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MANAGING

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MANAGING

What is it that managers actually do? This has to relate to what the unit gets done, the actions that it takes—whether to produce a product in a company, deliver a baby in a hospital, or head up a study in a consulting firm—but in the sense of changing directly the way these things get done. Key here is that the manager's involvement is not passive. This is not about sitting in an office and giving orders, ("Joe, ship twenty of those to Acme") or making judgment on those actions. Deeming is not doing. Nor is it about designing strategies, structures, and systems to drive other people. All of that is controlling. In the doing role, the manager gets personally involved in those actions, "hands-on": he or she becomes part of the designing of actions that change the unit's output.

- Delays in the delivery of food to the refugees brought Abbas Gullet into one camp to investigate, and a complaint by a refugee about a camp manager brought Stephen Omollo into another camp to meet with a representative of the refugees.

When the time came some years ago to redesign Pampers, Proctor & Gamble's most important product, the chief executive of the whole company headed up the task force. When Johnson & Johnson faced a crisis after someone tampered with a few of its Tylenol packages, it was the CEO who headed up the response effort (Bennis 1989). These examples suggest that **there are two aspects of the doing role: managing projects proactively and handling disturbances reactively.**

Managing Projects Managers choose to head up projects themselves, or to join others on them, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is *to learn*: to inform themselves about something they need to know. Other times it is to *demonstrate*—that is, manage actions to encourage others to take action, or show them how to do so. And most commonly, perhaps, managers involve themselves in projects because they are concerned about the *outcomes*. Thus, in the Pampers example, the CEO may have acted personally to find out more about the product and its customers, to demonstrate project management skills, or else—likely in this case—because the project was so important that the CEO simply felt he had to lead it.

- Jacques Benz, Director-General of GSI, was an active participant in a meeting about a software platform being developed for the French Post Office. After listening for some time, he commented, "There's a choice to make"; later he gave some advice; and at the

> end of the meeting, he pushed for what was needed at the next meeting. Asked why he attended, Jacques replied that the project was setting a precedent for the company, "the beginning of a strategy." At Greenpeace, doing meant not only taking actions but also "staging events" (in the words of its executive director), in which the senior managers were sometimes involved. "Hugging trees" was a common expression here. In the case of Brian Adams at Bombardier, doing, dealing, and linking all came together. He searched for problems—anything that could have impeded getting that plane off the ground on schedule—and then set out to resolve them.

Of course, few managers can take personal charge of all their unit's projects, even all the key ones. But the suggestion in some of the literature that managers should "do" nothing—doing being dismissed as micromanaging—stems from a sterile view of the job: the manager on a pedestal, out of literal "touch," simply pronouncing strategies for everyone else to implement. As reported by an executive in the motorcycle business: "The Chief Executive of a world famous group of management consultants tried hard to convince me that it is ideal that top level management executives should have as little knowledge as possible relative to the product. This great man really believed that this qualification enabled them to deal efficiently with all business matters in a detached and uninhibited way" (Hopwood 1981:173).

This might work fine in a simple world. Ours, unfortunately (actually, fortunately), is a messy one. So managers have to get out and find out what's going on, and one sensible way to do this is to get involved in specific projects. The projects benefit from the managers' nerve center information, while the managers learn their way to new strategies. **Strategies are not immaculately conceived in detached offices so much as learned through tangible experiences** (more on this in Chapter 5). Put differently, projects don't just execute strategies; they help to establish them in the first place, as in the example of Jacques Benz just cited. Managers *off* the ground often don't learn—and thus turn out to be dreadful strategists.

The last chapter described managers as "jugglers" who get involved in many projects. For one chief executive of my earlier study, during the week of observation I noted several, concerning public relations, possible acquisitions, setup of a new overseas manufacturing facility, resolution of a problem with an advertising agency, and so on.

With all sorts of responsibilities, most managers cannot allow themselves to focus on one project—that "magnificent obsession" noted earlier from Noel's study (1989). But there can be important exceptions—for example when the unit is in crisis or is facing a magnificent opportunity. And then there are the project managers, such as Brian Adams at Bombardier, whose job focuses on one project.

For most managers, however, a variety of projects demand attention. Since these tend to proceed in fits and starts anyway, with many delays, the manager can work on each intermittently, occasionally giving it a boost and then turning to other concerns until another boost later becomes necessary. Marples described this with an apt metaphor:

> The manager's job can usefully be pictured as a stranded rope made of fibers of different lengths—where length represents time—each fiber coming to the surface one or more times in observable "episodes" and representing a single issue. . . . A prime managerial skill may be the capacity to keep a number of "issues" in play over a large number of episodes, and long periods of time. (1967:287)

Handling Disturbances If managing projects is largely about initiating and designing proactive change in the unit—essentially exploiting opportunities—then handling disturbances is about reacting to changes forced on the unit. An unforeseen event, a problem long ignored, the appearance of a new competitor may precipitate a disturbance, and a correction becomes necessary. "Management is a contingency activity; managers act when routines break down, when unexpected snags appear" (Sayles 1979:17).

- Alan Whelan's day at BT, as described earlier, was largely one of dealing with what for him was a major disturbance—the failure to get a sign-off on a large contract. Brian Adams of Bombardier had to intervene with a "problem supplier" of the airplane, and Abbas Gullet faced a crisis in the camp hospital, due to the inadvertent firing of its head nurse. (All three days are described at length in the Appendix.)

As noted earlier, in the words of Farson, as managers advance to senior positions, they "deal increasingly with predicaments, not problems." These "require interpretative thinking . . . [because of] paradoxical courses and consequences. Alas, predicaments cannot be handled smoothly" (1996:43), as we discuss in Chapter 5 under the labels of conundrums.

Why must the manager be the one to respond? Aren't others in the unit there to do that? Sure, and they often do. But some disturbances require the manager's formal authority, or his or her nerve center information. And others link to concerns that no one else in the unit can appreciate—the reaction of a key stakeholder, for example. Moreover, problems often degenerate into disturbances precisely because they have fallen between the cracks: no one in the unit has taken responsibility. So the manager has to do so. Hence, research has indicated that "leaders have more influence during periods of crisis than during non-crises periods" (Hamblin 1958:322). Returning to the Johnson & Johnson story, in the words of the company's chief executive, who "took charge immediately" after poison was found in some of those Tylenol capsules:

> I knew I had to and I knew I could. . . . I knew the media. I was a news freak, and I'd dealt with the networks several times. I knew the heads of news, who to call, how to talk with them. . . . I was in this room twelve hours a day. I solicited advice from everyone, because no one had ever dealt with this kind of issue before. It was brand-new. . . . We put together the new packaging overnight practically, when it would have normally taken two years. (in Bennis 1989:152–154)

There is no shortage of reported stories about disturbances that arose because of incompetent or at least neglectful management. Fair enough, much of this time. Less discussed, but equally worth noting, is the other side of this coin: that disturbances occur naturally in every organization (as in this example). In fact, **the effective organizations may be not only those that avoid many disturbances but also the ones whose managers deal effectively with the unexpected disturbances that do arise.** Indeed, the more innovative the organization, the more likely are disturbances to occur unexpectedly. The organization that doesn't take risks may avoid all disturbances, until the one that sinks it in the end. So judge the manager by the response and not just by the event.

- When a boat overturned on Lake Victoria, causing almost a thousand deaths, as soon as he heard the news Abbas Gullet (as he described to me) called the Tanzania Red Cross office in

> Dar-es-Salaam. Realizing that they were unprepared for this and that in N'gara he was relatively close to it, Abbas collected nine other Red Cross people, grabbed what supplies they could—body bags, stretchers, disinfectants—and headed there by road, arriving one day after the accident, the first NGO on site. They stayed two weeks, working long hours, arranging for body recovery, setting up a morgue in a nearby stadium, and helping the bereaved families.

One other aspect of disturbance handling merits mention here. Sometimes a manager substitutes for someone in the unit who is ill, has quit unexpectedly, or otherwise cannot do the job. Here the manager engages in the regular work of the unit. But since he or she is disturbance handling—filling in by exception—this should be considered part of the job of managing.

There are times, of course, when managers simply choose to do some of the regular operating work of their organization: the pope leads prayers; a hospital chief does clinical work on Fridays; Catherine Joint-Dieterle organized museum exhibitions herself. Perhaps they simply enjoy this work and would otherwise miss it, in which case it is no more managing than is a weekly game of tennis (at least without a client). But there may be managerial reasons behind these activities, too: the pope may be acting as figurehead, and the hospital head may be keeping in touch.

To conclude this discussion of the doing role, Chester Barnard has written: "Executive work is not that of the organization, but the specialized work of *maintaining* the organization in operation" (1938:215). It sounds right; the tricky part is distinguishing one from the other.[27]

Dealing on the Outside

Dealing is the other side of doing, its external manifestation. Sometimes it is called "doing the deal" or "wheeling and dealing" (although these

[27] Braybrooke has written, "[As] one investigates, one seems to discover that an executive can be said to do something clearly identifiable only when he is doing something that in a larger or more perfect organization would be done by a subordinate, or, in other words, it would seem that the more specialized the role of leadership becomes, the more difficult it is to say what a leader does. For in a perfect organization, would not every specialized power be delegated to some specialized functionary? The man at the top would be left with nothing, or what seems to approach nothing, to do. He would simply approve the decisions of subordinates; in a smoothly running organization, he would never have any occasion to disapprove" (1964:534). Remember this when we get to the perfect organization that runs smoothly.

suggest the too-common disconnection of the dealing from the doing, as in the CEO who does the deal—negotiates the acquisition—and then dumps its ill considered consequences into the laps of others). Managers do deals with outsiders, such as suppliers, but also with other managers inside their own organization.

- As Doug Ward noted about the CBC: "This place has become very entrepreneurial, much more deal oriented," with a philosophy of "If you can help me, I'll help you." His proudest "done deals" seemed to have been his replacements of weak staff, involving considerable negotiations, not only with the individuals in question, but also with the managers of other CBC units willing to take them.

There are two main components of the dealing role: *building coalitions* around specific issues—sometimes called *mobilizing support*—and then using these coalitions together with established networks to *conduct negotiations.* I shall discuss them together.

Much doing requires dealing: to get projects going usually requires considerable negotiating—with suppliers, customers, partners, government officials, and many others. But there are also deals that are primarily external, as when a corporate CEO works out a stock issue with investment bankers, or is called in to close the negotiations on a union contract. Sayles has written that "sophisticated [middle] managers place great stress on negotiations as a way of life" (1964:131). But so, of course, do senior managers:

- As head of Hawkshead Films, Carol Haslam had to put together projects across TV networks, even around the world, pitching ideas to her potential clients and convincing them of her firm's ability to execute them. This was a particularly intricate process, involving a great deal of connecting and juggling. As director of the Global Express program at Bombardier, Brian Adams had to negotiate all kinds of arrangements with the partner/suppliers, to ensure smooth flow in designing and building the airplane.

Managing partners of consulting firms as well as chief executives of some high-technology firms, such as a Boeing and Airbus, often act as salespeople to secure contracts with customers. Here they are carrying out what is considered to be operating work in most other industries, but, as noted at the outset of this chapter, sometimes only they have the