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Book Review

Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development
by Henry Mintzberg (2004) San Francisco,
CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.



D R . J A M E S C U N N I N G H A M *

This latest book of Henry Mintzberg sent shivers down the spines of deans and MBA programme directors. Its publication in 2004 coincided with two notable events: firstly a period of tough competition in the international MBA market, with leading MBA programmes competing for a dwindling student cohort – a buyers’ market rather than a sellers’ market; secondly, the publication of Ghoshal’s (2005) article questioning the role, value and function of business schools and academics. Mintzberg’s book challenges the dominant logic of one of the core degrees of any business school: the MBA programme. In the preface he traces the development of the International Masters Program in Practicing Management, started in spring 1996, which he argues contributes to the development of business managers and, as he describes it, ‘...continues to be the delight of my professional life’ (p. x).

The book is divided into two parts: Part One, ‘Not MBAs’, and Part Two, ‘Developing Managers’. Mintzberg begins with a chapter entitled ‘Wrong People’, where he outlines what management practice is not and what work experience really means in MBA

* *Department of Management, Cairnes Graduate School
of Business and Public Policy, National University
of Ireland, Galway*

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admissions, and he concludes the chapter with ‘What should I tell Robert?’ who is looking for advice about doing an MBA. Within this chapter Mintzberg (p. 14) argues that MBA programmes can do harm as they are ‘...inadvertently encouraging an attitude of independence that is fundamentally antithetical to the responsible practice of management’ and that MBA programmes attract the wrong people who are ‘too impatient, too analytical, [and have] too much need to control’. In Chapter Two, ‘Wrong Ways’, he gives an overview of business history and questions what happened to management and the reductionism within the management discipline, as well as questioning the value of case method teaching. He concludes this chapter by outlining nine impressions left by an MBA education and persuasively reinforces this by stating (p. 67), ‘They suggest that no one should be allowed out of a conventional MBA program without having a skull and crossbones stamped firmly on his or her forehead, over the words “Warning: NOT prepared to manage!”’. Chapters Three to Six are titled ‘Wrong Consequences I–IV’, with corruption used as the start of the subtitle for each of the chapter themes. For example, in Chapter Three, ‘Wrong Consequences I: Corruption of the Educational Process’, he discusses student reactions to their MBA studies based on the books of Kelly and Kelly (1986) and Cohen (1973) and discusses the dysfunctionality associated with the MBA ranking system. In Chapter Six, ‘Wrong Consequences IV: Corruption of Social Institutions’, he probes the value of leadership across sectors in society and in doing so questions the reader about whether we have a choice about leadership in society. He does this by relating to the reader a story about an MBA student considering a job with Bombardier and a maintenance man sent to clean bugs out of his office fluorescent lights who bemoaned the change in the kind of leadership in his organisation. Mintzberg then questions the reader about whether we have a choice about leadership in society. He claims we do and in Chapter Seven, ‘New MBA?’, he examines business school programmes that involve the specialisation of business functions and those programmes that focus on educating the manager in their business context, and argues that there is no middle ground between these two approaches.

In the second part of the book, ‘Developing Managers’, Mintzberg sets out to persuade the reader further to his viewpoint.

He adopts the same approach as in the first part of the book and in Chapter Eight, 'Management Development in Practice', he guides the reader through the development of management education and development and touches on issues of mentoring, customisation, leadership, business school programmes and corporate academies, as well as putting learning into action. He also suggests that we develop managers differently. Mintzberg in Chapter Nine, 'Developing Management Education', tells the reader how this should be done in the form of a number of propositions. The following chapters, ten to fourteen, lead the reader through the development, logic and operation of the International Masters in Practicing Management. His final chapter, 'Developing True Schools of Management', is where he discusses the privilege of scholarship and the role and value of teaching and research and the importance of relevance to business.

This book should be required reading for business faculty members, deans, university administrators and MBA students. This is a thought-provoking book that will challenge your core assumptions about academia and even your management philosophy and your role in academia. Mintzberg is a brilliant wordsmith, which lends even further weight to his persuasive arguments, making a very readable book. He is fundamentally questioning of the dominant logic that has informed the development of business schools and their interaction with business through their MBA programmes. Examining conventional wisdom in such a way can be painful but is necessary as relevance is becoming more of an issue for business schools. Mintzberg, in talking about research, talks about passion and, in a box insert (p. 403), has a list titled 'Putting the Passion Back In' which includes: 'Screw tenure; Publish only when you have something to say; Say it all once, right, altogether; Never set out to be the best. Do your best; Create knowledge; Write for the thoughtful practitioner; Get close to the action; Be passionate about what you do or get out'. Mintzberg in his writing has done this, which has won him international acclaim, but this book challenges business schools', deans' and faculty members' beliefs about who they are and what businesses they are in. Probably in years to come the arguments presented in this book will become part of the conventional wisdom and not be unconventional, as they seem in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

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