

## Review of Mintzberg on Managing

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I bumped into McGill professor Karl Moore and he said “Have you read Mintzberg’s latest book? It’s his best yet.”

That claim seemed improbable considering how important Henry Mintzberg’s earlier books were. Yet on reading it I have to say that I think Dr. Moore may be right.

Mintzberg’s latest book is simply called *Managing* and it does an outstanding job of describing what the strange activity of managing really is.

Notice that word “describing.” There are endless numbers of books telling you how to manage (or lead) but very few that tell you what management is.

Mintzberg writes “*management is neither a science nor a profession; it is a practice learned primarily by experience, and rooted in context.*”

The crazy world of the manager doing twenty things at once, working off-the-cuff in a situation only half understood is not a flawed system—that’s what management is.

If we envision a smoothly running machine where the manager studies reports and sits in calm control of the situation then we are not envisioning the real world of management.

### **Big Picture**

Mintzberg draws a helpful framework of managers operating at three levels: information, people and action. At the level of information they are controlling information flows, at the level of people they are getting things done through others

and at the level of action they are personally involved in making stuff happen.

Experts have a fondness for lauding one or another part of this totality. In recent times the managing through people aspect has been a popular topic. But whenever we step away from the gestalt of all three planes we are misrepresenting what management is.

Another common failing is that we focus inordinately on how managers lead their team. Observation shows that managing outwards is just as much a part of the manager’s job as managing downwards. We make this mistake because we have a distorted vision of what management is.

### **Conundrums**

Mintzberg devotes a delightful chapter to the conundrum of managements. One conundrum is the “syndrome of superficiality”: the higher up you go in the organization the less you know about what you are managing. The head of customer service is usually far from the front line. Mintzberg’s observation is that these conundrums cannot be solved; only mitigated. The idea that problems cannot be solved is not one you often hear from consultants or gurus, but it is essential we grasp this if we want to live in the real world of managing.

### **No Superheroes**

Mintzberg also argues that all managers are flawed; no one can be competent in all the traits needed to be great. But fortunately people can be good enough despite their flaws; particularly if they have been careful or lucky in finding a fit with their role.

This notion of flawed human beings as managers is a far cry from what we usually envision when we hire and develop managers.

**Takeaway**

I wonder how often I am drawing on some fantasy vision of managers when I write about recruitment or performance management or development. Much of what we do in human capital management is based on our vision of what managers should be and Mintzberg shows us how flawed that vision often is.

I think managers who read this book will say ‘Yes that is me, that is what I really do.’ They’ll feel better in recognizing their nutty world is indeed the normal world of managing. They’ll perform better through understanding the real nature of their roles rather than the fairy tale ideals that dominate our collective imaginations.

Mintzberg’s genius has always simply been to see what is, breaking through the ideological lenses that distort our understanding of the world.

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Henry Mintzberg’s book *Managing* is available at online and at bookstores.

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