

The Handy Guide to the Gurus of Management

Programme One - Introduction

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INTRODUCTION:

In these days of global capitalism has management become some sort of religion? Who are these gurus anyway, and what do they preach? How useful have they proved to be in the past and how much notice should we take of their ideas?

These are the questions that I shall be trying to answer in the twelve short talks in this, my personal guide to these gurus of management.

Each talk will concentrate on just one of these gurus, so I have had to select the twelve writers, academics and business professionals that I think have been the most influential. But in this first talk I'll be discussing gurus in general and why I think they matter, as well as telling you a bit about myself and my ideas. It is, perhaps, a bit cheeky to include myself in the list of the twelve gurus, but you need to know the sort of things that matter to me if you are going to make sense of the rest of the series.

Back to the beginning, however, and the rise of the gurus. No-one knows how it happened, but twenty or so years ago the leading thinkers in the field of management started to be called 'gurus' by their publics. Some suggested that, actually, witch doctors would be a better title, because there was often no scientific basis for their ideas. To others the gurus were a sign

that management was an art more than a discipline or even a serious profession. A book called 'The One Minute Manager' sold in its millions. You can't imagine something like 'The One Minute Doctor' having a market at all.

Nonetheless, management has always been the invisible ingredient of success. The pyramids of Egypt and the Great Wall of China could not have been built without good management systems. The great military campaigns of history owed as much to good management as to bravery or weapons. Great ideas lie wasted unless someone turns them into a viable activity, or into a business, by management. Economies shrivel and countries decay unless they are properly managed.

How strange, then, that management has always had such a bad press. The word itself is demeaning. In everyday usage when we say to someone 'did you manage all right today?' we mean 'did you cope?' not 'did you do all the things that the management books tell you to do, to Plan, Organize, Staff, Direct, Co-ordinate, Report and Budget?'.

If you think about it, no-one likes to be managed. It sounds a bit like being manipulated or controlled. The older professions like medicine, law and education tactfully do not use the word "Manager". They prefer softer words like President, Principal or Partner, or even Permanent Secretary as the titles in their hierarchies.

During the last hundred years managers have tried to make their activity more respectable by professionalising it. At the beginning

of the last century Business Schools sprang up first in America, then, much later, in Europe and Asia. Now practically every city in the world has a School or Institute of Management and if you want a good start to an executive career, then get yourself an MBA degree and become a Master of Business Administration.

Irritatingly, however, the secrets of management remain elusive. Unlike the physical sciences there seem to be no hard and fast laws. If there were we would all be rich. As it is, the ground keeps shifting beneath our feet as new technologies arrive and people find new needs or wants which management has to deal with. Just to make it more complicated, the research laboratories of management are not tucked away in universities, but are made up of all the businesses and other organizations out there in the real world, experimenting, adapting; ducking and weaving to stay alive.

That's where the gurus come in. Their role is to interpret and spread around what seems to be working. They are the honeybees of management, buzzing around the world, writing, preaching, consulting. Oddly, perhaps, you won't always find their books on the reading lists of academic management courses. That's because their books are meant to be read by busy people, not by diligent students. Their lectures have to be exciting, even inspiring, their ideas both memorable and immediately relevant, not least to justify the fees they charge. The faster the world changes the more necessary are these bees, carrying ideas from one place to another, codifying and reformulating as they go.

In this series I shall be discussing the twelve most significant of these gurus, suggesting why, in my view, their ideas matter and why they make a difference to the way we manage our organizations. In hindsight, most of management seems to be just commonsense. The trick is to glimpse the sense before it becomes common. That is what gives you the competitive edge. That is what moves the world along, and that's what the gurus are trying to do.

So who is in my list of the twelve gurus most of whom I know personally or professionally? It has to include Peter Drucker, now in his nineties but still explaining the world in inimitable prose and a guttural Austrian accent. In fact, mention any management idea that works and the betting is that Peter Drucker was writing about it before you were born. The “knowledge worker” was his idea; and he invented the notion of “management by objectives.” There will also be Tom Peters whose book, 'In Search Of Excellence', which he wrote in 1982 with Robert Waterman, made history when it became the first management book to reach the national best-seller lists in America. There will be Kenichi Omae, the Japanese strategist who, amongst other things, talks about the impact of globalization on nations; and Sumantra Ghoshal, now Dean of Hyderabad's new Business School, who was one of the first to herald the arrival of truly global organizations. For cross-cultural issues we turn to Fons Trompenaars from the Netherlands. And, of course, there's me, an Irishman masquerading as an Englishman, with my ideas on organizations and culture and my socio-philosophical interest in people. An international cast for what is increasingly the major international challenge - management in a turbulent world.

So much by way of introduction.

To those of you who have just tuned in, I'm Charles Handy and you're listening to the Handy Guide to the Gurus of Management, from the BBC World Service. There will be twelve gurus in all but, as I said earlier, I am going to begin with myself and my ideas. That's so that you can get to know me and my prejudices, my way of looking at the world, even the way I talk.