

EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

What Managers Really Do

When they aren't dealing with interruptions, says Henry Mintzberg, they have three basic ways to exert their influence

Managers, to Henry Mintzberg's way of thinking, don't get enough respect.

While plenty is written about leadership these days, Dr. Mintzberg, who is the Cleghorn professor of management studies at McGill University and a well-known management scholar, finds that there is surprisingly little serious study of managers and the essential work they do in organizations.

Dr. Mintzberg is out to change that. Back in 1973, he published a book called "The Nature of Managerial Work," based on his doctoral dissertation at MIT's Sloan School of Management. In that research, Dr. Mintzberg studied what managers actually do—by following five executives through a workweek. He has now returned to the subject with a new book called "Managing," due out in September. For his latest book, Dr. Mintzberg again studied managers in action. This time he observed how 29 of them—from a CEO of a major bank to a manager of refugee camps—each spent a day. What he found were jobs filled with interruptions and activity, and varying widely by the type of organization.

Dr. Mintzberg spoke with MIT Sloan Management Review senior editor Martha E. Mangelsdorf for Business Insight. Here are edited excerpts of the interview.

BUSINESS INSIGHT: In your new book, you say there are a number of misconceptions about management. Can you talk about what some of those are, and what the reality is?

DR. MINTZBERG: The great myth is the manager as orchestra conductor. It's this idea of standing on a pedestal and you wave your baton and accounting comes in, and you wave it somewhere else and marketing chimes in with accounting, and they all sound very glorious. But management is more like orchestra conducting during rehearsals, when everything is going wrong.

Peter Drucker said the manager is both composer and conductor. It's very grand and glorious, but I think it's a myth.

Then there are all these lists of the qualities of the effective manager. So I said, well, for the sake of a better world, here's a comprehensive list of the qualities of an effective manager, combined from all the lists—and there are 50 or so items on it! Put kryptonite on the list, and even Superman wouldn't succeed as a manager.

So I talk about what I call "the inevitably flawed manager." We're all flawed, but basically, effective managers are people whose flaws are not fatal under the circumstances. Maybe the best managers are simply ordinary, healthy people who aren't too screwed up.

BUSINESS INSIGHT: Another aspect of management that your research, and apparently other research, reveals is the high degree of interruptions that managers face.

DR. MINTZBERG: Yes, that comes out of my original doctoral thesis, but it's held up throughout the years: Management is largely about interruption. But email—and especially BlackBerries in the pocket and all that—really makes it much worse.

BUSINESS INSIGHT: Suppose you were meeting with a group of new managers who were just about to start their first day on their managerial jobs, and you had a few minutes to share some ideas with them, things they should know about the jobs they're about to start. What would you tell them?

DR. MINTZBERG: Be prepared. It's going to be a lot of interruption, a lot of pressures. And I'd go through the three kinds of planes—that you have a choice of managing through information, or through people, or through action. You're going to manage through all of them, but understand the difference and understand the choices.

BUSINESS INSIGHT: You talk about the three planes. Tell me a bit more about that.

DR. MINTZBERG: Basically, managing is about influencing action. Managing is about helping organizations and units to get things done, which means action. Sometimes managers manage actions directly. They fight fires. They manage projects. They negotiate contracts.

One step removed, they manage people. Managers deal with people who take the action, so they motivate them and they build teams and they enhance the culture and train them and do things to get people to take more effective actions.

And two steps removed from that, managers manage information to drive people to take action—through budgets and objectives and delegating tasks and designing organization structure and all those sorts of things.

Today I think we have much too much managing through information—what I call "deeming." People sit in their offices and think they're very clever because they deem that you will increase sales by 10%, or out the door you go. Well, I can do that. My granddaughter could do that; she's four. It doesn't take genius to say: Increase sales or out you go. That's the worst of managing through information.

BUSINESS INSIGHT: What's the alternative?

DR. MINTZBERG: The alternative is to give more attention to the people plane and the action plane. Even when you're managing information, you can manage in a much more nuanced way than just shooting a bunch of figures around.