

MANAGEMENT AS A (SELF) CONFIDENCE TRICK - THE IMPACT OF MANAGEMENT IDEAS AND EDUCATION

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Abstract

Debates on the impact of management ideas tend to assume a mechanistic, rather than processual and emotional, view of knowledge with its value or threat conceived of in terms of the extent to which it is directly applied in practice. This paper explores managers' reflections on the consequences of 'learning' a range of explicit management ideas. Some direct translation, combination and application of ideas is evident, along with the more indirect construction of an identity as 'strategic' or managerial in content. However, the former is a minority response compared to the view that opportunities for application to organisational practices are unavailable, inappropriate or impeded within the organisation and that the principal outcome of the ideas and the process of 'acquiring' them is an albeit necessarily precarious sense of 'self-confidence'. This points to the analytical value of exploring the translation of knowledge beyond that of the transformation of ideas, objects and the content of identity towards emotional transitions or 'identity work'. It also has significant implications for our understanding of management, management education and the centrality and boundary of knowledge as an organising concept.

Keywords: knowledge, identity, management, 'self-confidence', MBA.

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Debates on the impact of management ideas tend to assume a mechanistic, rather than processual and emotional, view of knowledge with its value or threat conceived of in terms of the extent to which it is directly applied in practice. This paper explores managers' reflections on the consequences of 'learning' a range of explicit management ideas. Some direct translation, combination and application of ideas is evident, along with the more indirect construction of an identity as 'strategic' or managerial in content. However, the former is a minority response compared to the view that opportunities for application to organisational practices are unavailable, inappropriate or impeded within the organisation and that the principal outcome of the ideas and the process of 'acquiring' them is an albeit necessarily precarious sense of 'self-confidence'. This points to the analytical value of exploring the translation of knowledge beyond that of the transformation of ideas, objects and the content of identity towards emotional transitions or 'identity work'. It also has significant implications for our understanding of management, management education and the centrality and boundary of knowledge as an organising concept.

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Suggested track: F - Integrating knowledge across organizations

Management as a (Self) Confidence Trick - The Impact of Management Ideas and Education

Introduction - Diffusion, Knowledge, Management, and Identity Regulation

The search for means through which ostensibly useful ideas and techniques can be acquired and then applied to improve organisational effectiveness has become somewhat of a holy grail. Longstanding debates about innovation and training have been complemented by more recent concerns with learning and knowledge management and, even, societies. Aside from the issue of evaluation and the utility of ideas and techniques, the question of their transfer and application have troubled practitioners and policy makers as well as academics. In the contexts of national governments, public and private sector organisations, including schools and universities, especially management departments, facilitating the development and 'acquisition' of *practically* applicable or relevant knowledge has become a dominant imperative (eg see Becker, 2001).

Our starting point is the growing and varying literature on the 'diffusion' of management ideas. Much of this focuses on the rhetoric of promoters and neglects the 'audience' and whether the ideas are implemented in practice, even though the distinction between acceptance and application - thoughts and deeds - is clearly problematic (Guillen, 1994; Sturdy and Fleming, 2003). There are, of course, albeit crude, tests of whether ideas are adopted or developed as practice/technique as well as on their (lack of) impact on organisational performance (Staw and Epstein, 2000). More sophisticated accounts have also given attention to necessary, but varied adaptation/re-invention/hybridisation processes, especially in relation to institutional contexts (eg Kostova and Roth, 2002) or the de-radicalisation of ideas (Jacques, 1996; Contu and Willmott, 2003). This links with the broader notion of the sociology of translation, where ideas are not only transformed (or translated), but change the objects and other (ie human) actors they come into contact with in networks of ongoing relations (Czariawska and Joerges, 1996; Bloomfield and Best, 1992). However, in an effort to emphasise the activity of 'inanimate' objects (eg technological hardware) in the translation process, the transformation of human actors is seen largely in terms of how the idea transforms the content or label of who they are/become.

This relates to other areas of critical research where the focus is on how management ideas or expertise legitimate the managerial/functional prerogative at a

structural level or, more recently, how discourses shape, 'stick to' or regulate identity, making up entrepreneurial, strategic, customer oriented 'narratives of self' (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Grey, 1999; Parker, 1995). What is neglected in studies of the 'travels' of management ideas or discourses is how they transform not only the form or content of identity, but the existential or emotional experience of it, part of what Alvesson and Willmott call 'identity work' or 'interpretive activity involved in reproducing and transforming self-identity' – identity as a verb (2002: 627; see also Lave and Wenger, 1991). Likewise, studies of the ideological nature of management knowledge do not extend into what that means for the subjective nature of management or knowledge (Hales, 1993 cf Watson, 1994). This theme can be linked to psychodynamic and even institutional perspectives on management (Jackall, 1988) and knowledge (Gill and Whittle, 1992; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) in the sense that the interest in knowledge is seen as a (sometimes self-defeating) way to assuage insecurity which is played on by gurus and consultants and the like (Jackson, 2001; Sturdy, 1997). The implication, which is not often developed, is, of course, that management is concerned with being in control existentially as well as structurally, however fragile that security may be.

Such insights, on their own are, perhaps, unsurprising, not least because studies of learning more generally show the importance of emotional conditions and consequences (eg motivation) in knowledge 'acquisition', almost regardless of its particular form (*Management Learning*, 1997). However, within the context of management learning, its processual nature is largely restricted to the importance of social contexts, everyday (eg work) practices and networks (eg communities of practice) (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Chia, 2003). While such insights are valuable in challenging the largely cognitive view of knowledge as object-like and capable of transfer asocially, the potential utility of knowledge is assumed (cf Contu et al, 2003), rather than of the existential effects of its 'acquisition'. Once again, such a theme is evident in other fields, such as Weick's notion of strategy where, regardless of the form or relevance of this knowledge, the experience of feeling in control is sufficient to reach the (a) destination – 'any old map will do' (Weick, 1987). Clearly, management, knowledge and its mobility are not simply about existential conditions and consequences, nor is a notion of self-confidence peculiar to management as a the symbolic capital of an elite group nor derived solely from it (Bourdieu, 1986). However and much in the same way that emotion has been neglected in organisational theory more generally (Albrow, 1997), these features should be seen as integral to our understanding of the field of knowledge, learning and management.

The paper explores the above themes by drawing on in-depth interview research conducted among UK managers on the relationship between their day-to-day organisational practices and formal management learning experienced contemporaneously and between one and six years beforehand. Their reflections suggest that conventional notions of acquiring, translating and applying management tools and frameworks are barely significant in managers' perceptions. Rather, they suggest that what we consider to be management knowledge should include a form of self-confidence, but in a way which both disguises and reproduces the fragility of knowledge and identity work. In this sense, it might be seen as a 'trick' of confidence in that it is not so much what you know, but what you and others think and feel that you know and that managerial (and others') confidence is partly deceptive in terms of obfuscating its necessarily fragile nature in social contexts.

The paper is structured in the following way. Firstly, we introduce our research which was conducted in a context of MBA education in the UK, where one might expect the practical utility of knowledge to be especially important in terms of student expectations. We then explore this theme, moving towards a focus on identity work and the notion of self-confidence in particular. In the conclusion, we draw out some initial research and policy implications for management, knowledge and management education.

The Research

This study formed an aspect of three funded projects all of which are designed to explore the relationship between learning and management practice. A total of 34 students from the Imperial Executive MBA programme were interviewed in depth between April and November 2002. They ranged from graduates of 1996 to the current intake.

The primary objective of the research was to gain a better understanding of how MBA education, in general, is applied in practice. The questions posed examined the participants' original motivation and expectation, their learning orientations, learning outcomes and learning transfer.

The graduates and students were picked at random, using the alumni database and the Business School's student records. They formed 4 clusters, totalling 34 respondents (22 male, 12 female):

- 8 students who graduated in the years 1996 and 1997
- 9 students who graduated in the years 1999, 2000 and 2001
- 9 students who graduated in 2002
- 8 current students who will graduate in either 2003 or 2004

21 were from the private sector, 10 from the public sector and 3 from the charitable sector.

The sample is naturally biased because the respondents actively chose to be questioned about their personal experiences. In many cases, therefore, they are more participative by nature or enjoy expressing their views. The research is unlikely to include the opinions of those students who are less motivated or passive or less touched by their experience of study. In addition, the information collected is based on the interviewees' self-perception at a particular point in time, and, therefore, potentially transitory.

Findings

As noted, this research was driven by a search for the application of specific management ideas, tools and techniques. There were cases where a technique had been applied and found useful but this was the exception; indeed the converse was frequently voiced.

"I don't really feel that I learnt anything. I mean, things that would have been applicable. For me there wasn't a huge amount that I've brought back into the workplace." (Alex – graduate of 2001)

"It wasn't easy: it wasn't easy to pick out bits and apply them to my specific job...my role was very narrow... difficult to translate." (Harry – graduate of 2002)

A more frequent response was to talk about acquiring 'multiple perspectives', a 'broader picture' and to draw upon the discourse of strategy.

"I would have seen myself as much more narrow-minded in my approach without doing an MBA" (Angus – graduate of 2001)

“So this is what I have now acquired...really the aerial view rather than the microscopic” (Tajinder –graduate of 2002)

“I know much more what’s important. But more importantly I think I know how it fits into the environment” (Nathan – graduate of 2002).

“Broader approach to tackling issues more of an external perspective instead of having blinkers on and tackling issues in the normal environment in which I work... the engineering environment” (Harry – graduate of 2002)

“Others would say there certainly is a broader person, with a wider range of interests.” (Bill – graduate of 1996)

“A more open perspective when addressing issues. It is more strategic thinking that is coming to the fore...strategy plays a bigger role now than before. It was inside-out whereas now it is more of an outside perspective when looking at management decisions” (Harry – graduate of 2002).

“I feel I am a better balanced person. I think I am more confident and stronger. I would say that I am probably more strategic from the technical perspective. I am far better at interpreting corporate behaviour and I think, thinking before acting has been accentuated, so to speak.” (Angus – graduate of 2001)

This strategic approach overlapped with a feeling of being able to control events.

They happen because it is a better product, it is a better system, it is a better way of doing things and eventually, that breaks through the barrier or the status quo or whatever and then it is a success, so that if you can persevere with doing things right, you will generally come out ahead of the posse. you can step back from what is going on and have the confidence that things are going to work out the way you think they are.” (Fergus –graduate of 2001)

“I believe because I have greater confidence in what I know and in myself, I therefore, at least, appear and feel that I have greater conviction in the decisions that I make and I am not saying that I will make decisions rationally but I have far more

information to hand to make informed, sound decisions about things, so I will be far more likely to be a decision maker than I was before” (Penny - graduate of 2002)

Indeed for some this ability to see the ‘big picture’ had been achieved at the expense of acquiring specific skills.

“I think it was very generic...and that was probably necessary in terms of what you try to do... but it was remarkably considering the esteem in which the qualifications are subsequently held. I felt I knew a little about a lot, but I couldn’t have knuckled down to anything else without .. to a particular task within it without further training. It was very generic, very broad brush.” (Jane – graduate of 2001).

But many respondents, like Penny quoted above, emphasised how the MBA had increased their self-confidence, a term that came up on numerous occasions in the respondents own words. Of course increased self-confidence can come from passing any course, particularly when benchmarked against one’s peers:

“I walked in on the first day and there were all these very clever people doing lots of different things in different industries with different functional responsibilities. And you think, well, everyone must be very clever and I felt by the end of it, well, I could cut it with any of them. So my confidence in my own managerial abilities has improved” (Peter – graduate of 2002).

But this confidence was more marked once back in the workplace.

“And I think you become... the whole MBA has made me into a more... relaxed I suppose, professional, rather than somebody who is always questioning their own knowledge and ability” (Neil – current student, first year)

“Greater self-confidence to tackle different things” (Hannah – graduate of 2000)

“Confidence to try things that would be very new” (Clare – graduate of 2001)

“More confidence to move jobs and be comfortable that I could work in different environments” (Hannah – graduate of 2000)

"I think the MBA has given me confidence to make a move to do something."

"It is part and parcel of redefining what I want to do in my life." (Greg- current student, first year)

Yet there remains an inconsistency. If respondents generally disregard the tools and techniques of being of value – even the specific tools and techniques of strategy – then wherein lies the source of this self-confidence? Closer examination of the responses showed that it was in acquiring *the language* or *discourse* of business that was key.

"The approach and the confidence to speak. The MBA gives you the ability to stand up in front of anybody in a conversation and talk through a business perspective" (Neil – current student – first year)

I now have a much greater ability to be able to communicate ... as a result of the learning I have done in the last year" (Chris graduate 2001).

"I believe because I have greater confidence in what I know and in myself, I therefore, at least, appear and feel that I have greater conviction in the decisions that I make and I am not saying that I will make decisions rationally but I have far more information to hand to make informed, sound decisions about things, so I will be far more likely to be a decision maker than I was before" (Alice –graduate 2001)

"I don't think the learning is very deep. I think you can be more convincing by the way that you talk, based on you quoting lots of examples" (Penny – graduate of 2002)

" The ability to speak with a certain air of authority at least" (Oliver – graduate of 2001)

"I have got the language now. I don't always flaunt the MBA perhaps enough. It certainly has carried that credibility which quite surprises me in a way. It certainly has carried the credibility that has let me into the party." (Jane – graduate of 2001)

The last quotation gives another important insight. A number of respondents did not wish to advertise they had an MBA; thus the MBA did not give the respondents confidence merely because it was a particular badge. For example:

“Yes, I have...yes, sort of applied the concepts, although I haven’t told anyone I am applying it. I’m doing it, without saying...What I don’t want to do is encounter any sort of bad resistance.” (Suresh – graduate of 2003)

Language of course is not the only element; there is also a performative element of acting in a self-confident manner. As one respondent put it:

“I perform quite differently now. I am a very different person. I perform in situations quite differently from before.” (Anne –graduate of 2001).

Discussion

A recurring theme in our findings was one of growing self-confidence. A growth in self-confidence represents a change in the perception of self; a self that is more sharply perceived, less ambiguous, more keenly felt and one more positively valued in emotional terms. In short what we are witnessing here is what Alvesson and Wilmott refer to as ‘identity work’ (2002). But how are we to regard self-identity?

In this paper we take the view that that identity construction is about sense making. Further we take it to be relational in character and formed in large part from how others perceive and talk to us in different locations and contexts. As Weick states: “How can I know who I am until I see what they do?” (Weick 1995:23). Identity is about becoming just as much as being (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2001).

Sense making requires that the myriad impressions gleaned from the multifarious social encounters be organised and given a sense of coherence. Giddens has argued for a definition of self that links it to notions of reflexivity and biography: “The self as reflexively understood in terms of his or her biography” (Giddens 1991: 244). McAdams though has taken this notion of biography much further. He claims: “Identity is a life story. A life story is a personal myth that an individual begins working on in late adolescence and young adulthood in order to provide his or her life with unity or purpose and in order to articulate a meaningful niche in the psychosocial world”. (1993: 5).

We are agnostic as to the degree of coherence that subjects require: thus Lash for one is critical of Giddens’s emphasis on a subject’s desire for a unified and homogeneous identity arguing that a bricolage of multiple subject positions is just as likely an outcome. (Lash 2001; Lash and Urry 1994). We also reject any essentialist

position that subjects are always and everywhere creatures of narrative. (Bruner 2004); the desire to create and relate a story of one's life is not an essential prerequisite for a meaningful sense of self. Our position is that subjects in contemporary times increasingly see themselves as engaged or positioned within many 'life projects', some consecutive some simultaneous - all of which become a potential source for meaning and sense making. An MBA is one of many such projects; for some its significance may be considerable; for others it might be trivial. Nevertheless the notion of life as a project (and the MBA being to a variable extent part of that) was well captured in Greg's comment noted above:

"It [the MBA] is part and parcel of redefining what I want to do in my life." (Greg-current student, first year)

Our contention is that taking an MBA can provide a resource which helps certain subjects to secure a sense of who they are – feeling they describe as 'self-confidence'. This sense of self comes not through learning specific tools and techniques - in fact may only be realised at the *expense* of acquiring such tools – but through involvement and positioning in a specific discourse, notably the discourse of strategy. Within this discourse these subjects feel positioned as being in control through having a helicopter or panoptic vision. It is this discourse that "gets them into the party". Of course such confidence is only sustainable so long as the discourse of strategic control and the ordering of subjects in relation to the discourse continues to be meaningful and powerful both to subjects themselves and others. There are though surges of interest in managerial ideologies (Barley and Kunda: 1992 cf Guillen, 1994); it is an open question as to whether the discourse of the MBA will always provide as positive a source of meaning.

We have argued that identity construction is never autonomous but given from outside by others in terms of how they behave towards the subject; hence the status of any given identity is always provisional and subject to revision. No matter how confident a subject may feel there is always anxiety; indeed the more self-confident a subject feels then potentially the greater the anxiety since there is so much more to lose. Deetz (1995) has noted how management is less concerned with managing behaviour in a direct sense and more concerned with managing the 'insides' of workers. Judged from this perspective then, employer sponsorship of workers to undertake MBA can be seen as an aspect of organisational control or identity regulation. But possession of an MBA may not continue to confer high prestige on its

owner. Indeed there are always counterdiscourses which see it as hype or as no replacement for 'seat of the pants' management. (Blanchard and Johnson 1993).

Conclusion

In this paper we have indicated why there is a policy concern about the applicability of taught management ideas and concepts given the perceived poor quality of management practice, particularly in the UK. Given the ubiquitous nature of the MBA as a vehicle for teaching such ideas, we have selected MBA students as our focus. We questioned the view that such ideas can be applied in any direct sense on theoretical grounds; our empirics confirm that such straightforward application is an exception. Rather we anticipated that ideas would be transformed and translated. What we did find is that the MBA provided a discourse which enabled its subjects to present themselves convincingly as managers once back in the workplace, with a language that enabled them to 'join the club'. This discourse positioned its subjects as ones with a strategic vision, who operated from a panoptic position. Many of the subjects claimed that the corollary was a growth in self-confidence. We remain sceptical of the term in providing theoretical understanding and have argued that the MBA can be better viewed as one 'life project', which can to varying degrees become part of identity construction. Of course identity has to be negotiated through 'performance' and confidence can be a bridge between the two.

What then are the policy implications? If the specific tools and techniques associated with an MBA cannot be applied in a direct way, should not managers be avoiding the qualification and should not the State be encouraging the provision of discrete courses devoted to specific tools and techniques? Of course one defence of the MBA is that it is not about training but about education, about exposing students to new perspectives and modes of thought –principally strategic modes of thought. We do not have the space here to consider the alleged distinction between 'training' and 'education'. We note though that to expect direct application of even training is an heroic assumption given that translation and transformation rather than application is more the order of the day. But if the MBA is regarded from a discourse perspective, then that does expose its problematic and provisional nature. We suspect though that were it to lose support, then it would simply be replaced by something similar in intent - another discourse that speaks to those who strive to be senior managers.

We recognise our claims in this paper need to be qualified by the nature of our research, based upon MBA students, past and present. The MBA course is often

presented as an opportunity to change careers or move from middle to senior management –in short as a pivotal moment. Undertaking an MBA is likely to encourage considerable reflection and considerable anxiety, which may not be the case for other forms of management education and training. Moreover we recognise the dangers of trying to glean insights from respondents like ours who self-select to talk about their experiences. It is almost inevitable that we talked to those who favour a narrative mode of reflection or who are more prone to self-reflexion in the first place. We also echo the statement made by Alvesson and Willmott in relation to their own work: “it is relevant to note here how the research interview itself acts as an open-ended input to identity work. Research interventions such as interviews or questionnaires do not measure the ‘truth’ of identity but interactively provoke its articulation and may stimulate a reappraisal of identities” (Alvesson and Willmott 2002: 640).

The MBA is often described as a ‘prestigious’ qualification but it is as well to recall the original meaning of ‘prestigious’ and ‘prestige’: ‘a conjuring trick’ an illusion’, ‘deceitful’. (Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary). Magicians and conjurers experience anxiety that their tricks will be revealed so eliminating their ‘raison d’etre’. We concluded by noting the precarious nature of any confidence generated from undertaking an MBA and being exposed to its tools and techniques. This applies a fortiori to people like us who teach these tools and techniques in the first place.

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