ambivalence;
- has a sense of what living is all about and the values and beliefs that unite (and divide!) people;
- is willing to change direction and practice depending on new circumstances;
- initiates change as well as reacting to change – a feeling for history and progress;
- uses judgment based on future possibilities as much as past experience;

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- treats people at all levels with empathy and understanding – is culturally and emotionally aware;
- is articulate and literate on a range of social issues as well as business itself;
- demands high achievement from himself or herself as well as others;
- is success oriented but socially and ethically concerned;
- demonstrates wisdom, tolerance and intellectual fortitude;
- stands firm against threats to quality, performance and required results;
- does not let day-to-day concerns distract from the long-term mission;
- applies the analytical, creative, persuasive and administrative components of the job with equal facility and sensitivity; and
- understands what it means to be authentic and acts accordingly.

Some people are natural metamangers and can rise above the mundane aspects of the job to provide the sort of inspiration and leadership that is needed for continuing organizational success.

From anecdotal evidence, some excellent examples of CEO metamangers are Rod Eddington, recently of British Airways, Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, Steve Jobs of Apple, Andy Grove of Intel and Michael Chaney, recently of Wesfarmers in Australia.

The typical approach favored by education and training institutions and by in-house trainers produces “technicians” with knowledge of the functions of business and organizations in general and often specialist technical expertise in one of these functions: human resource development, marketing, accounting and finance, production planning, information processing and so on.

They rarely produce metamangers even when the course work includes units on leadership, organizational behavior and the like. Even these so-called “soft” units are also taught from a techniques perspective which ignores the fact that the issues addressed do not easily submit to logic, reason and objective analysis. The teachers do get it right when they preach contingency management – answers depend on circumstances!

### How can we produce metamangers?

Clarence Randall stated that the remedy to galloping specialization is top managers with the breadth of vision only a liberal education can provide.

He and others contend that exposing aspiring and incumbent managers to more liberal arts courses would go a long way toward introducing the intangible and qualitative elements that are missing from traditional management courses.

Thus basic, and in some cases advanced, studies in sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, literature, philosophy and even comparative religion would give these people insights and understanding about the second-level attributes that are necessary to be a metamanager.

For example, study of Iago’s role in Shakespeare’s *Othello* would give invaluable insights into the effects of naked ambition and organizational intrigue. A knowledge of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam would provide an understanding of many of the cultural aspects of Asian society which are necessary to do business successfully in Asian countries. Alfred North Whitehead’s *Adventures of Ideas*, Daniel Bell’s *Work and its Discontents* and Sophocles’s *Antigone* are other examples of material that would help form a liberal arts curriculum.

So, what do we do? It is time to build management education programs, including MBAs, around a core of liberal arts subjects as well as traditional “what it is and how you do it” subjects or to allow student managers the liberty of pursuing some of these management tributaries as electives or as research alternatives.



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We have tended to separate management from the mainstream of life and set it up as a unique entity with its own jargon, rituals and rites.

Organizations of all types and the managers who work in them are part and parcel of the broader social system. Therefore, it’s important that they incorporate knowledge about society and its functioning in their decisions – knowledge that should be made accessible to them through liberal arts courses taught as part of any formal management education program.

Management is more an art than a science but in our efforts to make it more scientific we have ignored the arts legacy of the world, which would give substance to the artistic side of management.

Each manager must have (or make) an opportunity to undertake the broad cultivation of mind necessary to correct and overcome the imbalances of performance that are created by specialization. The relationship between the liberal arts and management was explored many years ago by Goldwin and Nelson (1960), who made a plea for providing executives with opportunities for a liberal arts education. The book they edited contains articles by then top managers in industry and education who explore the type of leadership that is needed to handle the complex affairs of business. In addition, it gives the names of institutes that sponsored liberal education programs for executives and samples of the booklists used in such courses.

One so named, the Aspen Institute in the USA, still runs executive seminars on what they now term “values-based leadership” (see [www.aspeninstitute.org](http://www.aspeninstitute.org)). In this seminar, participants come together to learn from each other and from some of the greatest thinkers of all time. They discuss philosophers and social theorists, revolutionaries and voices of conscience, historical figures and contemporary minds. They learn how to identify what others believe and why, gaining a deeper understanding of their own values and how to communicate their goals and beliefs. I would suggest that MBA programs in particular could benefit from inclusion of such material.

Developing metamanagers will not be as easy as teaching people how to market goods and services or to operate a computer or to plan strategically but it would be worth the effort. Not the least of the difficulties would be to convince managers or MBA students, who typically have an analytical and quantitative mind set, that liberal arts study would be beneficial to their practice of management. For example, I have seen classes on business ethics phased out for lack of student demand when, in recent years, we have seen numerous cases of corporate fraud and corruption.

Every manager usually begins his or her working life as a specialist, but the fact that a person qualifies as a specialist is no guarantee that when he or she becomes a manager he or she will be able to perform ably the task that needs to be done.

The task entails more than just the commonly accepted process and people elements – to be truly effective and to operate at the metamanagement level requires acquisition of the knowledge and skill noted earlier in this article.



If we can produce metamangers then we need have no worries about the future improvement of our businesses and the criticisms of our managerial performance should diminish.

As an example, the metamanager would be much better equipped to do business in Asia than the traditional manager. Business in Asia is built on intangibles like trust, respect, personal rapport and breadth of cultural feeling rather than on technical skill – the intangibles that the metamanager has a fine instinct to apply.

Metamanagers have what I call an “essential essence” which gives you confidence in what they do, how they do it and where they are going. What managers and management educators need to do is recognize the fact that such people manifest the attributes of the well rounded, well read and liberally educated (formally or informally) person and insist that management education programs contain at least some content of a liberal arts nature.

Clarence Randall, noted earlier, was also a contributor to the book by Goldwin and Nelson (1960). In his contribution, titled “The cultivation of the mind” he writes (p. 127):

The truly educated man who lives worthily at no time permits material considerations to dominate his life. When serving a corporation, he never forgets that there are values that transcend tons of production and dollar value of sales. He knows that the end of life is not the production of goods as such, but an effort to make it possible for more human beings to pursue the good life, as they conceive the good life to be.

Randall claims that the rewards for living worthily will go to those who, by cultivation of the mind and illumination of the spirit, reach the highest level of inner growth.

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