



PROGRAMME: MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

MODULE: Strategic and Change Management

WHY DO WE MAKE MANAGEMENT SO DAMNED HARD?

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Managing a business of any size is a hell of a job. The world is a complex and dangerous place. Change is constant. There are surprises around every corner. And there's unending pressure to perform through good times and bad.

Companies are complex, too. And the bigger they get the more complex they become. Coordinating their efforts was always a challenge. But today, many firms sprawl across the world, so there are facilities, people, and many other factors to worry about. Just-in-time production, a growing amount of outsourced work, and intricate networks of suppliers all add logistical challenges. Relations with governments and regulators are of increasing concern. Investors, analysts, unions, environmentalists, lobbyists, and a host of other stakeholders all demand attention. And of course, there's always the need to drive innovation, improvement, and cost cutting; to adopt new technologies and ways of delivering world class quality, productivity, and customer service; and to survive the daily deluge of seemingly trivial matters which may quickly explode.

Executives face a stream of dilemmas with no easy answers. Their to-do lists keep getting longer. They're torn this way and that by people with competing agendas, and bogged down by meetings, video conferences, phone calls, e-mails, and so on. Many of them also have grueling travel schedules. Time is their scarcest resource.

It goes without saying that any war on complexity must be fought with a determined drive for simplicity. That in itself must be an ongoing effort with targets, projects, champions, regular reviews, and whatever else it might take. But on its own, it's not enough. For there's an over-arching problem of managers themselves creating conditions in which complexity flourishes. They introduce ideas and activities that often don't line up, won't produce the results they expect, and lead to unnecessary work, waste, and costs—*all as a result of how they manage.*

With few exceptions, they'd do well to ask themselves:

Why they so readily make life even more difficult, with management ideas, practices, and tools that in theory should help them, but in reality make little sense?

Why they keep searching for new answers to their management questions, when the answers they need are probably already well known?

Why they develop strategies that are either too vague to be useful, or too complex to explain?

Why they're such suckers for buzzwords and bullshit when they have so much on their plates, and so many people expecting guidance from them?

These are questions that have bothered me for the past 30-odd years. During this time, I've read countless management books, scholarly journals, and popular articles, and talked to many of the most prominent thinkers in the field, trying to learn three things:

1. How should firms compete?
2. What causes some to succeed over the long term, and others to fail?
3. Why do some executives produce better results than others?

You'd think by now the answers would be clear and widely accepted. But apparently not. For the quest for new ones is accelerating, not slowing. Or, at least, the amount of stuff published on these matters is growing by the second. And someone is grabbing all those books off airport bookstands!

Whatever you want to know, a Google search will instantly yield tens of thousands, if not millions, of links to possible answers. Authors of business books and articles slice and dice management issues into ever narrower opinion. The internet gives voice to anyone and everyone who has anything to say about strategy, structure, organizational behavior, people management, change management, analytics, leadership, IT, systems thinking, six sigma, values, culture, presentation skills, or whatever.

With all this “expertise” to hand, it’s little wonder that firms are jammed up by initiatives, or that managers are totally shell-shocked from being bombarded with information and advice about their world and their craft. The exploding volume of management flim-flam has made *managing* increasingly difficult.

Executives get in their own way because they’re always looking for another answer to their management questions—a quick fix or “silver bullet”—when the answers they need are right under their noses. And to compound their problems, they radically over-complicate things, and cause much of the mess and muddle that bogs things down. They also continually introduce new initiatives—or allow others to do so—while seeing few to a sensible end. And even as the pile deepens, they chop and change their priorities so fast that their people haven’t a clue what’s going on or what they should focus on.

Put differently, only by getting back to basics, simplifying things, lightening your load, and sticking to one view of how to manage will you ever make the progress you want.

I’m willing to bet that, right now:

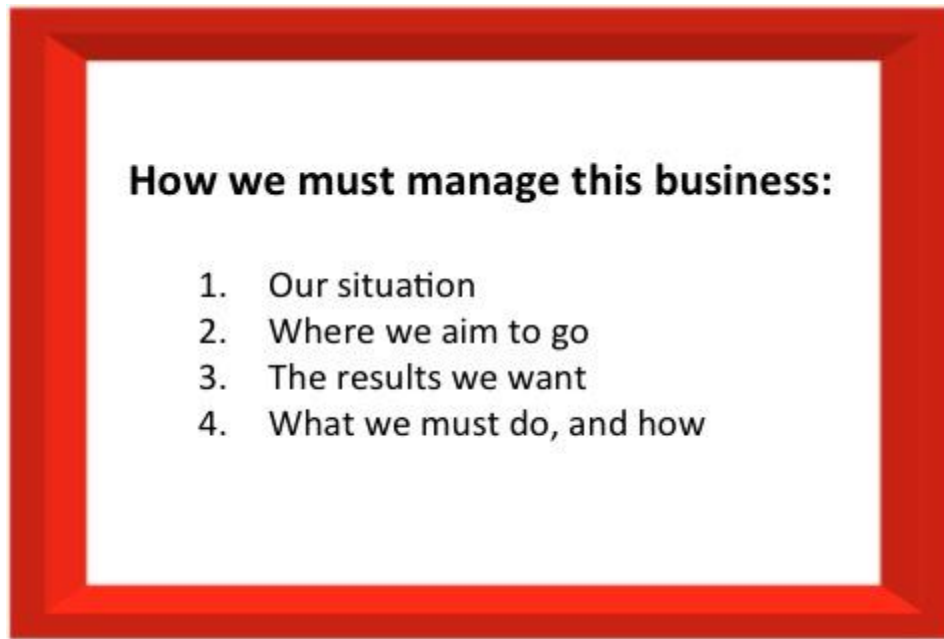
- you’re using management-speak that you don’t fully understand
- your strategy is a mystery to many or maybe most of your people (and possibly to *you*, too!)
- you struggle to turn your strategy into action
- your priorities are not really what you should be focusing on
- your people are doing things for reasons that aren’t clear to them, and don’t make sense to them
- they’re expected to use tools that they don’t grasp
- there are too many projects in your firm, many of which should never have been started, and many others past their sell-by date
- quite soon, you’ll latch onto some new management idea, and launch a flurry of new initiatives to replace the ones you haven’t properly finished
- *there is a better, simpler way to get the results you want.*

Sound crazy? A lot of nonsense? Well, think about this:

1. When I ask company employees why their firms' strategies don't work, the number one reason is, "We don't know what the strategy is." Many say, "We don't *have* a strategy" (they probably do, but no one told them or they just weren't paying attention).
2. Companies love strategy documents. And usually, the thicker the better. I read these things for a living, and when I get to the end of many of them I have no idea *who is supposed to do what*. They're heavy on detail that should have been left on a functional manager's desk. A clutter of thoughts, lack of logic, poor structure, big words, and long sentences make them murky. So they say too much, but explain too little.
3. Management tools are mostly not all they're cracked up to be. They're as fashionable as hemlines. As Bain Consulting's periodic tools survey shows, usage and satisfaction scores go up and down. Besides, very few tools are truly new, based on sound research, or proven across industries, companies, or even functions; and what works at one time, in one set of conditions, may not work when things change. The catchy language that management "thinkers" use to draw attention to their recipes should be cause for suspicion.
4. When a new tool is adopted, others that are already in place tend to stay there. So the pile grows. Each new idea creates a blast of activity, and sucks time, attention, and money from others. It becomes a nightmare trying to figure where to focus, how to integrate all this work, and what comes first, second, or third. And it becomes impossible to know which intervention caused what result.
5. Explaining strategy is a never-ending job. I once heard a senior manager ask former GE chairman Jack Welch, "How often do you have to tell people what your strategy is?" Said Welch: "You have to explain it, and explain it, and explain it, and explain it, and explain it, until you drive yourself crazy. Because nobody is paying attention!"

So where to from here?

For starters, clarify your own point of view about what you're trying to do. Think of strategy as the frame through which people see your company's future. What exactly do they need to know? Answer: *not much*. In fact, the four things here tell the whole story.



Framing your strategy – keep it simple, or you won't make it work!

Get this story right, and you have a good chance of success. Get it wrong, and you make a really bad start. So keep it simple. Keep it short. Cut to the chase. Maybe, at last, your team will get the message.

And what comes next?

First, a few tools, carefully chosen, well understood, and relentlessly applied so you and your people become expert in their use. Toss out anything you don't really, really, really understand; anything you can't use properly; anything that doesn't produce the results you expect. And any duplicates.

Second, make a list of all the initiatives currently in your organization. (Some will be in use, others just lurking somewhere, and probably at some cost.) Ask: what do we really need to do? Which of these initiatives helps us? What should we kill right away? Then, zap as many as you can, fast, and slam the door on new ones.

Third, keep reminding yourself—and drum it into your colleagues—that whatever approaches, methods, models, tools, or processes you go for, *all work hinges on*

conversation. On what you talk about, how you do that, and who you involve. So make sure you talk about the right things, in the right way, to the right people.

Above all, understand that everything follows from your point of view. And *the surest way to cut complexity is by avoiding it in the first place with your ideas about managing*.

Life is hard. Managing is one of the toughest jobs around. There's no point in making it harder for yourself.

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