



Book Review

Stefan Tengblad: *The Work of Managers—Towards a Practice Theory of Management*. Oxford University Press, 2012

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Introduction

This book, edited by Stefan Tengblad, Professor of Business Administration at the University of Skövde, Sweden, provides a broad and valuable insight into managerial work and behavior by reviewing previous studies in the field of management and work behavior (MWB) research and presenting a number of new empirical studies conducted in different settings in Sweden and Norway. Although these contemporary studies were conducted within Scandinavian countries, their findings are relevant beyond this context. The presented studies provide insight into similarities and differences in management actions and styles in different organizations and changes that have occurred in the work and behavior of managers at both the top executive and middle manager levels since the classic studies within the MWB field were carried out.

The book is dedicated to Sune Carlson (1909–1999), Swedish Professor of Business Administration, for his pioneering work in the study of managerial work. It has 32 contributing authors and consists of a total of 18 chapters organized into six parts according to the themes addressed. Part One comprises two chapters outlining the framework of the book. The chapters provide an overview of the MWB approach studying formally appointed managers and focusing on the content of managerial work by collecting behavioral data about individual managers.

A practice perspective on management

In the first chapter, Stefan Tengblad points to the poor correspondence between management theory and practice. There is a gap between the idealized image of managers and their work appearing in the management literature and the everyday life of managers. In the literature and training programs, management is presented as a highly ordered and controllable activity. Every problem has logical answers. Formal planning, clear goals, and step-by-step techniques are emphasized. But the theoretical models presented are often useless in dealing with the reality managers meet in their daily work where they have to cope with divergent demands, complexity, and uncertainty. A main point in the book's introductory section is that the disparity between classic management theory and observed managerial practices is not due to poorly developed management practices. The observed practices of managers must be seen as functional rather than dysfunctional. It is the theoretical models that are not sufficiently based in managerial practices.



The book's approach to the study of leadership is referred to as the practice perspective on management. The aim of the book is to contribute to the further development of a practice-based management theory. This approach sees management as work practices conducted by managers in their everyday work and management not as an applied science but as a craft requiring artistic skills. Management research should look at the activities and behavior of managers handling everyday challenges. Theorizing about management should be based on such studies of management in practice.

The book provides a critical view of traditional management education with its focus on formal knowledge and analytical skills. Managers also need skills and tools that the theoretical models based on scientific reasoning presented in textbooks and classrooms do not provide. They have to learn to cope with complexity, ambiguity, fragmentations, and emotional stress.

In the second chapter, Stefan Tengblad and Ola Edvin Vie give an overview of 21 significant studies within the field of MWB research, including Sune Carlson's study, *Executive Behaviour*, published in 1951. A conclusion we can draw from these studies is that managerial work is highly hectic, fragmented, and complex. Managers have to deal with hard work pressure, uncertainty, and ambiguity. They experience constant interruptions and spend much time responding to immediate problems. This leaves them with little time for formal planning and decision-making based on thorough analysis. According to Carlson (1951), the chief executives he studied appeared more like puppets in a marionette theater than orchestra conductors. Furthermore, Tengblad and Vie note in their review that many recent studies have increasingly emphasized the emotional, political, and symbolic aspects of managerial work and revealed some unofficial and informal aspects of managerial work. The studies they present demonstrate that management is fundamentally an interpersonal and interactive process. Managers are involved in many relationships and spend a high proportion of their time communicating and exchanging information with people around them.

Managerial leadership

Part Two contains three chapters discussing leadership in managerial work.

In Chapter 3, Ingalill Holmberg and Mats Tyrstrup investigate the leadership activities of middle managers in a telecom company. Based on narratives that exemplify typical situations that characterize the work day of these managers, they reveal that everyday leadership is mainly about handling unforeseen events. Everyday leadership is an event-driven rather than an intention-driven activity. The ability to deal with challenging incidents becomes a primary characteristic of a competent leader. Leadership takes the form of interventions and requires improvised actions. Thus, improvisation skills become essential in managerial work. According to the authors, these findings imply that an adjustment is needed in the training of managers.

In Chapter 4, Stefan Sveningsson, Johan Alvehus, and Mats Alvesson discuss managerial leadership. The chapter provides a critical discussion of leadership literature and summarizes popular thinking about leadership. Based on interviews with managers, the authors ask whether leadership, in the way it is normally presented in the leadership literature, really exists in managerial work. A heroic approach linking leadership to vision-building and strategic planning and a post-heroic approach seeing managers leading by

listening to and communicating with followers have dominated contemporary views of management leadership. The authors claim that assumptions about leadership in heroic and post-heroic approaches to leadership do not capture what managers actually do in organizations. They argue that more mundane activities that managers are involved in may be regarded as leadership. They believe that a mundane form of managerial leadership gives a more realistic description of what managerial leadership is in practice.

In Chapter 5, Gary Kokk, Sten Jönsson, and Airi Rovio-Johannson provide a close-up view of the strategic work practice of senior managers by analyzing audiovisual recorded sequences from a top management team meeting in a Swedish-based multinational industrial company. The case presented gives insight into the decision-making process of a management team in a case related to a market opportunity and shows how the team members cooperate in solving a complex and nonroutine issue that had to be resolved at the executive level. The chapter provides insight into collective sense-making and sense-giving discussions within the team and illustrates how team members make different frames visible to each other. Furthermore, the study shows the use of multiframing as a social tool involving different competences and perspectives in the assessment of the situation. In conclusion, the authors emphasize that the use of multiple frames enhances the effectiveness of team discussions, and skilful framing increases a group's ability to manage complexity.

Operational managerial work

Part Three presents studies of operational managers in health care, construction, and research and development (R&D). The presented studies show that managers in health care and R&D emphasize supporting employees, while managers in construction focus more on fixing problems.

In Chapter 6, Rebecka Arman, Eva Wikström, Ellinor Tengelin, and Lotta Dellve describe the work activities, time use, and stress of lower level health care managers. The chapter begins with a review of findings from earlier studies of managerial work in health care organizations and theories used in understanding how a complex and fragmented work situation is handled. Their own study provides insight into the activities of health care managers, the time spent on various activities, the managers' contacts, their approach to handling everyday stressors and boundless work conditions, and their legitimacy work.

In Chapter 7, Alexander Styhre draws attention to the construction industry where there has been very little systematic study of management practices. Styhre describes this industry as characterized by a combination of loose informal couplings between a variety of actors and tight couplings between activities, and the work of construction site managers as characterized by a large degree of unpredictability and improvisation. The site managers have full responsibility for construction projects and have to deal with complexity, various disturbances, and stress. Their work requires a leadership practice that may be described by Charles E. Lindblom's (1959) concept as "muddling through." In addition to managing planned activities, site management requires ad hoc solutions to many unanticipated problems. Such muddling is thought to be the most effective leadership by site managers.

In Chapter 8, Ola Edvin Vie focuses on the behavior of middle managers in R&D departments. His starting point is that special conditions in knowledge-intensive firms



require their managers to adopt special management styles. R&D managers are in charge of expert employees that value autonomy and dislike command-and-control management. This leads them to exercise a supportive management style where care and consideration are important leadership characteristics. The R&D managers prioritize interactions with their subordinates and exercise care by listening, chatting, exhibiting empathy, and so on. Thus, Vie's study provides good insight into how leaders exercise their personnel responsibility in practice.

Administrative managerial work

Part Four presents four studies of administrative managerial work at the executive level within Swedish municipalities, the university sector, and larger private companies. While much of the management literature concerns the private sector, we here find three chapters that deal with top-level management in public organizations.

In Chapter 9, Anne Cregård and Rolf Solli describe the context that shapes the special management conditions of high-ranking municipal managers and show how these managers handle this context as they try to fulfill their management roles. We gain insight into the tasks and difficulties that municipality managers have to deal with as well as their management strategies, and we get to understand the importance of experience. The municipality managers are described as the rubber band that holds the political, administrative, and professional domains within municipal organizations together.

In Chapter 10, Leif Jonsson reports findings from four studies seeking an increased understanding of the managerial function of the Swedish municipality director. This managerial function links the political and administrative spheres in municipalities. The studies explore the contents of this managerial function. They show how municipality directors allocate their time, what type of activities they are involved in, the communication forms they use, their power resources, how they use these resources to influence political decision-making, and how they gain acceptance for new ideas.

In Chapter 11, Lars Engwall and Carin Eriksson Lindvall describe the complex position of universities between state, professional, and market forces and the movement in academic governance system toward a more market-oriented system. Based on this, they look at the changing working conditions of, and increased demands on, university leaders. They refer to findings from Swedish studies of two levels of university leaders: vice-chancellors and department chairs. These studies show that vice-chancellors identify strategic planning as their most important task and exhibit a negative attitude toward control systems. Department chairs are faced with many expectations and it is impossible for them to meet all these expectations. Their main complaint is that they lack time for long-term planning.

In Chapter 12, Stefan Tengblad summarizes the results from his replication of Sune Carlson's study of CEOs. Tengblad points to the differences between his study and the studies of Carlson (1951) and Mintzberg (1973) with respect to the theoretical basis and refers to several changes that his study shows have taken place in the work of CEOs. The CEOs Tengblad studied in 1998 and 1999 had more working-alone time, traveled more, had a more decentralized leadership style, dealt more with financial issues and less with functional activities, and met with other actors than the CEOs in the two previous studies. But Tengblad argues that these changes do not imply a radically different kind

of managerial work. The concept that he finds to best describe the role of managers is *expectations handler*.

Managerial work in small businesses

Part five presents three studies on managerial work in small businesses. In such businesses, top managers are more involved in operational work.

In Chapter 13, Henrik Florén and Joakim Tell are concerned with the growth of small firms and why some firms outperform others. They look at the relationship between managerial behavior and small-firm performance. Their research comparing the activities and roles of top managers in fast- and slow-growing manufacturing firms reveals more similarities than differences in the behavior of managers in these two groups of firms. They present their interpretations of these findings and offer some possible explanations, one being that the growth of small firms depends on factors other than the behavior of the top manager.

In Chapter 14, Anders Nilsson, Mats Westerberg, and Einar Hächner summarize findings from their studies of strategic managerial work in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). They analyze three episodes of strategic management within different enterprises applying Giddens's structuration theory. Their findings show how power, influence, symbolism, and emotion are present in strategic managerial work. Further, their findings suggest that the intensity in strategic discourse as a result of environmental conditions and belief in the business idea may be crucial to an understanding of important aspects of strategic managerial work in SMEs, and that the duality between structure and action is a factor characterizing strategic managerial work. Processes are to a large extent agency-based when the current situation of the enterprise is not deemed viable and changes of structures are necessary. The authors conclude that structuration theory, as a frame of reference for understanding strategic managerial work in SMEs, is a promising research avenue that can supplement and enrich more instrumental or empirical approaches.

In Chapter 15, Ethel Brundin and Leif Melin focus on managerial practices in family-owned and owner-managed firms. They describe some main characteristics of family-owned firms that influence managerial practices. These include a long-term business perspective and a strong emotional commitment to the firm. This chapter shows how ownership shapes and influences managerial practices, especially managers' strategic practices. In family-owned firms, strategizing takes place on several arenas where nonfamily members are excluded, and strategic practices in such firms are often strongly interlaced with emotions. Generally, this chapter reveals the role emotions play in managerial practices. The authors present illustrations that show how managers' display of emotions, and the interpretations of these displays, can affect the managers' strategic intent.

Toward a practice theory of management

The book's final section consists of chapters discussing methodology, narrowing the gap between theory and practice, and summarizing the book's practice view of management.



In Chapter 16, Rebecka Arman, Ola Edvind Vie, and Håvard Åsvoll first address methods used in managerial studies and refer to their characteristics, criticism they have been exposed to, and challenges associated with them. Further, they investigate the use of shadowing methods closer. The authors discuss how researchers can analyze and make sense of data produced from shadowing by using the abductive research approach. Based on their own experiences of shadowing, they provide insight into both the difficulties and the challenges in using shadowing and the opportunities and advantages of shadowing. They also offer advice to researchers planning to use this method.

In Chapter 17, management scholars who participated in a panel discussion at the Academy of Management's 2009 Annual Conference in Chicago reflect on reducing the gap between theoretical management research and management in practice, and how to best gain an understanding of managing and managers. The contributors argue for the use of methods such as observation and shadowing in that it brings researchers close to everyday managerial work. Further, they stress the importance of taking contextual factors more seriously. Useful methods for studies of context are also suggested. Summarizing the contributions, Stefan Tengblad is optimistic about the possibility of building a strong, practice-based management theory.

In Chapter 18, Stefan Tengblad argues for the need for a theoretical understanding of management based on the study of actual management practice. He emphasizes that we need to educate students about the real world of management. To be able to do so, we need to learn more about how managers work and deal with the reality that meets them. In this conclusion chapter, Tengblad outlines a foundation for a practice-based theory of management and summarizes how the various studies presented in the book contribute to the practice perspective. This foundation is built on 10 theses that describe the context and characteristics of managerial work. Central is that management takes place in complex environments with a multitude of often conflicting expectations, and that managers' work is characterized by uncertainty, fragmentation, and a hectic work pace. Further, managerial work involves extensive interaction, is emotionally intense, requires symbolic actions, and involves participation in many informal activities.

Concluding Comments

This is a book I have appreciated reading and that I recommend to everybody with an interest in management and leadership. The book is in line with a practice turn we can see in management and organizational theory. There is much to learn from the field of MWB research when it comes to studying practice. Some of what I see as the strength of this tradition is the wide range of methodological approaches to the study of managerial practice, with an emphasis on observation, shadowing, and conversations as well as a critical discussion of survey method.

A well-meant critical commentary to the book concerns the fact that some of the empirical chapters appear very descriptive. They present empirical data that provide insight into managers' activities and workday, but contain in some cases limited theorizing related to the empirical data presented, although the book's introductory and concluding sections contain a call for theorizing from primary data of managerial practice. The discussions are primarily concentrated toward the end of the chapters and are in some

cases mostly a summary of findings. There seems to be a potential for more theorizing. There is reason to ask ourselves what prevents more bold theorizing.

As a final comment, I would like to highlight that the studies presented in this book clearly show that managers' work is very much about relationships, communication, and interaction. In light of this, we need future studies that focus less on the behavior and practices of managers and more on the interaction managers are involved in; studies that look closer at the interaction between managers at various levels, and between managers and subordinates and managers and external stakeholders; studies that can capture the contributions of the various participants in the interaction managers are involved in, and capture how these participants affect each other and are interdependent on each other.