

Managing to abstraction

Even as we are learning classic management theories, our brains are busy embedding the essential data deep in our long-term memory banks, minus irrelevant details like, for example, whose original idea it was anyway.

Report by **Laurie Robinson** and **Jan Francis-Smythe**

Many managers will be familiar with the proposition that conceptualising is one part of the experiential learning cycle¹ that consists, firstly, of concrete experiences; then observations and internalised reflections; followed by the formation of abstract concepts and generalisations; and finally active experimentation in new situations. However, a key objective of this article is to persuade you that, for managers, conceptual thinking is much more important than this. Indeed, it is argued that an individual's ability to perform some key conceptual operations is a critical success factor for a career in management.

But before beginning to explore the reasoning that lies behind these assertions let's consider two questions:

- What happened to all the more formal, academic theory that you became familiar with during your training and education in management?
- How does knowledge of this scholarship help you to discharge your managerial responsibilities?

If you are typical of the overwhelming majority of established, senior managers you will be hard-pressed to identify a significant occasion when your decision-making has been guided by direct reference to a particular management theory. In addition, even if you are able to recall the names of some academically respected theoreticians, together with the name of the theory that made them famous, you will be hard-pressed to provide a succinct explanation of their respective theories.

Let me provide you with an illustration. Think about Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg and Douglas McGregor. What is the name by which each of their respective theories is usually known? Can you succinctly describe the key elements of each of these theories?

If you cannot complete these tasks to your personal satisfaction, you may take comfort from the fact that another key objective of what follows is to explain why the ability to recall such information is neither necessary nor, perhaps, even desirable.

Relevant experiences

For managers whose substantive role includes responsibility for operational issues, rather than purely long-term, strategic planning matters, the evidence regarding the basis of their decision-making is clear and unequivocal. Managers make the overwhelming majority of these decisions by utilising expert recognition processes². They frequently describe this with terms such as experience, instinct, intuition, or common sense³.

By these means, an experienced manager identifies the key characteristics of the situation that is of concern to them. Then, from their data store of relevant experiences, they retrieve a small number of potential responses and, almost instantaneously, they are able to select the most viable option for implementation.

When circumstances are similar to, but not identical to, any previous situation that they have experienced, the manager will deconstruct a number of previous experiences and reconstruct these, until they create an approach that is potentially viable³.

Where the situation is completely beyond the manager's experience and even this kind of deconstruction and reconstruction is unable to identify a viable approach, their response is to seek advice and guidance from their fellow practitioners, rather than to consult academic theory³.

The evidence is that even in relation to an individual's most difficult organisational and personal challenges it is wholly exceptional and genuinely rare for a manager to overtly consult academic theory³. In fact it is so rare that the majority of managers are unable to identify a single occasion, over an entire career, when they have done this.

Indeed, in the genuinely rare and wholly exceptional circumstances where a minority of individuals have overtly consulted academic theory, there is almost always a structural impediment, such as confidentiality, that has prevented their collaboration with fellow practitioners³.

All in the mind

So what happens to all the theory that managers are exposed to during their training and education? When, in

the light of their recognition-based decision-making, managers are asked to explain the role that academic theory plays in their approach to managing, they will frequently assert that it 'must' exert a subtle, covert, subconscious, or even subliminal influence over them³. Whilst it would be easy to dismiss this as 'wishful thinking', there is good evidence to suggest that these assertions may actually be true!

Indeed, if the narrative of managers' decision-making explanations are analysed in detail, it frequently becomes clear that, in fact, they had a good, informal understanding of the theoretical models that are relevant to the challenges that they were discussing³. Thus, the inability to 'name' either a theory or a theoretician should not be taken to imply a failure to understand the theory in a more generalised, more abstract, more conceptual way.

As an illustration of this consider the example of the senior manager who was unable to name either the relevant management gurus or the name by which their particular model of leadership is traditionally known, despite the fact that there had been a formal organisational commitment to these particular managerial 'norms': Indeed, the manager's inability to recall these details occurred despite the fact that every manager had received training in relation to this particular model and its application across the whole organisation, at the instigation of the new chief executive.

However, this is not to say that the manager concerned had no clear understanding of the implications of the organisation's adoption of this model for its approach to management.

Consider also the example of a group of managers who demonstrated a clear understanding of the proposition that managerial effectiveness is enhanced when they adopt a flexible approach that is both determined by and dependent upon the individual employee; the precise nature of the challenges that are being faced; and the wider organisational circumstances.

Although each of these individuals could have referred to the academic theoreticians Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard and their model of 'situational leadership', the reality is that they did not do so.

Getting the gist of it

In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that managers who attend lectures during the course of their part-time MBA studies also adopt behaviour that is consistent with this kind of generalised abstraction rather than focusing upon the precise replication of the theoretical details.

Once these individuals have grasped the 'gist' of any theoretical input, their attention tends to turn to both the implications of the new information and the potential implementation issues³. Indeed the evidence is that this occurs to the point that they stop listening to the rest of the lecture.

For insights and understanding regarding what may be going on, we need to turn our attention to the scholarship regarding the human memory system. The first key insight is that the placing of any experience into the long-term memory of a human being involves a process of 'chunking', elaboration and encoding⁴.

The more extensive the elaboration and encoding, the more connections there will be





between the new experience and the existing data store of experiences. This, in turn, increases the potential for relevant information to be easily retrievable. In effect, this is the revision process for an examination at work. The more an individual goes over the information the more likely they are to be able to recall it when it is required.

A second important aspect of this scholarship is that the human memory is an 'adaptive' system⁴ that over the evolution of humankind has developed a whole series of useful adaptations and features. A key aspect of this was the emergence of a 'gist' based memory system. This

frees human beings from the tyranny of being constantly bombarded by a huge deluge of trivial facts. Think actor Dustin Hoffman as Raymond Babbitt in the film *Rain Man*.

In addition, 'gist' based memory provides us with the ability to see the patterns that both provide a broader, more strategic

picture and enable us to generalise in a meaningful way. For example, the study of chess players⁶ has shown that the key difference between an experienced Grand Master and a novice chess player is the ability of the former to achieve high levels of abstraction, to detect groupings that are significant and to develop a strategic analysis from the confusion of the positions occupied

by the individual chess pieces.

Thus, an individual's ability to conceptualise, to form abstractions and to grasp the 'gist' of information, rather than to focus upon the details, would appear to be some of the essential prerequisites to appreciating both the relevance of that information and the breadth of its potential applicability.

A repertoire of concepts

So what are the implications of this for managers? Well firstly, it would be to appreciate that the key professional requirement is not the appropriation of academic theory and models per se. In addition, it would be to also understand that neither is it to simply acquire a range of tools and techniques that would inevitably form an important aspect of managerial competence.

Rather, it is to recognise that a key aspect of a manager's professional calling is to participate in the difficult, relentless, lifelong task of abstraction, elaboration, encoding and 'chunking' that will underpin the process of building a repertoire of concepts that will be held in their long-term memories.

Thus, from this perspective a manager's primary task becomes that of continuously absorbing ambiguous and equivocal environmental information and to subsequently process this to a sufficiently high level of abstraction that dynamic groupings can be formed and strategic meanings detected.

By this means each experience will also be organised and consolidated into the structure of an individual's long-term memory in the way most likely to facilitate its subsequent retrieval, and good managerial 'moves' would become almost instantaneously apparent.

This analysis also suggests that when confronted with your most significant managerial challenges you should not turn to your favourite text book expecting to find a tailor-made theoretical solution. Rather your gaze should fall upon the concepts that both underpin and are embedded within the theory that you will find there. Of course, there may be other less challenging occasions when a prudent practitioner may choose to 'return to theory' as a means of both replenishing and refreshing their personal repertoire of concepts.

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Further Information

Information about management models and management gurus is available to CMI members at www.managers.org.uk/managementdirect