Interimmanagement. Profiel van een professie in ontwikkeling.

Wichard, Geesina Maria

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Summary

Introduction
A new profession of change agents has been developed in relation to organizational problems. Members of this profession temporarily take on the role of manager in a client-organization, and accordingly are called interim managers. Initially (in the seventies), they mainly functioned as troubleshooters in declining organizations struggling for survival, but nowadays they handle a large variety of organizational problems.

Although interest in interim management as an instrument for tackling complex organizational problems has been increasing strongly, up to now, the methods of working used by interim managers are largely unclear. This study relates to this lacking insight; the methods of working used by interim managers are its subject. They were explored in a practical research project.

Research design
Objective of the field research mentioned above was to explore the methods of working used bij interim managers from the perspective of problem solving (i.e. interim managers are seen as problem solvers). This objective led to three complementary research questions.

1. How do interim managers handle processes of solving organizational problems?
2a. How do interim managers diagnose organizational problems?
2b. Is an action plan in accordance with the final problem description executed, or does this action plan in the end turn out to be (partial) unworkable?

ad 1.
The perspective of problem solving was specified on the basis of bounded rationality. Two concepts of bounded rationality were distinguished: procedural rationality and political rationality. These concepts were used as ideal-type constructions, calling attention to different dimensions of the process of problem solving. The concept of procedural rationality has a one-sided aim at efficiency. It relates to issues such as the technical-economic quality of the solution to be implemented, and planning and control of the process of problem solving. The concept of political rationality is restricted to the political processes which are part of problem solving. It gives an idea of possible actions directed at manipulating those political processes and at gaining legitimacy and acceptance. Both dimensions were considered to be present in a process of solving a complex problem. Following contingency models of problem solving, I considered the dominance of one dimension over the other as contingent on the intensity of controversies related to the problem in question.

ad 2.

Within the perspective of problem solving, I paid special attention to the methods of diagnosing used by the interim managers, and to the relation between their diagnosis and the actual interventions in the client-organization. This focus on diagnosis was chosen because in general the perception of the problem and the resulting description of the problem - the diagnosis - affect the course of the process of problem solving to a considerable extent, while at the same time, specification of the problem itself can be problematic. A specific type of organizational research that concentrates on problem specification is called Organizational Diagnosis. The theoretical discussion of this instrument was restricted to the concept of *closed loop control*. Within this concept, Organizational Diagnosis aims at preventing two potential risks: the chance of solving the wrong problem, and the chance of a failed implementation. The methodological requirements that go with this objective were summarized in the V6-model. Proportional attention to the different requirements stated in this model can be ensured by (1) using systems of research questions, (2) methodical working, and (3) paying attention to the legitimacy of the diagnosis in the eyes of the people concerned.

The ways in which interim managers deal with organizational problems were explored in a multi-case study. Data collection took place in three stages.

1. Two interim managers were *shadowed* during their daily activities as interim managers. The resulting observations functioned as a prologue to the empirical research. They were my first introduction into the field of research and were aimed at getting a rough impression of interim management at first hand.
2. I interviewed 44 interim managers about their methods of working in their most recent assignments as interim managers.
3. 14 members of organizations, in all belonging to 7 former client-organizations, were interviewed about their experiences with interim management.

I analyzed the resulting data on common features of methods of working used by different interim managers. Because I took the context in which the interim managers operated into account, findings of this study could be useful in theory-building about the circumstances in which interim management can contribute to effective and efficient problem solving in organizations.

Some results

Four interim management roles emerged from the results of the interviews with the interim managers:

- the interim manager as a caretaker manager;
- the interim manager as a project manager;
- the interim manager as a crisis manager;
- the interim manager as an organizational development manager[111].

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[111] In this study, organizational development is not used in the ideological sense of O.D., but in a

The category of caretaker managers is the smallest one. In contrast with the other categories, capacities of the interim manager as a change agent are not asked for by the client; they are called in only to fill a temporary gap in the management of the organization. Project managers mainly are involved in the first part of problem solving; the decision-making process. In fact, nearly the entire interim management assignment could be seen as a diagnostic research. The methods of working these interim managers use are consistent with the idea of project management, leading to a prominent place for the concept of procedural rationality in the processes of problem solving.

Crisis management is by far the largest category. It does not only encompass objective crises, in which the short-term existence of an organization is in jeopardy, but also subjective crises, in which a collective sense of crisis exists in the organization while the organization's short-term existence is not in danger. Organizational development differs from crisis management in the intensity of the felt need for organizational change; in the former case a collective sense of crisis is absent. This distinction between organizational development and subjective crisis is a rather ambiguous one; I concluded from the interviews with members of former clients that it is better to speak of a continuum.

The main similarity between a crisis manager and an organizational development manager is that both primarily are called in to *tackle a* problem, and less to make an analysis of the problem. Often, others already have diagnosed the problem at hand, frequently resulting in ideas for a strongly deviating new design of the organization. Influenced by various factors, such as already existing frameworks for problem solving in the organization, pressure of time, and their own interest as entrepreneur, these interim managers seek quick convergence to implementation (at the expense of divergence), and accordingly present themselves as energetic and decisive.

Notwithstanding already undertaken organizational diagnosis, crisis managers and organizational development managers also diagnose the problem themselves. This diagnostic research takes place in an iterative process in which diagnosis alternates with interventions. Systems of research questions are hardly used by the interim managers. Specification of the problem and the choice of a problem solving direction are largely determined by their previous experience as (interim) manager, and by already existing ideas in the organization.

The problem solving activities of both crisis managers and development managers mainly relate to the formal management infrastructure, which appeared to be important from four different points of view: (1) it is part of the problem to be solved by the interim manager; (2) as far as present, it is used as an instrument for specifying the problem; (3) the management infrastructure is used as an instrument for management of meaning. For example, working within the new management infrastructure is expected to contribute to a new, matching attitude ; (4) control of the process of problem solving (partly) takes place through the management infrastructure, the interim managers reject the concept of procedural rationality, they strive for maximum room to move.

If a collective sense of crisis is absent, and therefore there is no urge for quick convergence in the organization, the legitimacy of the role of the interim manager as a problem *solver* and of his directive management style diminish. Members of the organization expect the interim manager to take the role of a counselor, and a confrontation arises between the ideal of the interim manager (quick convergence), with an emphasis on the concept of political rationality, and the ideal of the client as principal, with an emphasis on the concept of procedural rationality. In these cases, the search for a balance between both ideals seems to be a trial and error process.

The results of my research show that interim management is not a miraculous power. Crisismanagers and organizational development managers are called in to *solve* complex organizational problems. These problems mostly require the interim manager to implement fundamental changes in the entire organizational design, including organizational culture. However, members of organizations are disappointed about the embedment of these organizational changes, their disappointment especially relates to processes of cultural change. Often, the progress of these processes stagnates after the interim manager has left. Crisis managers and organizational development managers appeared to be faced with a paradox: with regard to those organizational problems for which interim management from a theoretical point of view seems to be very suitable, interim managers lack the facilities for a well lasting result because of the temporariness of their presence. Therefore, I concluded interim management to be a paradoxical profession.

At the end of my study I briefly commented interim managers on their apparently preferred way out of the paradox stated above. The comment, as well as some corresponding recommendations, was given from the perspective of further professionalization of interim management and related to succesively: (1) the friction between expectations and practical possibilities; (2) the introduction of the interim manager in the organization, and (3) diagnostic research. Lastly, I added some recommendations for the benefit of an ongoing discussion within the professional body of interim managers about both the existing and the desired image of the profession.