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Management, Information and Power

**A narrative of the
involved manager**

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Dedicated to my mother
with gratitude and fondness

The desire to know and the craving for explanations will never bring us to thoughtful questioning. Invariably the desire to know is already the concealed arrogance of self-consciousness which relies on fabricated reason and its reasonableness. Wanting to know does not want to relinquish hope in the face of that which is worthy of thought

Martin Heidegger

It is of cardinal importance that one should abolish the true world. It is the great inspirer of doubt and devaluator in respect of the world we are: it has been our most dangerous attempt yet to assassinate life.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Contents

Preface	viii
Acknowledgements	xi
1 Introduction: why and how to think?	1
2 The manager: involved in-the-world	22
3 Information: as understanding	48
4 Management: and <i>manus</i>	82
5 Power: the network of force relations	118
6 Management information: knowing, explaining and arguing	149
7 Implications: so what and what now?	176
Selected bibliography	191
Figure and table index	202
Index	203

Preface

This book started more than a decade ago. While working as a systems analyst, trying to develop management information systems, I became aware of the difficulty of answering seemingly obvious questions such as: “What is management information?”; “How do managers actually use it in doing whatever they do?”. The world of management theory seemed so obvious and clear cut. I remember distinctly how excited I was on completing my MBA and having this sense of now knowing it. I could analyze, articulate, describe, suggest, solve, and a lot more. Yet, my everyday work seemed messy, unanalyzable, unarticulatable, unsolvable, and so on. No matter how hard one tried to be the manager that the theory said one ought to be, these eloquent models seemed to crumble in the face of the everyday ‘getting the job done’. Getting the job done seemed to make the ideal increasingly elusive. Not only this, most of the managers for whom I tried to develop management information systems, talked about this sense of elusiveness in getting ‘it’ all together. Buried in the concerns of getting the everyday job done, absorbed in pushing it through, the world seemed to resemble a brawl in the bar rather than a chess game.

My initial reaction was that there seems to be a need to expand, or alter, our understanding of the nature of the everyday world of the manager in the organization. The more I immersed myself in a diverse body of literature, the more it became clear to me that there was a particular world view that informed the majority of management thinking; a world view deeply rooted in the Enlightenment, especially in the Descartes dualism. At the centre of this world view seemed to be the idea of the *thinking, rational, purposive manager*. Looking back at this realization, it is now apparent to me that this phenomenon of a particular world view dominating the discourse in a particular field is clearly not unique to management thought. However, what is unique, in my opinion, is the degree to which this world view seems to dominate in spite of numerous challenges, and in spite of an extensive and sustained deconstruction of the Enlightenment project that forms its basis. Why is this so?

Is it the pervasive *moral* legitimacy that this idea of a thinking, rational, purposive manager has? Is it that the alternative of an ‘unthinking’, ‘irrational’, ‘purposeless’ manager is just too ghastly to contemplate? Would managers lose their good name if they were to

acknowledge that they are not the skilful planners and decision makers which they are made out to be, and which they, from time to time, believe themselves to be. To acknowledge that they are rather skilful opportunists that mostly depend on gut feel, that collude, coerce, and do whatever is necessary to get-the-job-done. Would it be too dangerous to contemplate this possibility? Is the image of a thinking, rational and purposive manager more true because it is more virtuous? Surely this cannot be an argument as Nietzsche (1973, p.39) aptly points out:

No one is likely to consider a doctrine true merely because it makes happy or makes virtuous.... Happiness and virtue are no arguments.... Something might be true although harmful and dangerous in the highest degree; indeed, it could pertain to the very fundamental nature of existence that a complete knowledge of it would destroy one – so that the strength of a spirit could be measured by how much truth it could take, more clearly, to what degree it needed, it attenuated, veiled, sweetened, blunted, and falsified.

What is the alternative then? This book is an attempt rearticulate the idea of the manager; the manager *in* the world; not as the thinking, rational and purposive manager but as the *involved* manager. The manager that is always already *in-the-world*. The manager that cannot escape the messiness, the ambiguity, the play of force, in a world that cannot be un-entangled. Everything is already caught up, and tied to a whole, that has no logical beginning, no obvious logic, no simply present solutions, or ways out. There is no striating it out, or shaking it out, once and for all. The straightening it out and the shaking it out will itself become caught up, tied to, in many unexpected ways – where untying at one end may be tying at a whole lot of other ends. This is a world of *being-in*, of gut feel and thinking on your feet – in this world success is defined by your ability to see the gaps, grasp the opportunities and translate them into possibilities. This is the world of the *involved* manager; this is the image I will seek to present. It is not a neat and eloquent story; it is not a prescriptive story; but hopefully it is a real story – and this is why it is worth telling.

Heidegger will help us think through what it means to be an involved manager *in-the-world*. We are not *in* the world in a way a table is *in* the world. We are *involved* in a world that is present even *before* we think of it, plan it, or decide it. Gadamer, Wittgenstein and Heidegger will help us think through how this involved manager understands the world and acts

in this world already known. They will help us understand what it means to make sense of the world. They will show us that the involved manager understands the world and knows how to act in it even before thinking, even before reasoning, and deciding. It may even be that what we call deciding, are merely acts of reifying what was already known in doing in the world. Ashby will help us to argue that control based on representational knowing will always lead to a zero-sum game; that every layer of externally located control will have to be paid for with a loss of flexibility in the lower level. Varela will help us think through what it means to get the job done in-the-world where we have collapsed the Taylor dualism, the layers; when we reunite thinking and doing. Foucault and Glegg will help us think through the network of power relations that are always already present in understanding and doing in the world. We will see that power cannot be escaped; that it is always already present. Finally, we will see how these concepts of the involved manager, information as understanding, and power, provide us with a useful framework to think through what management information means in-the-world of the involved manager.

This book is not finished. It is a rough draft. However, it needs to get out now. I suspect that many of the ideas in this book will relate to things currently being said by others – if the ideas, arguments and remarks in this book do not bear ‘a stamp which mark them as mine’, I do not wish to lay any further claim to them. Let me conclude this preface with some thoughts from Wittgenstein. His concluding paragraphs in the preface of his *Philosophical Investigations* is a clear reflection of how I feel about this book: “I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of their own. I should have liked to produce a good book. This has not come about, but the time is past in which I could improve it.”

Lucas Introna
London, 1997

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