Manager, Meet Maslow

Complexity, Creativity, and the future of Work

I would hope that American managers - indeed, managers worldwide - continue to appreciate what I have been saying almost from day one: that management is so much more than exercising rank and privilege, that it is much more than "making deals." Management affects people and their lives.

-- Peter F. Drucker

The great end of all human industry is the attainment of happiness. For this were arts invented, sciences cultivated, laws ordained, and societies modeled, by the most profound wisdom of patriots and legislators. Even the lonely savage, who lies exposed to the inclemency of the elements and the fury of wild beasts, forgets not, for a moment, this grand object of his being.

-- David Hume

In 1943, psychologist, philosopher, and leader of the Human Potential movement, Abraham Maslow wrote a paper entitled, *A Theory of Human Motivation*, in which he produced one of the most useful diagrams for understanding the human condition, the now famous Hierarchy of Needs.

A pyramid with five levels, Maslow's Hierarchy of needs shows a progression of human needs from bottom to top, beginning with the most basic physiological needs at the bottom on up to more highly evolved needs at the top. Maslow contended that the most basic physiological needs, such as adequate food, water, and sleep must be addressed before a person can have a basic sense of safety. Further on up the pyramid, one cannot have a sense of positive esteem, which includes self-esteem, confidence, achievement, and respect for and by others, without first feeling a sense of love and belonging, including friendship, family, and sexual intimacy.

At this point, it should be noted that Drucker viewed people as an organization's most valuable resource, and that a manager's job is to prepare and free people to perform. This act of "freeing people" involves allowing the workers' to quench their needs in life via their work and their engagement with the organisation.

So far, organisations have focused on the needs falling in the first four levels of Maslov's hierarchy. Maslow himself made an important distinction between these levels—physiological, safety, love/belonging, and esteem, and the fifth—Self-actualization.   These first four levels he referred to as "deficiency needs", whereas the fifth and highest level, the level of Self-actualization, he described as "being needs."

The first four levels, the deficiency needs, are about fulfilling a sense of lack. These are the levels to which most organisations and managers first secure their employees and stakeholders to. Provision of money to afford the necessities of life, a sense of camaraderie, friendship and teamwork to provide for love/belonging, and a code of ethics and an environment instilling respect and self-confidence: these have traditionally been the focal areas of good management.

But things change at the fifth level, the "being needs" level, which is about striving for something better. Unlike the other levels, these needs are less and less tangible, and thus more and more difficult to quantify and allocate.

According to Maslow's model, when we desire to create, when we desire delight ourselves and others by bringing something new into the world, we are actively expressing one of the highest aspects of our human potential.

This is where the need for creativity comes in. While so far the firm may have succeeded in empowering their employees with deficiency needs, they time has come to provide self-actualisation. As life and work meet, and the distinction between the two is blurred, it is now the corporation's duty to infuse creativity in its DNA, and in the lives of its constituents, its workers. Work environments which do not fulfil this need, will no longer satisfy employees, will see no innovation, and will no longer thrive.

Technology and broadening the horizons of Management

When we think of the future, the first word that pops in the mind is 'technology'. Indeed, technology is changing our world much more rapidly than our minds can even understand. From the dawn of the wheel to the age of big data and the cloud, technology has always been about making lives easier, less hardy, and allowing us to pursue self-actualisation by replacing tasks termed "menial". In fact, robots have been replacing humans in jobs involving manual labour for a long time now, be it via assembly lines or vending machines.

But robots may very well annexe the large territory occupied by the erstwhile middle management, much before it intervenes the lives of skilled labour. In fact, Dilbert creator and satirist Scott Adams recently said "I think it will be a long time before a robot can replace a sales person or a graphic designer. But it won't be long before a computer can do project management and resource allocation better than humans."

It is not difficult to foresee this. Compared to most skilled jobs, management is not hard, but just complex and tiresome. The individual tasks of management are fairly simple, and it is the sum of many simple steps multiplied due to multiple projects that makes middle management a problem of dealing with the complicated whole. If this is how you imagine complexity, you have hardly seen the greatest challenges lying ahead.

This is the form of complexity that modern information technology is already adept at handling. A good project management system can go around handing out assignments, checking on progress, and adjusting schedules and budgets on the fly, and easily juggle the dozens of such projects simultaneously. It may not take more than a decade or so before we have automated systems almost completely taking over project management with a very high degree of quality control. Such systems may indeed also be very good at estimating the time and resources needed to complete projects, and can share their experiences through the cloud. Big Data will help these systems determine how long the various stages of the project should take, and the resources that are needed, based on similar projects elsewhere. They shall also be free of human bias and optimism, and will be entirely objective, and won't fear being fired if it tells the boss the project won't be done before the CEO visits. The middle manager of the future is one with no flesh and bones!

Who then, shall be the most prized employees of the organisation? They shall be employees who have mastered the skills which technology can scarcely hope to touch. These shall be the artists, the writers, the designers, the actors, the scientists… the creative types!

Management as it has been treated the world over so far, has been about optimizing resource allocation, something a robot can learn relatively easily, at least compared to most skilled jobs. But if you asked Drucker, management has always been way beyond that. Drucker's philosophy maintained that management is a liberal art—one that takes into account not only economics, but also history, social theory, law, and the sciences. As he said, "it deals with people, their values, their growth and development, social structure, the community and even with spiritual concerns . . . the nature of humankind, good and evil."

Are we creating such managers yet?

Business and the Liberal Arts

That people even in well paid jobs choose ever earlier retirement is a severe indictment of our organizations -- not just business, but government service, the universities. These people don't find their jobs interesting.

– Peter Drucker

Business has much to learn from the arts… Studying the arts can help business people communicate more eloquently…Studying the arts can also help companies learn how to manage bright people…Studying the art world might even hold out the biggest prize of all— helping business become more innovative. Companies are scouring the world for new ideas. In their quest for creativity, they surely have something to learn from the creative industries.

—Schumpeter: The Art of Management, The Economist

As we just discussed, the workers most valued in the future will be those who can think creatively and generate the ideas that will propel economic growth. If we teach our students and future employees just one trade or skill, they may be obsolete in a matter of years. They need to understand how to free their minds and think, and look at lots of information and connect dots – all skills that a classic liberal education gives!

Such skills are best fostered in a traditional liberal arts environment. Art can thus be a role model for business, since all great art pushes boundaries beyond the established norms. Thus, it can teach us about aesthetics, ambiguity, diversity, chaos, change, courage, and complexity. Art-based trainings for example, can bring forth many of the tacitly held beliefs and assumptions that managers and employees have.

It takes imagination and creativity to discover opportunities for growth and turn ideas into action. You will need to develop a creative, resourceful, multi-disciplinary workforce. To keep people engaged and motivated, will mean finding ways to overcome the constraints imposed by traditional ways of leading and managing.

Creativity and solving the world's most pressing problems

All the problems in the world are nothing in front of human creativity.
-- Prof. Muhammad Yunus

Professor Muhammad Yunus is best known for his work in microfinance and for the creation of the Grameen Bank, with which he shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006. Yunus, who has been regarded as the Henry Ford of microfinance, built a bank with thousands of employees delivering useful services to millions of customers. What is somewhat lesser known is his conception of the idea of Social Business. In fact, he initiated several efforts such as the Grameen Creative Lab, with a mission to eradicate poverty through the promotion of the social business idea and the implementation of social business projects.

The Social Business aims to create "very good products and services for the poor people, products and services with the right price and sustainable from an economic and environmental point of view." And according to Prof. Yunus, "The essence of Social Business lays in creativity"

A native of one of the world's poorest and most-densely populated countries, Bangladeshi-born Yunus is a firm believer in the power of human ingenuity to solve the world's problems. Human beings have unlimited capacity for creativity, he says. The real challenge is raising awareness of that capacity; then understanding how and where to channel it.

Social businesses, he says, don't come in ready-made, off-the-shelf formulas. But he believes creative minds once put to work can come up with appropriate solutions. "That's the beauty of social business, it makes you think, makes you bring creative ideas."

Yunus has already set up some pioneering social businesses in his native Bangladesh, working with leading multinationals.

For example, in 2006, Yunus led a joint venture between Grameen, the microfinance conglomerate he established, and European food giant Danone, to produce high nutrition yoghurt. The yoghurt, known as "Shakti Doi", meaning "power yoghurt" in Bengali, aims to reduce malnutrition in Bangladeshi children via a tasty and locally popular snack packed with nutrients that the target population suffers from a deficiency of. This while also creating a manufacturing and distribution network that provides income and job opportunities for the local community.

Design thinking and creativity has been engaged to help society in several other meaningful ways as well. A celebrated example is that of same language subtitling (SLS), or subtitling TV programs in the same language as the audio, traditionally meant for deaf viewers. Brij Kothari at the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad realised that SLS can make reading practice an incidental, automatic, and subconscious part of popular TV entertainment, and spread mass literacy at a very low per-person cost in India. Studies have since demonstrated that reading abilities improved manifold among schoolchildren exposed to 30 minutes a week of Rangoli on Doordarshan with SLS, and over 90% preferred subtitles due to their interest in learning the lyrics of Bollywood songs. SLS has been nationalised in India and China as a part of literacy programs, and has been supported by UNESCO. Educational researchers are now advocating the addition of SLS-style 'open' subtitling to music video on the web and across the world.

In Prof. Yunus's view, an overwhelming majority of human creativity is used only for the pursuit of self-interest or is wasted entirely. "The world has become made up of money chasers and that's wrong – we are not just money-making robots, we are human beings with enormous capacity," he says.

What tends to be overlooked he says is the broader range of possible business solutions available to solving the world's problems. By applying creativity to solving problems in a business framework, all the world's problems would be solved, he says.

Need of the hour

To understand the process of creative genius, it is valid for business people to look at the model of the artist. The business of the artist is to create, navigate opportunity, explore possibility, and master creative breakthrough. We need to restore art, the creation of opportunity, to business.

-- Brandweek (1998)

According to the Adobe study on creativity, only 1 in 4 people believe they are living up to their own creative potential and 75% of respondents said they are under growing pressure to be productive rather than creative, despite the fact that they are increasingly expected to think creatively on the job. Worse, only 39% of global respondents described themselves as creative.

Creative employees have often been dismissed as moody, erratic, eccentric, and arrogant, but as managers, you can't just get rid of them. We need to learn to get the best out of creative employees, and recruiting "easy to manage" people (and encouraging such traits) will lead to mediocrity for the firm!

Suppressed creativity has been described as "a malign organizational tumour." Although every organization today makes grandiose claims to care about innovation, understanding what it takes to keep creative people happy and productive is the need of the hour!

Creativity needs to be understood not as the mystical attribute reserved for the lucky few, but a trait that can be developed, nurtured, and managed. We learn to be creative by experimenting, exploring, questioning assumptions, using imagination and synthesizing information.

Art is thus a potent catalyst for a deeper inquiry into business issues, providing the means for 'artful reflection' in organizational development.

Some corporations have already embraced the use of arts programs by corporations to meet organizational development needs. Dozens of Fortune 500 corporations and countless smaller firms employ arts-based learning in participatory workshops, skill-based training programs, hands-on consultancies with business units, individual and team coaching, case studies in- action, and lecture/demonstrations at leadership conferences. Events combining learning with entertainment are also growing rapidly in popularity. Companies use these various programs to foster creative thinking, promote the development of new leadership models, and strengthen employee skills in critical areas such as collaboration, conflict resolution, change management, presentation/public performance, and intercultural communication. Clearly, many business leaders have concluded that there are valuable lessons to be learned from the experiences and insights of artists.

In a sense, it is time not just for the individual but also for the firm to see itself through Maslow's glasses. Complexity is essentially a higher need for self-actualisation and creation. Be it complexity in business, education, or development, it is time we let go of our inhibitions and seek the solution in creativity.

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