



# MANAGERS NOT MBAs

A hard look at the soft practice  
of managing and management  
development

**HENRY MINTZBERG**

An Excerpt From

***Managers Not MBAs:  
A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management  
Development***

by Henry Mintzberg

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## PREFACE

I don't exactly have an MBA—the MIT Sloan School of Management called it a masters of science then. But I did exactly teach MBAs, for about fifteen years, until I had enough and asked our dean at McGill in the mid-1980s to reduce my teaching load and salary accordingly. I was simply finding too much of a disconnect between the practice of managing that was becoming clearer to me and what went on in classrooms, my own included, intended to develop those managers.

In these feelings, I have found myself not alone. Over the years, I asked colleagues all over the world and especially in the United States what they thought about teaching conventional MBA students. I have been surprised by how many agreed with me. A well-kept secret of business schools is how many of their faculty have had it with teaching MBAs. (We shall hear from the others, if not these.)

So in the 1980s I began my rants, speaking my mind about MBA programs, including a chapter entitled “Training Managers, Not MBAs” in a book I published in 1989. But then people started asking the embarrassing question: What was *I* doing about it? Academics are not supposed to be asked such questions, so it took me a while to respond. Then it took McGill a while to respond. But eventually we put together a group to do something about it: create a masters program truly for practicing managers.

Realizing we would do better in partnership, we approached Insead in France, where I was jointly appointed at the time. But that did not get far, so I called Jonathan Gosling at Lancaster University to see whether that school might be interested. He had to check with a couple of people, he said, including the dean. He called back an hour later!

I duly drafted a memo to Insead admitting defeat. Gareth Dyas noticed it on our common secretary's desk and said, “You can't do that!” I realized then that my proposal had been too simple; Insead needed something complicated. So I proposed a partnership of five schools. That they liked!

Next I faxed a letter to Hiro Itami at Hitsosubashi University in Tokyo, not realizing he was then dean. “Sit down before you read this,” it began. “Why not?” began his reply the next day.

And so it was that our little fledging group of Jonathan, Roger Bennett and myself from McGill, and Heinz Theinheiser from Insead headed out

to Tokyo, to convince Jiro Nonaka, the dean of management academics in Japan. We might never have gotten the chance had the madmen who gassed the subway cars in Tokyo that morning chosen to so on the same line in the other direction, as we headed out to Hitsosubashi.

From there we went to the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, where Roger had done a reconnaissance trip earlier. “An interesting idea, but we’ll never see them again” was the response to that trip (we found out years later). But they did see us again, and the partnership of five was confirmed (in Japan including the faculty of several schools).

Then we had to recruit companies to send their managers—no easy task when all we could offer were ideas (with no resources to back up our personal efforts). But thanks to the companies noted in the dedication, we managed to get going, although it didn’t look like we would a month before startup. Thus in the spring of 1996 the International Masters Program in Practicing Management (IMPM) was launched, and it continues to be the delight of my professional life—as you will notice from my enthusiasm in Chapters 10 through 14.

This constitutes one of three main subjects of this book—what can be done to develop managers in a serious educational process. Another is my critique of the MBA, which is business education that I believe distorts managerial practice. And the third considers the practice of management itself, which I believe is going off the rails with dysfunctional consequences in society. So this little package called a book—four years in the writing, fifteen years in the developing, and thirty-five years in the thinking—draws together a great many of my ideas.

It must sound corny to read all the claims in such pages about how this and that book has been a collective effort, when everyone knows that nothing is more personal than the writing of a book. But the claim happens to be more than usually true here.

I dedicate this book to the “Why not?” people who got the IMPM started, but I wish to single one of them out in particular. This book would not have been worth writing had I not met Jonathan Gosling and developed such a wonderful working and friendly relationship with him. His ideas and imagination infuse this book, far beyond the many attributions to them. Perhaps people associate the IMPM with me because my name is better known in the literature, but there would have been no IMPM without Jonathan.

And there would not be the same IMPM without many others—faculty, participants in our eight classes to date, company people, administrators, and others. I mention here in particular Frank McCauley of the

Royal Bank of Canada, who not only supported us from the outset (and who prided himself in having sent our first check) but provided so many insights, as will be seen in Part II; Thomas Sattelberger, who at Luft-hansa lit a fire under us to get things going; Bill Litwack, who set up some rather clever administration arrangements to deal with our complicated partnership and helped set the tone at the early modules; Collette Web, who followed him as administrator of the program and has been its cheerful heart and soul ever since; Dora Koop, who has been there from the very first meeting at McGill to the current operation of the McGill module, and Kunal Basu, who was part of those early efforts; Nancy Badore, who has been so full of wonderful ideas and moral support; a number of our young faculty Turks, notably Quy Huy, Kaz Mishina, Taizoon Chinwalla (a graduate of the program and later co-cycle director while at Motorola), and Ramnath Narayanswamy, who were often truer to the fundamentals of the program than its founders, myself included; and Oliver Westall, who is extending the IMPM idea to the E Roundtables for existing EMBA programs.

My wife Saša and I have spent a good deal of time in Prague since late 1999, where I have written most of this book—about five times! Her support has been inspiring. Every once in a while I would announce to her energetic delight that I had finished the book. In fact, no book is ever finished until you hold it in your hand. Ask Santa, my personal assistant. Every time she finished typing the last chapter (I *write* books; Santa types them), I appeared with revisions to the first one. How she has remained so good-natured is a mystery I dare not investigate. Further help was provided by Chahrazed Abdallah, known as ChaCha (imagine life with a wife named Saša, a personal assistant named Santa, and a research assistant named ChaCha!), Elise Beauregard, Chen Hua Tzeng, and Rennie Nilsson. Nathalie Tremblay was brilliant in chasing down lost references.

Berrett-Koehler is an old-fashioned publisher. In other words, its people believe in books, in ideas, and in authors; the company is not sold every other week, and the staff is not engaged in the musical chairs of constant reorganization. All this comes under the stewardship of Steve Piersanti, the quiet, decent, dedicated kind of leader that we desperately need more of. It pleases me greatly to have been able to work with the very “engaged” style of managing I describe in Chapter 9 and the whole team at Berrett-Koehler who embody it.

Helpful comments on parts or all of this book were provided by Charlie Dorris, Jeff Kulick, Bob Mountain, Andrea Markowitz, John Hendry, Joe Raelin, Dave Ulrich, Paola Perez-Alleman, Colette Webb,

Oliver Westall, and Jonathan Gosling. Bob Simons offered some especially valuable comments on Chapter 2, far more sympathetic than my treatment of his school (Harvard) but successful in making my arguments somewhat more honest. Bogdan Costea provided in his doctoral thesis and private discussions ideas that have informed this book; Dan LeClair of the AACSB was very helpful in providing statistics on enrolments in business programs; Joe Lampel worked hard on the analysis of the nineteen Harvard CEOs discussed in Chapter 4. I must also mention the various IMPM participants who allowed me to quote from their material, as cited in the text.

Some years ago the dean of a prominent business school (Richard West of New York University) claimed, “If I wasn’t dean of this school, I’d be writing a book on the bankruptcy of American management education” (in Byrne 1990:62). I have never been the dean of a business school. But I have worked with a number. Needless (if necessary) to say, the ideas expressed in this book represent neither their views nor those of their schools. But my deans and colleagues have been well aware of my views and never discouraged my expression of them in any way, while encouraging our efforts with the IMPM.

Thank you all!

Henry Mintzberg  
*Prague, November 2003*

# INTRODUCTION

This is a book about management education that is about management. I believe that both are deeply troubled, but neither can be changed without changing the other.

The trouble with “management” education is that it is business education, and leaves a distorted impression of management. Management is a practice that has to blend a good deal of craft (experience) with a certain amount of art (insight) and some science (analysis). An education that overemphasizes the science encourages a style of managing I call “calculating” or, if the graduates believe themselves to be artists, as increasing numbers now do, a related style I call “heroic.” Enough of them, enough of that. We don’t need heroes in positions of influence any more than technocrats. We need balanced, dedicated people who practice a style of managing that can be called “engaging.” Such people believe that their purpose is to leave behind stronger organizations, not just higher share prices. They do not display hubris in the name of leadership.

The development of such managers will require another approach to management education, likewise engaging, that encourages practicing managers to learn from their own experience. In other words, we need to build the craft and the art of managing into management education and thereby bring these back into the practice of managing.

Follow the chapter titles of this book into the chapters, and you will read about management education—Part I on what I believe is wrong with it, Part II on how it could be changed. But look within the chapters, and you will read about management itself—again what I believe is wrong with it and how it could be changed. To pick up on the subtitle, here we take a hard look at the soft practice of managing, alongside that of management development. There are plenty of books that provide soft looks at the hard practice of managing. I believe we need to face management as it is, in a serious way; it is too important to be left to most of what appears on the shelves of bookstores. Easy formulas and quick fixes are the problems in management today, not the solutions.

I have written this book for all thoughtful readers interested in management education and practice: developers, educators, managers, and just plain interested observers. I mean this to include MBA applicants, students, and graduates, at least ones who harbor doubts about this

degree. If what I write here is true, then they especially should be reading this book.

Readers interested in management education will get the messages about management practice as they go along. Readers interested in management itself—this hard look at that soft practice—can focus on particular parts of the book. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 contain the essence of this material. Before reading this, however, I suggest you look at the introduction to Part I and the first part of Chapter 1 (pages 5–13) as well as, from Chapter 2, pages 36–42, 48–56, and 67–68. Beyond Chapter 6, I recommend pages 259–264 and especially 273–275 in Chapter 9, pages 299–312 in Chapter 11, and pages 333–336 and 344–345 in Chapter 13.

I should add that there are all kinds of illustrative materials in the boxes that accompany the text. Reading these will give much of the flavor of my arguments.

Part I of this book is called “Not MBAs.” Some people may see it as a rant; I wrote it as a serious critique of what I believe to be a deeply flawed practice. If you have anything to do with MBAs, whether hiring them, supporting them, teaching them, or being one, I urge you to read this, if only to entertain some dark thought about this ostensibly sparkling degree. And if you are a manager or have anything to do with managers (who doesn’t in this world?), I hope that reading this will open your eyes to a vitally important activity that is going out of social control.

The chapters of this first part flow as follows. What I call conventional MBA programs, which are mostly for young people with little if any managerial experience (“Wrong People,” Chapter 1), because they are unable to use art or craft, emphasize science, in the form of analysis and technique (“Wrong Ways,” Chapter 2). That leaves their graduates with the false impression that they have been trained as managers, which has had a corrupting effect on the education and the practice of management as well as on the organizations and societies in which it is practiced (“Wrong Consequences,” Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6).

There has been a lot of hype about changes taking place in prominent MBA programs in recent years. Don’t believe it (“New MBAs?” Chapter 7). The MBA is a 1908 degree based on a 1950s strategy. The real innovations in management education, mostly in England but hardly recognized in America, serve as a bridge from the critique of Part I to the positive ideas for “Developing Managers” in Part II.

There is a great and unfortunate divide between management development and management education. While a full discussion of management development would require a book unto itself, the presentation of

a framework of basic practices (“Management Development in Practice,” Chapter 8) can open up vistas for management education.

The discussion of the book to this point suggests a set of general principles by which management education can be reconceived (“Developing Management Education,” Chapter 9). These principles have been brought to life in a family of programs that can take management education and development to a new place, by enabling managers to reflect on their own experience in the light of insightful concepts (five aspects of “Developing Managers,” Chapters 10 through 14). No one can create a leader in a classroom. But existing managers can significantly improve their practice in a thoughtful classroom that makes use of those experiences.

All this suggests that the business schools themselves need to be reconceived, including a metamorphosis into management schools (“Developing True Schools of Management,” Chapter 15). But will these agents of change be able to change?

## PART ONE

# Not MBAs

IT IS TIME to recognize conventional MBA programs for what they are—or else to close them down. They are specialized training in the functions of business, not general educating in the practice of managing. Using the classroom to help develop people already practicing management is a fine idea, but pretending to create managers out of people who have never managed is a sham. It is time that our business schools gave proper attention to management.

This may seem like a strange contention at a time when MBA programs are at the height of their popularity, when MBA graduates are at the pinnacle of their success, and when American business, which has relied so heavily on this credential, seems to have attained its greatest stage of development. I shall argue that much of this success is delusory, that our approach to educating leaders is undermining our leadership, with dire economic and social consequences.

Every decade in the United States alone, almost one million people with a credential called the MBA descend on the economy, most with little firsthand knowledge of customers and workers, products and

processes. There they expect to manage people who have that knowledge, which they gained in the only way possible—through intensive personal experience. But lacking that credential, such people are increasingly relegated to a “slow track” where they are subjected to the “leadership” of people who lack the legitimacy to lead.

Considered as education for management, conventional MBA programs train the wrong people in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences. This is the argument I shall pursue in Part I of this book. It contains seven chapters. The first is about the wrong people, the second about the wrong ways, the next four about the wrong consequences. Chapter 7 considers recent changes in MBA programs, concluding that most of these are cosmetic. A “dominant design” established itself in the 1960s and continues to hold most of this education firmly in its grip. The notable exceptions are found mostly in England, whose innovations provide a bridge to Part II of this book.

Some clarifications to begin. First, by “conventional” MBA, I mean full-time programs that take relatively young people, generally in their twenties, and train them mostly in the business functions, out of context—in other words, independent of any specific experience in management. This describes most MBA programs today, in the United States and around the world. With a few exceptions, the remaining ones (usually called EMBA) take more experienced people on a part-time basis and then do much the same thing. In other words, they train the right people in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences. That is because they mostly fail to use the experience these people have.

Second, I use the words *management* and *leadership* interchangeably. It has become fashionable (after Zaleznik 1977) to distinguish them. Leadership is supposed to be something bigger, more important. I reject this distinction, simply because managers have to lead and leaders have to manage. Management without leadership is sterile; leadership without management is disconnected and encourages hubris. We should not be ceding management to leadership, in MBA programs or anywhere else.

Third, I refer to the schools in question in three ways: usually as “business schools,” in reference to what most of them are; sometimes as “management schools,” in reference to what they could be; and, especially in the last chapter, as M/B schools, in reference to what I conclude is the appropriate role for most of them—balanced attention to both management and business.

The MBA was first introduced in 1908; it last underwent serious revision based on two reports published in the late 1950s. Business schools pride themselves in teaching about new product development and strategic change, yet their flagship, the MBA, is a 1908 degree with a 1950s strategy. Part I of this book develops this conclusion; Part II proposes some real change.

Part I is highly critical of MBA education. I do this at some length because I believe the case against the MBA as education for management has to be made thoroughly, to counter some deeply entrenched beliefs and their consequences. One of the most interesting articles ever written about the MBA appeared in *Fortune* magazine in 1968. In it, Sheldon Zalaznick claimed, “The idea that the graduate school of business is the principal source of top executive talent has been allowed to flourish, unexamined . . .” (169). It has been allowed to flourish unexamined ever since. . . .<sup>1</sup> Not here.

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<sup>1</sup>In 1996 (221), Aaronson reported on a search for articles about graduate business education. Of the 693 she found, only 12 criticized that education.

# 1

## WRONG PEOPLE

*It's never too late to learn, but sometimes too early.*

—CHARLIE BROWN IN *PEANUTS*

There are no natural surgeons, no natural accountants. These are specialized jobs that require formal training, initially in a classroom. The students must, of course, be able to handle a scalpel or a keyboard, but first they have to be specially educated. Then they can be foisted on a unsuspecting public, at least for internship or articling, before being allowed to practice on their own.

Leadership is different. There are natural leaders. Indeed, no society can afford anything *but* natural leaders. Leadership and management are life itself, not some body of technique abstracted from the doing and the being. Education cannot pour life experience into a vessel of native intelligence, not even into a vessel of leadership potential. But it can help shape a vessel already brimming with the experiences of leadership and life.

Put differently, trying to teach management to someone who has never managed is like trying to teach psychology to someone who has never met another human being. Organizations are complex phenomena. Managing them is a difficult, nuanced business, requiring all sorts of tacit understanding that can only be gained in context. Trying to

teach it to people who have never practiced is worse than a waste of time—it demeans management.

## MANAGEMENT AS A PRACTICE

Were management a science or a profession, we could teach it to people without experience. It is neither.

**MANAGEMENT IS NOT A SCIENCE** Science is about the development of systematic knowledge through research. That is hardly the purpose of management. Management is not even an applied science, for that is still a science. Management certainly applies science: managers have to use all the knowledge they can get, from the sciences and elsewhere. But management is more art, based on “insight,” “vision,” “intuition.” (Peter Drucker wrote in 1954 that “the days of the ‘intuitive’ manager are numbered” [93]. Half a century later we are still counting.) And most management is craft, meaning that it relies on experience—learning on the job. This means it is as much about doing in order to think as thinking in order to do.

Put together a good deal of craft with a certain amount of art and some science, and you end up with a job that is above all a *practice*. There is no “one best way” to manage; it all depends on the situation.

Effective managing therefore happens where art, craft, and science meet. But in a classroom of students without managerial experience, these have no place to meet—there is nothing to *do*. Linda Hill (1992) writes in her book about people becoming managers that they “had to act as managers before they understood what the role was” (67). In other words, where there is no experience, there is no room for craft: Inexperienced students simply cannot understand the practice. As for art, nothing stops that from being discussed, even admired, in the conventional MBA classroom. But the inexperience of the students stops it from being appreciated. They can only look on as nonartists do—observing it without understanding how it came to be.

That leaves science, which is what conventional MBA education is mostly about, at least in the form of analysis. So, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, conventional MBA students graduate with the impression that management is analysis, specifically the making of systematic decisions and the formulation of deliberate strategies. This, I argue in Chapter 3, is a narrow and ultimately distorted view of management that has encouraged two dysfunctional styles in practice: *calculating* (overly analytical) and *heroic* (pretend art). These are later contrasted with a more

experienced-based style labeled *engaging*—quiet and connected, involving and inspiring.

**MANAGEMENT IS NOT A PROFESSION** It has been pointed out that engineering, too, is not a science or an applied science so much as a practice in its own right (Lewin 1979). But engineering does apply a good deal of science, codified and certified as to its effectiveness. And so it can be called a profession, which means it can be taught in advance of practice, out of context. In a sense, a bridge is a bridge, or at least steel is steel, even if its use has to be adapted to the circumstances at hand. The same can be said about medicine: Many illnesses are codified as standard syndromes to be treated by specific techniques. But that cannot be said of management (Whitley 1995:92). Little of its practice has been reliably codified, let alone certified as to its effectiveness. So management cannot be called a profession or taught as such.

Because engineering and medicine have so much codified knowledge that must be learned formally, the trained expert can almost always outperform the layperson. Not so in management. Few of us would trust the intuitive engineer or physician, with no formal training. Yet we trust all kinds of managers who have never spent a day in a management classroom (and we have suspicions about some others who spent two years there, as will be discussed in Chapter 3).

Ever since the 1910s when Frederick Taylor (1911) wrote about that “one best way” and Henri Fayol (1916/1984) claimed that “managerial ability can and should be acquired in the same way as technical ability at school, later in the workshop” (14), we have been on this search for the holy grail of management as a science and a profession. In Britain, a group called the Management Charter Initiative sought to barrel ahead with the certification of managers, not making the case for management as a profession so much as assuming it. As its director told a newspaper, the MBA “is the only truly global qualification, the only license to trade internationally” (Watts 1997:43).

The statement is nonsense, and the group has failed in those efforts. It is time to face a fact: After almost a century of trying, by any reasonable assessment management has become neither a science nor a profession. It remains deeply embedded in the practices of everyday living. We should be celebrating that fact, not depreciating it. And we should be developing managers who are deeply embedded in the life of leading, not professionals removed from it.

Those fields of work discussed earlier can be divided into ones in which the person doing it truly “knows better” than the recipients and others in which acting as the expert who knows better can get in the

way. Upon being wheeled into an operating room, few of us would be inclined to second-guess the surgeon. (“Could you cut a little lower, please?”) No matter how miserable the bedside manner, we accept that he or she knows better. But a schoolteacher who acts on the basis of knowing better can impede the learning of the student. School teaching is a facilitating activity, more about encouraging learning than doing teaching.

Managing is largely a facilitating activity, too. Sure, managers have to know a lot, and they often have to make decisions based on that knowledge. But, especially in large organizations and those concerned with “knowledge work,” managers have to lead better, so that others can know better and therefore act better. They have to bring out the best in other people. The idea that the chief does it all, coming up with the grand strategy and then driving its implementation by everyone else, is frequently a myth left over from the mass production of simple goods. Yet it is one of the impressions left by MBA education. “Our goal is to create an environment where students learn how to tackle difficult, complex problems. . . . Students learn what it feels like to exercise judgment, make decisions, and take responsibility” (in “Message from the Dean,” Harvard Business School Web site, 2003).

Because grade school teachers can easily carry their skills from one classroom to another, they can still be called professionals. But not so managers, who can hardly carry their skills from one function to another within the same organization, let alone across organizations or industries. In other words, knowledge about context is not as portable in management as it is in education or engineering or medicine. That is why so many managers who have succeeded in one place fail in others (which is hardly true of teachers or engineers or physicians—so long as they stick to the skills they have).

**A GUEST MANAGER?** Imagine a guest manager. The very idea seems absurd. How could anyone just come in and manage something? The manager must have a deep understanding of the context. Yet we accept substitute teachers who take over classrooms for a day, and Doctors without Borders who set up hospitals in hours. But temporary managers?

The one obvious example is instructive—a guest conductor. A few rehearsals, and off go the musicians performing at the most prestigious concert halls in the world. The reason is simple: the whole exercise is so highly programmed. Mozart is pulling the strings; everyone plays to his highly orchestrated score. We shall have professional management as soon as other organizations become as programmed as the symphony orches-

tra, playing their strategies like scores from Mozart, with all the obedient employees and customers sitting in neat rows responding on cue.

The practice of management is characterized by its ambiguity. That is why, despite its popular use, the metaphor of the conductor on the podium is wholly inappropriate (at least during performance, if not necessarily rehearsal; see Mintzberg 1998). Most work that can be programmed in an organization need not concern its managers directly; specialists can be delegated to do it. That leaves the managers mostly with the messy stuff—the intractable problems, the complicated connections. And that is what makes the practice of management so fundamentally “soft” and why labels such as experience, intuition, judgment, and wisdom are so commonly used for it. Here is how a successful manager at a major airline described her MBA husband to me: “He has the technique, thinks he knows best. But he is frustrated because he doesn’t understand the complexities and the politics. He thinks he has the answers but is frustrated by being unable to do anything about it.” He never learned management in the business school.

### “EXPERIENCE” IN MBA ADMISSIONS

Most business schools today require “work experience” of their MBA applicants, typically up to about four years. Some, in fact, are openly biased against much more than that, and Harvard apparently made the decision recently to reduce that to about two years and accept some applicants straight out of undergraduate studies.

But what is the use of a few years of experience, especially when it is not managerial? Can that install the necessary depth of understanding about how organizations work and what management means?

Imagine dropping a young MBA student into a classroom of experienced managers, even in a course on a specialized business function such as marketing or finance. So long as the class remains with theory and technique—in other words, remains at a generic level—the student would be fine. But as soon as the discussion turns to application—to nuance and appreciation—the student would be lost. In this respect, a classroom full of such students is always lost. “If you know how to design a great motorcycle engine,” quipped Richard Rumelt, a professor of strategy at UCLA, “I can teach you all you need to know about strategy in a few days. If you have a Ph.D. in strategy, years of labor are unlikely to give you ability to design great new motorcycle engines.” Business is about motorcycle engines: strategy is the means; motorcycle

engines are the end. Conventional MBA programs are about strategy in the absence of motorcycle engines.

## WRONG TIME?

Of course, this lack of experience suggests that the problem is not the wrong people so much as the wrong time. Do MBA programs teach the right people at the wrong time?

I think not, for two reasons. First, too early can make the right people wrong. Giving them a questionable impression of managing can distort how they practice it subsequently. Chapters 4 and 5 present some evidence on this. My colleague Jonathan Gosling has made an intriguing suggestion in this regard. The MBA appeals to people who are just gaining their independence from family and roots. Going “global,” for example, sounds good to them. Yet management is about something quite the opposite—namely, the acceptance of responsibility. So MBA programs may be inadvertently encouraging an attitude of independence that is fundamentally antithetical to the responsible practice of management.

Second, I argue that MBA programs by their very nature attract many of the wrong people—too impatient, too analytical, too much need to control. These characteristics together with the MBA credential may get them into managerial positions. But with what consequences? That is the subject of Chapters 3 through 6.

## THE APPLICATIONS CHARADE

At the time of this initial writing, with a great deal of publicity and considerable help from McKinsey & Company, a new business school was being set up in India. The Indian magazine *Businessworld* (Gupta 2000) reported on its application criteria: “Students must be smart team players with proven leadership qualities and two years of work experience.” How to select for such “proven” leadership qualities after only two years? “Selection criteria: GMAT scores, college performance, extra curricular and work experience.”

This is typical of how people get into MBA programs. In the first instance, they select themselves, presumably in the belief that leading is better than following (and pays better). In fact, many people apply to MBA programs not just to move *up* but to move *out*—to find a better job

somewhere else; in other words, to get away from the source of whatever limited experience they do have. Should that be telling us something?

The business schools choose from this pool. They select from among these self-selected leaders. The schools may look for evidence of leadership potential (e.g., posts held in extracurricular clubs, etc.), but when they boast about the quality of their students, they almost inevitably cite GMAT scores and grade point averages. Nicely numerical, all these—the business schools' own bottom lines. But do they measure managerial potential?

GMAT stands for Graduate Management Admission Test, and it assess one's ability to give fast answers to little numerical and verbal problems (e.g., "If Mario was 32 years old 8 years ago, how old was he  $x$  years ago? (A)  $x - 40$ , (B)  $x - 24$ , (C)  $40 - x$ , (D)  $24 - x$ , (E)  $24 + x$ " [GMAT 2000]). This is accompanied by an analytical writing task. Since how well you do depends on how well everyone else does, you had better prepare by buying a special book or taking a special course, because that is what everyone else is doing. "Take [the Kaplan exam preparation program] and get the score you need to get into the school you want," claims one big provider on its Web site (2003). So instead of practicing management, the would-be manager practices tests.

Good managers are certainly intelligent, and the GMAT certainly measures intelligence, at least formalized intelligence. But nonmanagers can be intelligent, too, as are no small number of dreadful managers. So the GMAT constitutes a useful but insufficient screening device, more useful, in fact, to identify successful students than successful managers. The latter have to exhibit all kinds of other characteristics that are not measured by such scores—indeed, many that are not adequately measured by *any* scores.

An MBA student at my own university once reproached me for having mentioned intuition in regard to the selection of MBA students. How can you possibly select for intuition, he insisted, when you can't even measure it? How indeed. Another asked whether the use of judgment in the selection process would not introduce bias. Sure, I replied, because bias is the other side of judgment. The best way to get rid of bias is to get rid of judgment. MBA programs that rely on these numerical scores get rid of judgment, and so, too, do they get rid of assessing managerial potential. In the process, they introduce their own bias—for science over art and craft.

Sure, the schools need some way to select the right people. But not from a pool of the wrong people. And not by the use of superfluous criteria. There is another way to select, which will be discussed in

Chapter 9: from a pool of practicing managers, based on their demonstrated success as managers.

## THE WILL TO MANAGE VERSUS THE ZEST FOR BUSINESS

In a classic *Harvard Business Review* article published over three decades ago, “The Myth of the Well-Educated Manager,” Sterling Livingston (1971:84) wrote that many people who “aspire to high-level managerial positions . . . lack the ‘will to manage.’” Not the *need* to manage but the *will* to manage. They “are not motivated to manage. They are motivated to earn high salaries and to attain high status.”

Successful managing, in Livingston’s opinion, is not about one’s own success but about fostering success in others. “Universities and business organizations that select managerial candidates on the basis of their records as individual performers often pick the wrong [people] to develop as managers. . . . Fewer and fewer [management graduates] are willing to make the sacrifices required to learn management from the bottom up; increasingly, they hope to step in at the top from positions where they observe, analyze, and advise.” Interesting words from 1971!

Some of these applicants do have another important characteristic, which Alfred North Whitehead, in another important article about business schools, published in 1932, labeled the “zest for business” (which is not the same as the zest for riches). Business schools have been effective at encouraging people with that zest and sometimes at encouraging others to get it; that may be their most important contribution to the economy. But they have also allowed this zest for business to be confused with that will to manage. In a sense, the former is about getting the most out of *resources*; the latter is about taping the energy of *people*. (That people have become “human *resources*” in business schools and so much business practice is further evidence of this problem.)

As shown in Figure 1.1, there are people who have both the will to manage and the zest for business, just as there are people who have neither. The former would seem most suitable for leadership positions in large corporations, just as the latter are suitable for no leadership positions. Those who have the will but not the zest may be suitable for public and social sector organizations.

The problem is in the remaining box, with those who have the zest for business but not the will to manage. Such people are numerous in MBA programs. They may make good investment bankers, financial analysts, or consultants, which is what many of them in fact became (a

		Zest for Business (after Whitehead)	
		NO	YES
Will to manage (after Livingston)	NO	Do research or whatever.	Do deals, or run your own small business.
	YES	Consider the public or social sector; get experience as a manager, then study management.	Consider big business: get experience as a manager, then study management.

FIGURE I.1  
Business or Management?

famous one is discussed in the accompanying box), but often in the hope of running big corporations. I cite evidence in Chapter 4 suggesting that a surprising number of those who succeed in that hope fail in those positions. They should have remained where they were or else run their own small businesses (although other evidence cited there suggests that the record of MBAs as entrepreneurs is not strong).

**NOT MUCH WILL TO MANAGE, BUT  
PLENTY OF ZEST FOR BUSINESS!**

“I didn’t know what to do after the Navy. I didn’t have any better idea than doing an MBA,” said one holder of this degree, from Stanford (quoted in Crainer and Dearlove 1999:78). Not much will to manage, apparently. But he certainly did have a zest for business. He didn’t end up as a manager. But he did do well in his chosen field, gaining great fame and making much money. His name is Tom Peters.

“[T]he MBA degree is not a magic wand that transforms inexperienced and immature undergraduates into licensed managers.” So said Arnoud de Meyer *et al.* (1992:28), as head of the Insead MBA program. His counterparts, however, have generally thought otherwise. “This program is designed to develop high-potential managers,” claims the University of Virginia Darden School on its Web site (2003). The Baruch

School in New York describes business schools as “incubators for the business leaders of tomorrow.” And a faculty member of that new school in India said, “We will be interviewing people with the notion that we are training them to be managers” (Gupta 2000:53–54).

The business schools take this rhetoric seriously. They welcome people with the zest for business—or for power, or for riches—assume they have the will to manage, fill them up with courses on finance, marketing, and so forth, sprinkled with a few *about* management (not *on* managing), and then tell them that they are ready to manage. If the schools take this seriously, then why shouldn’t the graduates? Most damaging of all, many of the hiring corporations, or at least people in their “human resource” departments, eager for a convenient source of managerial talent, take it seriously, too. It is, to repeat, a sham.

To conclude, we need leaders with human skills, not professionals with academic credentials. In the larger organizations especially, success depends not on what the managers themselves do, as allocators of resources and makers of decisions, so much as on what they help others to do.

So what should I tell Robert, a young man who came to see me about doing an MBA? It is with this question, discussed in the accompanying box, that I conclude this first chapter.

### WHAT SHOULD I TELL ROBERT?

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Robert came to see me, the son of an old friend. He wanted to do an MBA. Where should he go?

That question comes up all the time. Bright young people, bored with a year or two of full-time work and looking for a better position somewhere else, see the MBA as a launching device. And I always give the same answer: Earn your leadership. Find an industry you like, get to know it, prove your potential, and practice management. *Then* get educated in management. Conventional MBA programs, I tell them, are a waste of time for managerial work; in fact, they can distort true managerial potential.

The eyes always glaze over at this point. No one actually says, “I came to find out which school to go to and you tell me this,” but that is what seems to be on their minds. Instead, they say (in good years), “But look what awaits me if I get an MBA from a good school: a big salary, an important job, recruiters falling all over me, maybe even a

signing bonus like a football star—the fast track, the good life.”  
How could I tell Robert not to do the MBA?

Don't worry. I haven't done any harm in all this, because I doubt that a single one ever took my advice. They were all intent (as was I at that stage) to do the degree.

Until Joe came along. Same question. Same answer. But Joe's eyes didn't glaze over. At least he left wondering.

I've stayed in touch with Joe for several years now. A few months later he was accepted at a good business school. He decided not to go. Instead, he changed jobs. He loves his new work, he told me, and is learning a lot. He has doubts about the MBA now and is considering other options for further education.

Maybe there is hope.

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