

# strategy+business

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Thought Leaders

## Management by Reflection

**Managing** author Henry Mintzberg believes that to improve business schools, we must first understand the essence of what managers do.

by Art Kleiner

One of the most consistently interesting sources of management thinking and education is Henry Mintzberg, the John Cleghorn Professor of Management Studies in the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University in Montreal. In 1973, Mintzberg first made his mark with *The Nature of Managerial Work* (Harper and Row), a study of the working lives of five chief executives. Since then, he has been a prominent voice against ritualistic decision making (in his influential 1994 book, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning* [Free Press]), in favor of business school reform (in his 2004 book, *Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development* [Berrett-Koehler]), and in support of commonsense organizational practices (especially in his most recent book, *Managing* [Berrett-Koehler, 2009], a tour de force based on in-depth observation of 29 executives at work).

Mintzberg is also an innovator in education. Like several other noted management and leadership writers (Manfred Kets de Vries and Karl Weick come to mind), he has devoted himself to developing new forms of executive education, aimed at leaders, who must combine analytic and intuitive skills on the job. This effort has led to a model of intensive training that Mintzberg calls “natural development.” Offered at McGill University, Lancaster University in the U.K., and the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, the training involves courses in which managers draw on one another’s experiences and insights. He is also experimenting with self-directed learning, using programs by such luminaries as Marshall Goldsmith and human resources expert David Ulrich, along with his own material, through a private company he cofounded called [CoachingOurselves](#).

The idea of a class without instructors has some precedent in management studies: Robert Blake and Jane Mouton offered exactly that with their managerial grid model in the 1960s. Mintzberg’s innovation is to ground the class in on-the-spot problem solving: Participants work on real-world cases that they bring to class. If the natural development approach turns out to be successful, it could help bring a higher level of managerial competence to many organizations, and companies would no longer need to rely on expensive outside instructors (or send participants far away to attend training sessions).

Mintzberg met with s+b for breakfast in New York in January. Our purpose: To learn about the link between understanding management and reinventing management education. We are grateful to Peter Allan Todd, dean of Desautels Faculty of Management, for helping this interview develop.

**S+B: *Managing* opens by saying that management isn’t a science, it’s a practice. How much do we understand about the nature of this practice?**

**MINTZBERG:** There is a lot that we don’t understand. Our current knowledge of organizations is similar to the science of biology before biologists had names for different species of mammals. They were all “mammals,” just as consultants say the latest technique is good for everybody. It’s as if we were incapable of distinguishing between bears and beavers.

I think it’s amazing how few people are actively researching managerial work — empirical studies of what managers do — as

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their main focus. Many people are concerned with organizational issues, but because they don't actually study what managers do, they lack insight into the essence of organizations. Even topics like the impact of e-mail on the way managers work have not been adequately studied. Some research has been conducted on the effects of the Internet on behavior — for example, the way people tend to casually shoot off e-mail messages and then wonder, "Why did I send that?" But there have been no real studies of the impact of e-mail on day-to-day management activity.

My own speculative hypothesis is that e-mail takes an already frenetic job and, in many cases, drives it over the edge. It increases the force of the pressure. At the same time, it provides a much easier way to get the information you need to deal with that pressure. People do a lot of tangible things with e-mail that should be researchable: getting themselves into problems, resolving problems, cutting through difficult issues. Personally, I find the hardest thing to do with e-mail is schedule a meeting. It takes 10 e-mails going back and forth for a week: "I'm available at 4 P.M. but you're available at 3. Let's try another day." Whereas on the phone, you could simply say, "Look, I'll move my 3:00 to 3:15 or you move your conflict. Which do you want to do?"

Where there is reliable management research, it doesn't always get recognized or translated into practice. For example, we know that the most effective companies and organizations are those that embody the importance of being communities. People in these companies are committed and respected, and when you unleash that kind of energy, it's quite remarkable.

But most conventional management practice and education has gone in completely the opposite direction. It's becoming more mercenary, more individualistic, less community oriented, and less nuanced.

**S+B: How would you go about fostering more of the community-oriented style of management?**

**MINTZBERG:** You do it through an engaged management that cares, not a heroic leadership that cures. This means giving up the false dichotomy between leaders and managers. Would you like to work for a manager who doesn't lead? That can be terribly discouraging. What about a leader who doesn't manage? That can be awfully disengaging: How is he or she to know what is going on? We have had more than enough of detached, heroic leadership. It is time for more engaged management, embedded in "communityship."

If you think of organizational leadership that way, and you want to develop people who can carry the roles of both manager and leader effectively, then you need a different kind of educational initiative in business schools. You have to go beyond conventional classroom instruction. You have to foster commitment: to the job, for sure, but also to the organization as a community, and beyond that, to society.

**S+B: Talk a bit about your own efforts to create this kind of leadership development and bring it to scale.**

**MINTZBERG:** Since the mid-1990s, I have been part of a group of colleagues — academics, consultants, developers, and managers — who are engaged in and committed to the idea of rethinking the management classroom. We began with management education in the McGill business school. Then I began to question the flagship program, the MBA. This led to an embarrassing question that should never be asked of an academic: "What are you doing about it?" I had thought academics were not supposed to do anything about anything.

But the question kept coming up, so a group of us decided to act: to rethink business education in a master's degree program for practicing managers engaged with their jobs and committed to their companies. We began with the IMPM, the International Masters Program in Practicing Management. Participants don't earn an MBA degree; they get an MPM, a master's in practicing management. Most MBA programs are designed to help graduates *get* a better job; our intention was to help them *do* a better job.

We put managers at round tables where they could reflect on their own and others' experiences. We deliberately designed this to contrast with the traditional MBA approach of studying other people's experiences through cases or theories in a U-shaped classroom. Anchoring the learning to their experience at work was the key. I argue that if you're a student sitting in

that class, you're not there primarily as an individual to be developed, but as a representative of your organization. You've got a team of people that you work with at your company. And you should carry what you've learned back to them. Then you might come to the next class and say, "Look, we worked on this issue at my company and this was the result. This worked, this didn't work." So you're going back and forth between the workplace and class.

**S+B: How did you make the leap from there to self-organizing education?**

**MINTZBERG:** In one IMPM class, we had three people from Lufthansa participating. The instructors, myself included, kept asking them for their perspective on the airline, and we'd get blank looks. The reason was that one was in cargo, one was in IT, and one was in maintenance. And it occurred to me that when we have a team in class, even though they come from the same company, they go back to different places in that company. So we thought, why don't we create a program where everybody in class comes as part of a team — so when they go back to work they can experiment with what they learned?

This came out of a shorter program, the Advanced Leadership Program [ALP], focused on organizational development. Each company sends a team of six managers to attend the program. And each company team comes with a strategic issue, which becomes the basis for discussion with the other company teams present. We call this "friendly consulting." They come in for three week-long modules, conducted over a six-month period, working with one another.

However, the ALP teams didn't always come charged up about the issues that senior management had concocted for them to think about. They weren't sure what to do with those issues. So we started asking them to frame the issue themselves; they would hold an initial workshop and decide what the core issue was going to look like.

For example, a road building company sent the chief executives of six of their business units for training. They were assigned to tackle the issue of their relationship with headquarters. But in our initial workshop, they redefined the core issue as collaboration: "How do we work with one another?"

After they framed the issue, they presented it to the class, in which three other company teams were present, at three other tables. The six participants from that road building company fanned out to these three tables and the tables discussed what they heard. As visitors to the tables, the road building folks were sitting with their backs to the discussion, just listening. Afterward, they went back to their own table to share with one another what they heard, and started reframing the issue again.

**S+B: Are you saying that in general, management education and development should be based less on knowledge from the teacher and more on reflecting on real problems that people are facing in their jobs?**

**MINTZBERG:** I don't want to be dogmatic about it. The best way to learn is by reflecting and learning from your own experience.

When a competency issue comes up in a classroom of practicing managers, one of the most powerful things we can do is to stop everything and say, OK, there are 30 managers in this classroom. They've got an average of 15 years of managerial experience each. You ask the group, "What have you done when you encountered this issue?"

Then, you get people saying, "Well, I had that exact issue. I dealt with it this way; it didn't work. But another time, I dealt with it that way, and it did work." That kind of competency sharing can cut across all kinds of managerial issues that would never get discussed in a traditional classroom.

It takes a lot of time, but that's why you're there. My favorite thing, which we don't do enough, is to have what I call "white time." There's nothing on the schedule from 2:00 to 3:30. So some professor offers to give a lecture. And we say, "I'm sorry, that time's taken. We're doing nothing then." In other words, that's the time for competency sharing, for issues that come up, and so on. That time is much more useful than all the things we do schedule into the program.

**S+B: In CoachingOurselves, you removed the instructor from the equation altogether.**

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**MINTZBERG:** In 2004 I got a call from Phil LeNir, my stepson and the director of engineering in the Montreal branch of a high-technology company at the time. His engineers had become managers, he said, because their programming was outsourced to eastern Europe, and they were struggling. “What should I do?” he asked. “And, by the way, I have no budget!”

I suggested that he get them around a table periodically, in a quiet atmosphere where they could at least share their concerns and reflect on their experiences in dealing with them. Phil took this up with a vengeance. He established a small group of managers who met every second week or so, for about 75 minutes at lunch. It had to be fun, he said, or they wouldn’t keep coming. They did, for two years. Soon Phil had another group, this time of peer managers on site, and then a third. Members of these groups also started their own groups. They started using the material from our other programs that Phil had adapted. Eventually he had 40 topics for his groups to discuss, ranging from negotiating skills to figuring out the balance sheet.

The balance sheet topic proved particularly telling. Phil brought in copies of the company’s annual report and a list of definitions of the terms. Their assignment: to gain comprehension of the company. “We have 75 minutes to figure out [these financials],” he told the group, who were largely engineering managers without finance experience. They did, and had a great time — especially when they began to understand the footnotes!


In the sessions, Phil introduced the equivalent of morning reflections, which he called “happenings.” He even used field studies: In one session on culture, they all went into the hall to interview whoever they found there about the company’s culture, and then reported to the group.

From this, the self-teaching program evolved. For any given session, we have a leading management thinker provide materials and exercises on a particular theme. For example, Philip Kotler [the S.C. Johnson & Son Distinguished Professor of International Marketing at the Northwestern University Kellogg Graduate School of Management in Chicago] approved a topic on branding. But he shows up only as a picture on the front page with a bio. Kotler is a very good lecturer, and when he’s present, you sit there kind of mesmerized. But here you’re not mesmerized. You’ve got to struggle to say, OK, we’re supposed to read this topic that Kotler provided and decide how we as a group can influence and understand the branding of our own company.

### **S+B: How open have managers been to the idea of “coaching ourselves,” rather than learning directly from the experts?**

**MINTZBERG:** It’s selling. We now have more than 50 topics, in six languages. Some organizations are beginning to use the CoachingOurselves program in internal meetings. In one Canadian bank, for example, a senior executive used a topic called “Silos and Slabs in Organizations” [slabs are horizontal barriers between levels of the hierarchy] in a meeting of her senior management. They split into two groups, talking about how to facilitate better communication, and then they met together to compare their conclusions and decide what actions to take.

Once they’re exposed to this, people start driving changes in their organization naturally. In the ALP, a group from Via Rail Canada took on the issue of how to enhance customer service. The same group kept going years after the program ended. They’re called the ALP group within Via Rail, and they have continued improving the company from the inside for years.

Management is not like surgery; you can’t try performing surgery unless you’re something of an expert. But we’re all trying to manage, all the time. And if you’re a manager, the most powerful way to learn is by reflecting on your own experience with colleagues. 

### **AUTHOR PROFILE:**

**Art Kleiner** is editor-in-chief of *strategy+business* and the author of *The Age of Heretics* (2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2008).

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