2 Management as a common sense construct

Introduction

During the early 1960s, the British government considered setting up a Business School similar to those at Harvard, MIT and elsewhere in the US. In making his contribution to the discussion, J.H. Smith (1960), then one of the UK's leading industrial sociologists, argued strongly for the inclusion in the syllabus of a course on the sociology of organisations. Those being prepared for senior roles in organisations, he asserted, needed to be exposed to an objective, scientific understanding of the social factors influencing the practice of management to complement explanations given by Management Science, Economics and Psychology. The centrepiece of the proposed course was the consideration of 'management roles and their determinants (technical, economic)'. ~~Forty~~-odd years later, reflecting the passage of time and changes in Sociology's conception of itself, Keith Grint (1995) repeated the appeal but this time more in terms of the need to understand the nature of power in organisations. Once again, the character of the management role was to be central. Although much in Sociology and the sociology of organisations has changed, it seems the criticality of the function and role of management remains a ~~constant~~ pre-occupation.

To position our discussion of senior and executive management, this chapter will take the general notion of 'management' as its point of departure and develop an approach based upon the framework outlined in Chapter 1. To do so, it draws inspiration from Egon Bittner's classic paper 'The Concept of Organisation' (Bittner 1965). By pointing out the resources which the sociologist uses to understand organisations are the same as those which members of the organisation use to form their understandings, Bittner, following the line of argument we set out in Chapter 1, suggested if Sociology wishes to offer a technical description (such as those in various accounts of 'bureaucracy') to capture the characteristics of the rational organisation of activities in enterprises and elsewhere, the features it includes in its description will reflect the features which members of the organisation include in their common sense constructions of the same rational organisation. Whilst the sociologist's depictions will be directed to illuminating and resolving sociological considerations and problems, members of the organisation will be concerned with their own. Bittner proposed

the linkage between the sociological construct and the construct used by members of the organisation points to a hitherto unexamined sociological topic, namely the concept of rational organisation as a socially organised common sense construct.

In studying common sense constructs, Bittner warned it would be important to ground the investigation in three ways. We must be prepared

> to treat every substantive determination we shall formulate as a case for exploring the background information on which it in turn rests . . . *and describe the mechanisms of sustained and sanctioned relevance of the rational constructions to a variety of objects, events and occasions relative to which they are invoked*.
>
> (Bittner 1965: 181; emphasis in original)

We must look beyond the definitions and usages of those within the organisation whose official task it might be to formulate the nature of the organisation. Such persons are, in his view, simply 'toolsmiths', and we would not restrict the description of the use of a tool simply to the modes of deployment envisaged by its creator.

Equally, we must look beyond those aspects of the organisation which most obviously express the idea of rational organisation and, instead, examine whatever happens to be brought under the scheme:

> *The consequence of this step is that the question of what the scheme selects and neglects is approached by asking how certain objects and events meet, or are made to meet, the specifications contained in the schedule.*
>
> (Bittner 1965: 181; emphasis in original)

Such considerations laid the groundwork for the sociological investigation of the methodical uses of 'organisation' as a common sense construct. From his own initial reflections, Bittner suggests organisation might be looked under three broad headings:

1. As a gambit of compliance whereby whatever is needed to be done or whatever has been done can be brought under the relevant rule or rules governing that species of activity through the deployment of 'organisational acumen' – the know-how, know-what of how things get done in any particular organisational context.
2. As a model of stylistic unity by means of which the extended complex structures of activities are bounded and integrated as a proper ordering of interdependencies. This ordering is not the expression of a sense of organisational discipline provided through sanctioned or compelled conformity to whatever may be the prescribed courses of action but of what Bittner calls 'piety', wherein what is done is done because those who do it see it as an appropriate structure of coordinated actions.

3 As corroborative reference wherein the local meaning of whatever one is engaged in can be set in the context of an understanding of the surrounding gestalt. Taken as a collection of individual elements, the meaning of individual tasks or activities may be fragmentary and determined locally. In response to the entropic possibilities of such fragmentation, the notion of rational organisation can be used to solve the synecdoche problem for organisational order by co-relating each part within the whole.

These formulations describe 'organisation' in terms of the normative orders formulated by members of the organisation. Such usages, however, are not to be taken in too Panglossian a way. No organisation exhibits homogeneity of outlook on how things are and who is or should be doing what. Indeed, the normativity of the social order is as much to be seen in the finding of its breach as in its demonstrable observance. The contestability of normativity leads to another consideration. The schemes of interpretation are themselves organisational objects and subject to organisational processes. They are reflexive on the strategies for managing and shaping activities wherein they are used as a resource by *whoever* wishes to make *whatever* sense they can of the state of organisation.

In the studies we present in this book, we take organisational consociation to be the achievement of the intersubjective accountability of actions through the use of senior management as a common sense construct. We treat the determination of what activities mean as the outcome of complementary methods to achieve the recipient design of action. That is, we treat co-participants as being oriented to the mutuality of complementary methods for constructing and finding the accountability of activities. This strategy allows us to adapt the principles set out in Chapter 1, and to adopt the following investigative postulate: *members of an organisational setting see each other's actions as providing displays of what the meaning, sense, logic, rationality, purpose and so on of those actions are to be taken to be.* Describing methods of recipient design as the exhibition and determination of the displayed accountability of organisational activity is how the modalities of management in general as a common sense construct can be made visible and investigated. The variety and contestability of such interpretations is one of the quotidian facts of organisational life.

'Management' as a management construct

Conventionally, management as a course of action type is defined by two related elements:

1 A position in a formal division of labour and its associated bundle of activities, rights, obligations, orientations and responsibilities;
2 Correlated with the above, a position in a power structure based in forms of authority and legitimation.

Discussions of the function of management, the culture of management and the practice of management are usually couched as the interplay of rules associated with formal position and the constraints set by the actualities of power. This is often done by counter-posing idealised descriptions of management work, the barriers and enablers facilitated by the operation of formal and informal organisational relationships, and the balance of capacities and control between the powerful and the powerless. It was in terms of just these contrasts that Smith and Grint presented 'the role of management' as the leading term in sociological explanations of the nature of organisations.

In explicating the counter-posed idealised descriptions, sociological accounts of 'management' as the title of a category of actors set details of a course of action type within a mosaic of related conceptualisations. Within such schemes we find:[1]

1 Categories of other types of actor who, together with 'management' make up the personnel in any setting;
2 Inferences about shared motivations constituting reasons for action;
3 Lists of typical interests and relevances organising action;
4 Presumptions about horizontal structures of relevances and interests structuring attention and priorities;
5 Assumptions about a reciprocity of perspectives which allows typical actors to shape the trajectories of their actions as complements or counterpoints to those of others;
6 Repertoires of standardised courses of action allowing any instance to be accommodated within the scheme and which provide for the securing of serial ties between actions.

Unsurprisingly, given the position we have just outlined, these components have their counterparts in the common sense notions of management found within any organisation. However, whereas sociologists might propose that their depictions are reflective and have a degree of 'disinterestedness' and 'generalisability', the adoption of the praxeological rule requires us to treat the members of the organisation as permanently and irredeemably immersed in the specifics of resolving what, in the ~~specific~~ context they are in at any point, they should do next in relation to the courses of action, problems and tasks in hand as they attempt to achieve their desired ends, whatever those might be and however they are to be brought about. The member's depiction is always to be constructed *in media res*.[2]

Our studies describe just some of the modalities of 'accountable senior management' found in organisations. These modalities provide locally perspicuous epitomisations of 'what top management is up to *now*' or 'what executive management is in *this* organisation'. The ones we pick out are:

1 Management as observable and trackable schemes of operational values;
2 Management as displays of continuity of purpose;
3 Management as discoverable due process.

In scoping these three, we are not claiming they are the only modalities to be found nor are we claiming such epitomisations are universally shared. What we are saying is that these modalities can be found and, where found, are socially available accounts of management action. Each stands for a budget of enquiries into how management and other organisational courses of action configure the organisation and so constrain the open texture of interpretability. Strong family resemblances hold between the concepts of organisation and management in professional and lay accounts of organisational life. We should not be surprised, then, to find resonances between the two constructs in cases of both sociological and lay use. Our analysis of actual materials demonstrates these resonances at length.

A final preliminary thought; in looking through the studies we present in later chapters, it would be a mistake to line up the management object being described with just one of the modalities we have listed. Whilst we might emphasise a particular modality in our discussion, the performative possibilities of management objects – that is, what they can be used to do – are open. They can serve whatever purposes an organisational actor may have at any particular point.

Exhibited schemes of values

Management researchers and commentators attest to the prevalence of what might be termed 'rationalisation drift'. Whereas the formal structures, policies, practices enshrined in its charter provide an initial, technical rationale for the complex of activities encompassed within the organisation, over time they become hedged around by other structures, policies and practices which derive their rationale from the institutional environment outside the organisation. *In extremis*, as Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggest, technical rationalisation is reduced to myth and ceremony. An element in such drift is value subscription and ascription, the normative orientations guiding the patterning of courses of action which form the essence of the management and organisational cultures on which researchers report.

Members of organisations, both managers and non-managers, understand the phenomenon of rationalisation drift and use it as a common sense metric for the interpretability of senior management courses of action.[3] The calibration of 'real' and 'claimed' value orientations motivating management strategies is achieved through what senior managers are seen to be doing. Such deductions may stem from comparisons between what is said in public pronouncements and what is seen to be done in day-to-day problem solving, in the prioritising of investments, or in the 'rationalisation' of delivery structures. Similar evidence can be found in the re-configuration of planning objectives, the announcements of new partnerships to be entered into, or recruitment and staffing decisions. Determining the extent of drift in value rationalisation and the projection of its local and global consequences rests on a construal of senior management activities as exhibiting schemes of value which motivate action. On the basis of such judgements, members find patterns in activities which indicate, for example, pressure for change and increased momentum in its realisation. Such determination enables members

action and the likely availability of resources to undertake them. In turn, all are key components of the ordinary member's structure of organisational relevances.

Discoverable due process

Governance and who is responsible for it has been much discussed of late as headline after headline has trumpeted alleged improprieties in the ways organisations, large and not so large, public and private, are run. For the sociologist, governance provides yet another locale where the tendency for formal policies and actual practices to diverge may be on view. As with other studies of rationalisation drift, the aim is to mark and track both the forces at work on managers which encourage or impel movement away from strict observation of the formal rules and procedures, and the reasons offered for so doing. These reasons are held to point to the causes and consequences of the warping, morphing, or erosion of what counts as 'good management culture' in the organisation.

Members of organisations also orient to a sense of propriety, that is, to a sense of the proper bases on which decisions and actions should be taken, and hence seek to find due process being honoured in what is being done; the right things are being done in the right way. This sense does not come from a detailed knowledge of the Memorandum of Understanding, Articles of Association, or other formally defined remit under which the organisation might have been created. Instead, as Bittner pointed out, it comes from a generalised sense of what ought to be done before what, what ought to be used as a reason for what, and who should or should not be doing what. This generalised understanding allows members of the organisation to decide what managing is and define what senior managers are doing by the extent to which their actions can be fitted under it. This is senior management as discoverable due process.

All members of organisations are engaged in management to some extent. They are involved in going to meetings; they are involved in scheduling activities; they are involved in determining local and global priorities; they are involved in the resolution of problems. Thus, for them, the determination of discoverable due process is as much about what 'we' are doing and how 'we' are doing it as it is about what 'they', the formally designated most senior managers, might be up to. One of the most important ways such judgements can be made is by seeking to bring the activities currently under way within the scope of whatever organising format is available for the situation in hand. Members of the organisation can see if there is a fit between 'the agenda' and its meeting, 'the record' and the decision outcomes, statements of 'the evidence' and the definition of its implications, 'the next steps' to be taken and the allocation of tasks and responsibilities. From such fits, they can see just how far managerial due process is being adhered to. That finding becomes their evidence for the accounts they offer.

One last point is worth bringing out. In sociological and other discussions of governance, the moral order of due process is often what is at issue. Are the tenets ascribable to the actions taken the ones which ought to be in place? For members of organisations, such moral considerations are only occasionally a matter of

concern. Rather, their interests centre on the extent to which the interpretation of due process arrived at chimes with the projectability of the trajectories of actions being undertaken elsewhere under the organisational frame of reference. Are we arriving at similar decisions in much the same way? Will this decision lead to revision of earlier decisions? Will this course of action generate turbulence for that course of action, and so on? The practicalities of management as governance are the practicalities of activity management as a normative order – that is, as a system of activities which can and should be fitted together in particular ways.

What next?

By treating management as a common sense construct, we can develop suites of topics through which to explore the co-production of the accountability of senior management action. Such accountability is produced within the flow of management activity. This is the configuration of senior management from within. The means we use to make this configuring visible is the structuring of documents and related management objects as devices for ordering activities. In the next two chapters we lay out what we mean by this. In subsequent chapters, we show how, under the three modalities we have just outlined and through the use of an array of documentary and other objects, organisational consociation is produced by means of recipient design of senior management activity as the display of mutual intelligibility.

Notes

1 Obviously, we are following Schutz (1962) in this specification.
2 For the purposes of exposition, we will allow this (caricatured) contrast to run. On another occasion, we would wish to look at what things impinge upon and shape the way sociological descriptions might be given. The working sociologist is no less *in media res* than the working member of the organisation. It is simply the array of things they are in the midst of is different.
3 We mean 'metric' here in Lindsay Churchill's sense (no date).
4 Donald Rumsfeld, Defence Secretary under George W. Bush, famously distinguished between 'known unknown' and 'unknown unknown' exigencies associated with a formulated plan. It is the latter which pose 'Rumsfeld problems'. These can often require major strategic re-orientation.

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