

Analysis of a Soft-skill Learning Throughout Life

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Abstract

"Soft-skill" is often a problem for social researchers. Though it is widely used in different media, there is no exhaustive definition of the term in scientific papers. While the majority of authors distinguishing "soft-skill" from "hard-skill", a few others determine "soft-skills" by listing some features "that everyone has, more or less consciously: education, creativity, stress management, listening, adaptability, empathy etc." (Bouret, Hoarau & Mauleon, p.1, 2014). In this article, the author takes activity analysis approach and does not try to make any definition. Rather, she focuses on managers' soft-skill learning process and uses managerial attitude shaping as an example. The main research question is how managers learn managerial attitude from recalling certain life event. By answering to this question, the author hopes that this study will allow scholars in adult education to better understand the process and the components involved in the soft-skill learning of the managers.

Key Words: Activity, Attitude, Experience, Soft-skills Learning

Introduction

In business, we often hear that managers have to face more human and relational issues than technical problems. In the past, every manager had authority over his subordinates. Now, a transversal manager does not necessarily have authority over his team members. Moreover, even if the authority is formally attached to the manager's position, an appropriate managerial attitude may not be automatically adopted overnight. This issue leads us to the question: how do managers shape their managerial attitude and how do they learn making others take action? In order to answer to this question, we have conducted a study, based on observations and interviews with managers on the subject. During an interview conducted in 2012, the interviewee replied that the biggest challenge for an expert, when he became a manager, was "to make the others work on something, which we could easily handle ourselves". In another recent interview, our interlocutor, an international project manager shared: "It was very difficult, because I should be authoritarian with someone. He is a strong heavy man, a guy who has worked for international projects all his life, and that 'mirrored wardrobe'¹ was in tears on the phone. It was a Saturday night and there was no one...and I had no direct management whom I could ask for advice". The responses reflect the feelings these managers experienced while adopting a new attitude. They also show the evolution in general understanding of the word "manager" in France.

About two centuries ago, the word 'manager' appeared in French language as a term borrowed from English language, meaning the head of a company or an institution. Nowadays, the word "manager" can also refer to a job. In the meantime, beside the classic stream, which sees manager's activities always in strict link with "authority", there exists now another mode of thinking, in which the manager's job is considered less hierarchical and more transversal. The authors of this stream highlight the process of self-transforming of an individual in interaction with the others (Barbier, 2011). They also believe that becoming manager is a result of a long process of "fabrication", but not just of an appointment decision (Cristol, 2013).

By "coupling" the activities of manager and the others (managed people), by focusing on the interaction between them, by analyzing managers' narratives about their reflections before, during and after making the others act, we may go deeper into the learning process of both entities. Moreover, the discourses of the manager about their experience can be analyzed this time, not only as messages addressed to the others, but rather as a particular way of speaking to oneself or acting on oneself before making the others take action. For the first time, we consider attitude shaping as an activity and we use "activity coupling" (Barbier) as a new prism to look differently at the role of experiences in manager's soft-skill learning. Before presenting the result of our analysis, let's take a very brief look at what can be said in the literature.

Literatures about attitudes at work

Our literature review showed that there were very few scientific papers about managers' activities and even fewer about their attitude shaping activity. Besides, most of papers focused on manager's roles rather than on their activities. According to Mintzberg (1999) manager's job was composed of different roles. That is why he was neglecting the learning from reflection of managers. He even argued that managers rarely had time to think about anything.

Employee's attitudes

In order to prove that shaping attitude is a real existing activity, we start this subsection by listing the different studies on employees' attitudes, which were observed and

¹ French idiom, which means a: strong and heavy person (Author's note).

categorized by researchers both in and outside France. In France, according to Dujarier (2006), there are four different types of attitudes of the employees toward the “standardized ideal”. In the manager-managed interaction, if the instructions given by a manager are considered as “standardized ideal”, Dujarier states that employees can adopt following attitudes: 1) to be in total agreement with the order of the manager; 2) to maintain a way of acting at the ‘minimum required level; 3) to distance themselves from the order of the manager; and 4) in the extreme case, to protest against the orders of the manager.

In the United States, another type of research (Oechsle, 1989) has been ordered by Shell Oil Co., to explore employee’s attitude towards their job. The results showed that people generally fit into one of following six categories including 1) Fulfillment seekers, who are satisfied with their jobs, see themselves more as team players than leaders. 2) High achievers, who plan on laying out a career path, take initiatives and hold managerial positions 3) Clock punchers, who are the least satisfied with their jobs 4) Risk takers, who go where the money is, like to change employers 5) Ladder climbers, who choose stability by staying with the same employer for a long time 6) Paycheck cashers are mixed between those, who say they will take risks for a chance at achieving great financial success and those, who want the security of staying with one employer for a long time.

In Asia, culture and traditional values hold very important places in people’s mindset. These elements also influence employees’ attitudes in business². The observations show those who ban themselves from any kind of protests against a hierarchical decision. These employees may think about disagreement, but do not express their opinions. Another category of employees leaves everything to be managed and controlled by the procedures.

Manager’s attitudes

Given the variety of profiles of people, whom a manager has to work with, it is expected that the researches on the attitudes of managers are much more complex and the findings may generate many different interpretations or conclusions. In this subsection, we highlight only the works, which are most related to the topic of the study. Firstly, the analyses previously made on managerial activities already indicate that some manager do not limit their job to communication, planning, organization, coordination or control (Mintzberg, 1989). Secondly, the research program on the activity of the managers conducted by CRF³ of the Cnam shows that “managers have essentially intangible, reflexive activity, which is not carried out only in working time but which often extends into the private world where the researcher has no access” (Ulmann, 2009). Finally, in his book Milspelblom (2010) notes that managers must have different work attitudes “According to the moments, the places and people, the manager should be sometimes relaxed and able to make concessions, or on the contrary, to put up a front and bang his fist on the table”.

Methods of research and findings

Inspired by the book *Leading: as a job* (Barbier, 2011) about the work of managers and based on the concept of ‘activity coupling’, we conducted a field survey by realizing twelve interviews at the Cnam⁴. The interviewees included engineers, specialists,

² Source : <http://www.marketing-professionnel.fr/secteur/management-asiatique-autoritaire.html>

³ Research center on training – a Research laboratory of the Cnam (Author’s note)

⁴ The Cnam (Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers) is a public institution characterized by a scientific, cultural and professional focus. The school was founded in 1794 under the Convention, at the urging of Abbot Henri Gregoire. The Cnam has earned the status of a « grand établissement », and is under the authority of the National Ministry of higher education and research.

(Source : http://ressources.campusfrance.org/guides_etab/etablisements/en/ing_cnam_en.pdf)

accountants, businessmen, scientists, lawyers, consultants, teachers, etc. By meeting with and listening to these people, it is worth noting that they all share more or less a common point, a desire to gain necessary “soft-skills” in order to manage the human aspects in their work. For them, it is much more difficult than managing the technical aspects, because it is a very complex task, involving not only professional, but also personal life.

Nondirective Interviews

During the observation of managers’ work, we do perceive different ways of acting as among several different managers as in one and the same manager. For example, we notice the difference between those who are preparing long to take action and those who react almost spontaneously in parallel. We experienced a situation, in which the general director, who usually deals with only abstract issues as defining the vision or the policies of the company, suddenly became involved in details and even gave orders to prepare a simple invoice. In another case, we met a very dynamic manager, a person of action, who mentioned about “sleepless nights” or “dead time” without any concrete action before making an important decision. Occasionally, while discussing a business problem, his look and his words could become momentarily distracted.

All this gave us the desire to question the managers, in order to understand, what is involved in their reflection or in their attitude shaping process before, during and after the moment of “making the others act”. However, the difficulty is that unlike the other activity, the object of reflection can only be expressed through the narratives of the managers produced after the fact. In order to establish a sufficient corpus for analysis and to ensure the feasibility of this research, we have conducted during the past two years, several nondirective interviews or, more precisely, short conversations, but discreetly oriented to the object of our research: the roles of reflection about significant experience on their attitude change. The interviews were conducted with people we met at the Cnam including managers and professionals having very diverse educational and professional backgrounds. Nevertheless, we found many common points in the discourse of those, who were on the way to become managers, or were entering a new kind of professional relation with the other collaborators. It is interesting to note that when some managers expressed their thoughts about the sense of responsibility or about promotion, our attention was rather attracted by the expressions of those who planned to change job, such as from a “pilot”, an “engineer” or an “artist” etc. to a “manager”. Within the limits of this paper, we will describe three interviews to illustrate the work realized.

The first interview is that with a former airline pilot who decided to become a company manager. In one of her narratives about the reflection before making that decision, the word “incompatibility” has emerged as the key word. The situations used to illustrate the incompatibility include contrasts occurred between the number of working hours and family responsibilities, her professional passion and health, her sense of safety and technical defects of the air companies. The interviewee considered the obligation to accept that her job as pilot was no longer compatible with family life as a “failure. She recalled the days and nights on mission without any opportunity to attend family events. She also told us that she once refused to carry out a mission order, which, according to her, did not meet safety requirements. Through all of this, we find that the reflections during that period have triggered her intention to change working attitude towards the others. As indicated in the last sentence of her narrative: “The next stage of my professional life begins.”

Findings from these narratives are that there exists the intention to learn a new way of doing things in the reflection of this individual. After having accumulated enough experience and expertise in the “non-human” interaction, instead of acting alone and directly on the object of the work her intention now turns to a more sophisticated level. She wants to learn

how to influence the others, to do things through the others, take responsibility for the work of the others and therefore to maintain much more complex interactions with interdependent people.

In the second one the interviewee is a young Hong Kong salesman. He was hired for a management position and sent to China for the first time. The individual has an atypical profile compared to other MBA participants in general. In terms of academic profile, his degree was neither in the field of economy nor business. Besides, this was a degree of 3-year bachelor level (lower than the general level required for an MBA, which should be a 4th university year degree or an engineer degree). In terms of professional experience, he worked for 5 years before entering the MBA program, specialized in fashion business development. Regarding his personality, he revealed himself as reserved and observant person. The situation presented below was chosen by the interviewee himself as his first experience as a manager, and moreover, of a team, whose members belong to another culture. Before this experience, he had already made several trips to China. However, only at this time, he officially had the opportunity to meet a new local Chinese team and give them the directives (orders) as a manager. During his first contact with employees he knew nobody and nobody knew him. Local employees were very polite and treated him as a manager – foreigner: What he shared was the thoughts about the image of himself as a “real manager” seen through the reaction of local staff. He commented: “It's exciting and at the same time "funny", because they are very polite and they have a lot of respect for me. They treat me like a real manager.”

Through his narrative, we can explore how the reflection on significant experience could promote the outreach process of the manager with local employees. This was also what helped him to take action and at the same time to shape the attitude in accordance with his new image. He said: “Among these new employees, some are younger and some are older than me. I am new, the market is new. I have to come up with a plan after the market study conducted by myself. I have to restructure and re-branding the products.”

At the end of this conversation, we can make two remarks:

Firstly, the fact of becoming manager of a team, whose members have a different culture, puts the person in a new situation with new relationships. Strong feelings such as “exciting”, “shocked” marked the awareness of the person of a gap between his “ancient knowledge” and “reality”, which motivated him to pursue the acquisition of other attitudes through involvement in multicultural confrontations.

Secondly, important transformations of the person result from a process of production and transformation of knowledge that refers to language learning, attitudes, behaviors, and potential conflicts of interests, the working methods and the personalities of individuals from different cultures.

The third interview demonstrated clearly how an unconscious process of reflection could impact on manager's attitude. The traces of this process can be identified through the links existing between a very old experience and a present event in one's life. The manager in this case was not among the list of target population of the research. However we decided to conduct a special interview with the manager after observing his sudden change of attitude in a real meeting⁵. The main topic of the meeting was a project, the deadline of which was approaching and there was a huge risk that the delivery date would be delayed. To solve this problem, the manager in question wanted all team members to follow his emergency plan dividing the job "point by point". However, throughout the two-hour long meeting, he could not impose his plan to his team. It lasted only until he lost patience and suddenly raised his voice on his team. The meeting ended without any concrete results.

⁵ A meeting of the management board of a project, in which the subject in question has participated as one of project leaders and the researcher - as a secretary in charge of taking notes in order to establish meeting minutes.

Regarding the interview, which took place in the afternoon of the same day, we tried to intervene as little as possible and allow maximum flexibility to the interviewee so that he could express his feelings and comment on what had happened during the meeting. In addition, we hoped that by remaining "passive", we could observe the spontaneous occurrence of new elements, which could help us to test our hypothesis in a more objective and convincing manner. At the beginning of this interview, despite our efforts to help the person to get in evocation about one of his significant experience, the only answer we got was:

“Give an order. No, no ... words are too strong ... I never do that. I prefer to ask gently the person to do things rather than give orders.”

Only when the voice recorder was stopped, because it ran out of battery, the interviewee started talking about another stage of his life in which the notion of “respect” was unfortunately associated with a great disappointment:

“I’ll tell you one thing that happened to me when I was young. [Long pause] I had a Director. He did me an honor to accept me in his team. He was like a father to me, perhaps more than a father. [...] Then once, while I was working with him, he suddenly changed. He did not criticize my work, but he said he did not understand what I had done ... After a while, I was told he published what I wrote. The disappointment was huge. I felt like ... the father's death. You understand ... For some years after that, I refused to have any leader”.

Just like previous interviews, the last interview also confirms our main hypothesis that there is an implicit but strong enough connection between what is expressed by the interviewees as significant lived experience and the change in his attitudes. Moreover, during the last interview, we were very impressed by the occurrence of negative emotions: disappointment, the anger in expressions of that person and, above all, by the impact of the experience on the attitudes of the latter. The refusal to have any leader shows the loss of confidence in human interaction between manager and managed ones, or even faith in his own ability to become a manager. The person did not say a word about what happened at the meeting in the morning. However, disappointment and anger are the only similarities between the critical stage of the meeting we observed and the lived experience which he mentioned. Moreover, we noticed that, compared to other forms of interaction, it seems impossible to isolate the manager from the managed ones and vice versa.

During our research, all interviewed managers expressed their reflections by putting themselves in different human interactions and comparing themselves with different “subjects”. This shows that the subject and the others, the manager and the managed ones, the example and counter example are forming the "parallelism" in their reflection. Therefore, in their narratives, there are many examples, carefully selected expressions and metaphors and anecdotes. These elements often provoke many emotions. We believe that not only the manager and the managed ones can influence each other but they may even reverse their roles.

Activity coupling analysis

In his book, Barbier (2011) defined: “to manage is to act on the commitment of activity of others” (p.59). In this part, we aim at analyzing the answers of interviewed managers on: how do individuals learn managerial attitudes while becoming managers? Is it true that to lead without just simply giving an order, managers often mobilize reflection on lived experience? Is the return on experience the process that leads to the development or even to the heterogeneity of ways of acting and being?

Indeed, through the prism of “activity coupling” between manager and managed people, we found that the way to make others act without using the power cannot be learned in isolated conditions, without interaction with others. However, the findings drawn from the narratives of our interlocutors, show that learning through reflection on experience is not following the same process as learning scientific concepts. It is interesting to note that in most of cases, the manager reveals that he or she modifies his behavior on the managed ones following a process of reflection on the virtues and the faults he finds in the different situations of human interaction. There are also thinking processes, which allow concerned people to adopt a way of acting or being, even if sometimes it does not correspond entirely to his nature.

The permanent presence of comparisons between different ways to act in each narrative has shown us clearly that the effects of similarities and especially of the contrasts contribute enormously to the reflection dynamics of the manager. In particular, thinking about interaction with others is an important factor that encourages the movement of a managed person from “peripheral participation” zone to the “central participation” zone of a manager.

In the narratives of the managers-participants in our research, we found that instead of the information on the procedural action itself, managers focus more particularly on the “satellite information” of the action (judgments, declarative and intentions). In their stories, there are many images of close relatives (father, mother, brother, sister, children ...), carefully selected adjectives, metaphors and anecdotes, provoking many emotions. In addition, our field survey data also show that learning through reflection on significant experience is not the same form of learning like the others, which can be undertaken in the dedicated spaces. The links between different themes in the narratives about the reflection of managers show that this is an implicit learning process, spontaneous and accidental. Unlike a procedural action, learning through reflection on significant experience brings together several cognitive actions. Managers can feel and remember, reflect and consider, compare and generalize. As these are cognitive actions, the concept of time seems to lose its value. In our study, the narratives of the interviewees show that the dimension of time and chronological order in their thinking are not significant. The managers can simultaneously think about various topics, regardless of when these themes have emerged in their life. Another important remark is that the most memorable experience is often the oldest one. Moreover, some of them have been perceived as the "open wound", which can link with many other similar events. In a situation like this, the person in question could not handle frustration or his inner conflict immediately. For the person, the problem seems to be too new to be discussed: what causes a dilemma between lack of reflection for effective resolution and the inability to accept what had happened.

Conclusion

Finally, it becomes clearer that all managers participated in the survey demonstrate a very high level in their ability to learn in the interaction with others and in their reflection on significant experience. Unlike studies that show learning as an “annex effect” of the situation offered by life, in this study, the managers confirm the central place of the learning process that builds on several thoughts about significant situations in life. In their thinking, the managers act on themselves before, during and after, making other to act.

Mintzberg stated that “The manager’s job is not ordered, continuous, sequential; it is neither uniform nor homogenous. It is otherwise highly fragmented, irregular, changing and variable. It is also marked by its brevity, he has just finished an activity then he must move to another” (1989, p.71). Now, thanks to the research conducted, we can add that manager’s job is not always made of purely logical and rational actions as in many other professions. It may consist of processes that are sometimes difficult to name and are connected to each other by

indirect and complex relationships. When direct relationships only link several occupations in a time or a specific place, indirect relationships can involve different activities, grouped around the meaning of his work, throughout time, space and even different cultures. In this perspective, the most important element for our research is the fact that learning process of the manager should not be considered as an isolated action, but certainly as a combination of changing activities produced by the parallelism between two forms of thinking, a rational one and an emotional one, which accompanies the manager in each of the interactions between himself and the employees.

In conclusion, the prism of activity coupling has allowed us to see that manager in transversal position learns to break free from his dependence on the authority or hierarchical power while remaining interdependent in the manager-managed interaction. For him, lead the others no longer means acting or making decision alone. By linking his significant experiences in the past or in the present with the new attitudes that he may accept to adopt in the future, the manager of the XXI century is now able to act on himself throughout life: before, during and after acting on the activity of the others. Shaping managerial attitude is also learning to create constantly a desire to transform the others and to transform oneself in a changing world.

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