OBJECTS OF DESIRE

The relevance of project management techniques to everyday business as usual management is sometimes called into question. In a sense, this is understandable, since it isn't easy to see where one ends and the other begins, and managers may well feel that they project-manage their day jobs quite adequately without the imposition of the tools, techniques and disciplines of the arcane art of Project Management.

Rod Gray

I believe that this is a mistake. Project management approaches can and should have a place in business as usual, but confusion arises through the baleful influence of the Personal Objective. Let me explain. I'm all in favour of bosses letting their people know what they should be trying to achieve; I think of it as pointing out the steeple on the distant horizon that we're trying to reach. What causes problems is the measurement of personal achievement in crude terms of succeed or fail against (often quite arbitrary) specific objectives. This is appropriate when assessing a project (see below), but quite inappropriate when assessing a manager.

The idea of management by objectives (MbO) dates back to **the** 50's when Peter Drucker suggested that every manager needed "clearly spelled **out** objectives*' derived from the "goals of the business enterprise". The way the system usually works was developed in the early 70's by John Humble and quickly caught on to become quite the accepted fashion in the late 70"s and early 80's.

At first sight the principle seems sound enough; if you want a manager to do something it's pretty important for him to know what you want him to do (and to have some input into setting the targets). It also appeals to the adherents of the "what gets measured gets done" school, since objectives can be designed to be observable in their achievement. Unfortunately, as a management tool MbO is a blunt instrument of steam-hammer proportions. This is one reason why it lingers on. Basically, it requires little or no management skill to administer; subject to audit it could be done by computer or a schoolchild of average intelligence during work experience.

The subtle art

Management, on the other hand, is a subtle art. We select people for management jobs by assessing their skills and experience in problem-solving, decision-making, communicating, learning, and taking responsibility for acting in the interests of the organisation. We look for resourceful, intelligent, educated people for these roles. Why is this? Well, because the manager will be required to act in certain ways which, experience has shown, will be conducive to the organisation's well-being. Since we can't predict exactly what situations will arise, we fall back on picking someone whose personal qualities will enable him to deal with the widest possible range of eventualities.

You might, then, logically expect management control tools to encourage the display of these attributes. A quick dip into psychological theory finds E L Thorndike telling us as early as 1911 that "acts which are rewarded (reinforced) tend to be repeated: acts which are not reinforced tend to die out". Too much reference to B F Skinner and his rats might be a little tasteless in this context - enough to say that Thorndike's Law of Effect has been pretty satisfactorily proved. At this point the supporters of MbO will probably be claiming that their approach does just this - rewards satisfactory behaviour so that it gets repeated. It doesn't. What it does is to reward outcomes, not behaviours. Of course, consistent behaviour of certain types may correlate to successful outcomes, but specific instances of certain behaviours may not. (Incidentally, behaviours which lead directly to a successful outcome are self-reinforcing, and probably don't need to be artificially reinforced anyway).

It doesn't require much thought to see the flaws in a system which rewards outcomes, rather than behaviours. Perhaps the most obvious is that it may not be the manager's personal contribution which gets rewarded. Success may have resulted from the efforts of others in spite of, rather than because of, the manager's own activities. It might have been the result of good luck rather than good management and it may have been bought at a high cost to the company in terms of other areas of the business not covered by specified objectives. Likewise, the objective may not have been achieved despite brilliant and valiant efforts by the manager concerned which converted potential catastrophe into a near miss. MbO is very bad at reinforcing the behaviours and qualities for which managers were probably selected. To do this requires a level of understanding, communication and, yes, trust, between the manager and his boss which is frankly hard to achieve. The important things are difficult to measure and evaluate. Managers of the Theory X school (and there are still a few about) will find this very uncomfortable. It is, though, perfectly consistent with the ideas of teamworking and recognition of contribution which go with the company's values.

The principle of Thorndike's law of effect is that you have to look for examples of behaviours which you want to see repeated, and reward them. The consequences of such behaviour on one specific occasion are irrelevant - it doesn't matter whether success or failure ensued. What matters is whether the behaviour was likely to lead to success and whether the same behaviour should be

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Objects of Desire continued

displayed if similar circumstances arise in the future. If so it should be reinforced even if it didn't quite succeed this time.

Inflexible objectives

The second major problem with MbO is inflexibility. A manager may decide that an objective is no longer relevant, or that something else is more important. Again, MbO supporters will say that reviews form part of the system. This is really not a sustainable argument. Reviews cannot be held frequently enough or be responsive enough to changing circumstances to cope with the day to day vicissitudes of a manager's life. Either managers are appointed to make decisions and take appropriate action within their spheres of responsibility or they aren't. Who is in a better position to judge what is needed than the manager himself? The old view that greater seniority in the hierarchy either confers or results from greater wisdom and perspicacity seems rather weakly supported by empirical evidence.

There is a deeper and more serious danger in relying on pre-set objectives as a general management tool. The idea that in complex management situations the relationships between cause and effect can be properly understood is increasingly being questioned. Ralph Stacey in his book "Managing Chaos" asserts very strongly that the future is in a real sense unknowable. This means that setting objectives and long-term targets is literally pointless since we can't know in advance what a desirable or feasible objective would be. Even if we could determine an appropriate objective we couldn't be sure what actions (causes) would bring about the desired effect. In fact, concentration on pre-set objectives blinkers the manager to the ever-changing world. For Stacey success Comes from "learning in real time" instead of "planning or envisioning", from using "intuition, reasoning by analogy, reflection upon experience" and "continually creative interaction".

I started this article by drawing a distinction between project management and business as usual. We think of projects as sets of tightly-drawn objectives with clear success/failure criteria and I've been arguing that managers' jobs should not be seen in this simplistic way, so where does that leave the project? My point is that projects are not jobs, nor are they people. The elements of a manager's job which can be reduced to specific, finite objectives can and perhaps should be defined as projects. Success or failure against these objectives can then be seen as project successes and project failures rather than human ones, and the extent to which an individual manager's behaviour affected the project outcomes can be assessed as a learning mechanism.

A manager's job is a complex interaction of balancing and counterbalancing forces, much too holistic for the bottom-line tunnel vision of MbO to cope with. The naive maxim "what gets measured gets done" has an unfailing corollary: "what's not being measured gets left". Let's keep the simplistic measuring syndrome safely constrained within project structures, and leave the fuzzy, contradictory open systems of management free to get on with their job.

Rod Gray