

Editorial Comment

Do You Believe in Management

Being a copywriter I am primarily interested in the way managers express their thoughts. I try to help them with putting the right words in the right order. When writing for a company as a whole, which is called 'corporate communication', the words should then come from a number of managers who are supposed to work together.

Philosophy appears to me as a very practical matter. It manifests itself in the language used (and therefore in the thinking), in what is highly valued, and in many other everyday matters which have a profound and immediate effect on where the energy of people is directed to and how efficiently it is being used. However practical, philosophy is also elusive and cannot be discovered by analysis. But it is immediately obvious when it is missing. Without it management concepts like 'culture' and 'strategy' lose their meaning and become purely technical abstractions. Without it management loses its believability and, as a consequence, to a large extent its effectiveness in communication.

Most of what communication specialists say stems from dividing the public into well defined target groups, each of which gets a different message. But this, to a certain extent, inevitably leads to creating different identities. In fact, the emphasis placed upon the target groups leaves the company with a fragmented image. People have difficulties in simply believing what management representatives are saying, because their statements are often at the same time contradicted elsewhere. This is serious enough, for management that is not believed in will certainly have problems in getting things done.

Generally, managers and their consultants are trying to solve this situation on a theoretical basis. Therefore they make use of two approaches.

First, they seem to give up the idea of a corporate identity by giving a measure of autonomy to parts of the organization, and labelling them as 'business units'. In this way they make the company look like a portfolio of businesses. Each of those can be taken out and sold with a minimum of damage to the other units. What actually happens is that the unity of the whole company is lost. The remaining binding factor is the financial return on investment. This kind of reality is hardly possible to communicate, because it is of no interest to the customers of goods and services produced by the organization, nor for the people who work there. The financial reality is of course of very high interest to 'corporate raiders'. If they notice that the added value of being a whole is missing, they will soon find that the separate parts can be sold with a substantial profit. And strike.

Second, another way of denying the problem is found in a specific use of the concepts 'strategy' and 'culture'. In this view the organization has to make a so called 'strategic fit' with its environment. But simultaneously it has to maintain a 'corporate culture', an identity by which it is separated from its environment. This clearly is not a very practical situation. In their organization managers see themselves forced to underline the cultural strength ('what we do and what we want'). But outside they see themselves forced to deny the cultural characteristics, especially in their communication with the market ('we comply to what you want').

Instead of leaving it just at that and trying to cope with the situation (a job they are well paid for), managers are often induced in the theoretical construction of a reality which should solve the problem. A 'mission statement' or a 'corporate philosophy'. Usually this is a very compact summing up of the principles the company stands for. It consists of carefully chosen words in sentences that are very abstract. Such a statement indeed

seems to provide a guideline for dealing with every possible difficulty.

Only if it is a theoretical construction, it stipulates what managers should say 'as if' they had an abstract corporate personality. Since managers in reality don't possess such a thing they have to be actors. In this way a manager might even be expected to use his communicative skills to mask the irrationality of his situation. Words are devoid of meaning. What is said can hardly be remembered, only the impression remains. A performance of power, based on nothing more than an act of will.

This has little in common with a story a manager

can tell which can be understood because it expresses his ideas about how the company should handle its problems. Such a story is real in origin and intention, so that it can be believed and people can act upon it. A story like that is certainly not a philosophy. But a manager might need some philosophy to be able to tell it.

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