

The article, Have We Come in the Grip of ‘Managerialism’?, authored by Prof. Subrata Chakraborty, Former Dean & Director-in-Charge, IIM, Lucknow & Former Director, Jaipuria Institute of Management, Lucknow(suchak45@gmail.com), was published in Vol 12, issue 1, 2020. Listed here are the commentaries written for this article:

HAVE WE COME IN THE GRIP OF ‘MANAGERIALISM’? - A COMMENTARY

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- I greatly enjoyed reading the historical perspective of evolution of management as a discipline: well researched, very scholarly, and informative.
- I particularly resonated to your observation that ‘much of management studies is reductionist in the sense of trying to simplify a complex, ideological, political and social process to a set of principles, roles and techniques justified by one supposed rationality’. In subsequent statements this rationality is further explained as ‘high result orientation’, ‘primacy of profit motive and productivity’, and that ‘organisations have to be managed for the economic benefit of owners’.

Indeed, this view of management has quite rightly attracted criticism from social scientists, and many others, who see management education as an institutionalized arrangement for developing mercenaries, armed with theories and techniques, who would pursue profit and productivity to the exclusion of almost everything else: individuals, society, and development, except to the extent that individual is a consumer, society provides an institutional arrangements in which businesses can legitimately pursue their profit motive, and development is synonymous with GDP growth.

This may well be called a jaundiced or highly exaggerated view, but there is a grain of truth in it that hurts nonetheless. That is why, an attempt is made to sanitize the profession of business management, by introducing the largely ceremonial concept of Corporate Social Responsibility. Occasionally, mention is made of ‘values and ethics’, but it is largely ignored and sacrificed at the altar of profitability. Human Resource Development is largely a euphemism for personnel management and skill development for ultimately serving the goal of profitability. Management education, by and large, has little clue on how to inculcate values and ethics among students, and makes little serious attempt in this direction.

Sorry for such sweeping generalization, but a proper, more nuanced discussion is not possible here due to obvious limitations.

- Managerialism, in the sense of applying generic management skills and theories to management of educational organisations often reduces the educational institutions, particularly private owned (exceptions apart), to mere business organisations. Some of the important purposes of education: acculturation, development of a wider socially and politically informed world view, development and internalization of a humane value system, a personal and social philosophy, ability for critical thinking, learning and pursuit of knowledge, receive little conscious attention. Essentially students are trained to be management ‘technicians’ rather than management ‘professionals’ who can transcend the techniques and manage ‘wisely’ taking due account of the ever changing socio-political and human context. I have added the word ‘human’ to socio-political in order to emphasize that the individual dimension can also be disaggregated from that of the society in general.
- Gap between theory and practice is the old bugbear. By the very nature of the two a gap will always remain. Theory, after all, is an attempt to arrive at general principles drawn from a large number of different individual experiences, which otherwise would be a stupendous task of understanding and assimilation by an individual desirous of benefit from others’ experiences. Theory provides a broad framework for examining the problem at hand. But, unlike in physical sciences, the context to which it is to be applied in managerial situations, is far more complex and ever changing. Direct application of prior received theory is seldom possible. Actual practice can and does deviate from the received theory for valid reasons. This new practice gives rise for further information for refinement of theory. Theory therefore lags actual practice and a gap does remain. Researchers’ aim is to continuously improve on theory so that the gap can be narrowed but the gap between theory and practice will remain.

There is a fundamental difference in theory in physical sciences and theory in social sciences and management. In the former the object of investigation is easily replicable and unchangeable in its characteristics. Repeated measurements will yield repeatable results. Except at a quantum mechanical level, where the observer stands outside the observed system and does not influence the outcome. In such a situation a theory is a reliable guide to practice, and if any discrepancy is observed the theory is sought to be improved till it can be authentically applied to practice. A theory will be discarded even if one exception is found and an alternate theory/improved

theory would be sought. This is not the case in social science theories. Observer is not outside the observed system. Objects of study cannot be duplicated completely in subsequent measurements. Measurement results are not repeatable. Theory is not discarded even if exceptions to it are found on account of variability mentioned earlier. It can be refined but cannot be authentically applied to every new situation. A social science theory is largely a conceptual framework to assist examination of a situation but the practice is to be arrived at by a careful consideration of other variables which are not always amenable to evaluation. Rather than blind application of theory, 'wisdom' is called for in taking a decision.

Let me hasten to dispel the impression, if that has been created by the above discussion, that management theories are not useful. Quite the reverse in fact. Management theories, despite the gap with actual practice, provide a valuable tool for decision making. They provide an informed guide to examining the problem and reflecting on possible solutions, of course taking due account of the specificities of the situation. More importantly they help expand the conceptual knowledge base of the field of management and bring us closer to understanding complex social systems. There is every case for educational institutions to familiarize management students with current management theories along with their limitations and encouraging them to apply them as a first step in arriving at a decision. If educational institutions fail to teach them theories just because they will not always be unerring guide to practice they do disservice to them twice over: one, they will not be equipped to approach a problem at a higher conceptual frame-work level and remain bounded by the specificities of the particular problem, and, two, will fail to benefit from the larger, broader, generalised truth encapsulated in a theory.

The gap in theory and practice provides space for wisdom!

- I now turn to the question: 'have we reached a highly convoluted stage from where we find it difficult to extricate ourselves' In other words a cul-de-sac, where we cannot see our way forward. I think, not. As long as we keep asking these questions management education will continue to evolve. After all it is a relatively new field. Evolution takes time. At the risk of oversimplification let me say that one way out is to substantially increase the content of humanities in management education. The other is to focus on building 'learning-to-learn' capabilities and making our students capable of autonomous learning. We need to move away from limiting our efforts to training in theories and techniques of management to providing

broader management *education*. The italicised word is meant to draw attention to the distinction between training and education.