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Some Half-truths of Management

"There are no whole truths; all truths are half-truths" (Alfred North Whitehead). So here are a few in management.

WE LIVE IN TIMES OF GREAT CHANGE.

Have you heard this before—say in the last hour? Did you know that when a laptop detects a CEO about to type a speech, it automatically enters: "We live in times of great change." Why bother the CEO to type it again, since just about every management speech in the past few decades has begun with this line. *That never changes.*

Do we really live in times of great change? Look around and tell me what's changed fundamentally. Your food, your furniture, your friends, your fixations? Are you wearing a tie, or high heels? How come: because you always have? How about your car? Under the hood is probably a four-cycle, internal combustion engine. That was in the Model T Ford.

When you got dressed this morning, did you say to yourself: "If we live in times of great change, how come we are still buttoning buttons?" (from Wikipedia: "Functional buttons with buttonholes for fastening or closing clothes appeared first in Germany in the 13th century".)

What's my point? That we only notice what is changing, and most things are not. Of course, some things are changing: information technology, most notably. Zap, I hit a few keys and Wikipedia tells me about buttons. I hope you have taken notice of this new technology, because it is rendering great changes. But I hope that you are also taking notice of all the things that are not changing, because they are no less important. Managing change without managing continuity is anarchy.

THE WORLD IS BECOMING MORE GLOBAL.

Often, when I work with groups of managers in various parts of the world, I ask them whose businesses have more than half their sales outside the home country. You would be surprised how few do. (If a quintessentially global company like General Electric has about half its sales in the United States, then it is better described as a quintessentially American company.) Think of how much retailing, banking, food, and so on, is local. On the other hand, more than a century ago, Singer sewing machines were sold as globally as are Apple phones today.

The fact of the matter is that some businesses have long been global, and a great many remain local.

MANAGEMENT SITS ON TOP.

Of what? The pay scale, to be sure, and probably the headquarters building too. But mostly on top of that ubiquitous chart. So what? If, as CEO, you see yourself on top of your organization, does that help you keep on top of what is going on in your organization? No. This top is the worst place to manage an organization: looking down on everybody else. Try the ground instead. Don't we have enough disconnected managing already?

FROM THIS TOP COMES DECISIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR EVERYONE ELSE TO IMPLEMENT.

IKEA has a terrific strategy: selling unassembled furniture so that we can take it home in our cars, which saves us and the company [lots of money](#). According to IKEA's own website, this idea came from the ground. A worker tried to put a table in his car, and it didn't fit, so he took off the legs. Then came the key insight that eventually changed the strategy, and the industry: "If we have to take the legs off, don't our customers do too?" Who asked that: a CEO on top? Of course, key to this becoming strategic was a company culture that enabled this idea to get to the CEO, to sprinkle holy water upon it. But I'll bet this particular CEO, like most successful entrepreneurs, spent lots of time at the bottom finding out what was going on. Thus: from everywhere, "implementation" included, come little insights that can emerge into big strategies.

ORGANIZATIONS NEED HEROIC LEADERS.

Really? How often have heroic leaders ridden into established organizations on great white horses, only to fall into black holes? New organizations may need aggressive leadership, but most others need engaged management—quiet, humble, thoughtful. Enough narcissism in the executive suites.

PEOPLE ARE HUMAN RESOURCES.

Not me! Feel free to let yourself be called a human resource. I am a human being, thank you. Not even a human asset, let alone human capital. Enough of the demeaning vocabulary of economics—turning us all into things. Resources are things we throw away when we no longer need them. Is that how to build a great enterprise: by throwing away the human beings? (It's politely called "downsizing".) Airlines used to refer to passengers as "self-loading cargo." Are the HR words really any better?

IF YOU CAN'T MEASURE IT, YOU CAN'T MANAGE IT.

This is just plain silly. If you can't measure it, you had better manage it. And if you can measure it, you had better manage it even more carefully. Think of all that matters in management—and in life—that is tough to measure: culture, engagement, leadership, the market for a truly novel product (who ever got that right?), even management itself. And tell me, did anyone who uttered this nonsense ever even try to measure the performance of measurement, instead of assuming it is wonderful? I guess, then, that we shall have to get rid of management and measurement too, not to mention truly new products.

I could go on, since too much management goes on and on with its half-truths. Instead I'll just quote Winston Churchill, that human being who lived in times of greater change than most of us can possibly imagine:

"[People] occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing happened."

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