

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 19
Number 1 *Parameters* 1989

Article 1

7-4-1989

MILITARY MANAGEMENT: THE FUTURE IN RETROSPECT

Donald C. Askew

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Donald C. Askew, "MILITARY MANAGEMENT: THE FUTURE IN RETROSPECT," *Parameters* 19, no. 1 (1989), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1514.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

Military Management: The Future in Retrospect

DONALD C. ASKEW

© 1989 Donald C. Askew

MEMORANDUM FOR: Chief, Survey Team 53

SUBJECT: Transmittal of Artifact Translation

1. Reference Site: 122993

2. Date: 3333278

3. Following is the preliminary field translation of information contained in a somewhat crude but nonetheless well-preserved "video tape" device recently uncovered at Reference Site dig. Although primitive, the device contained sufficient residual audio and visual memory to allow accurate translation.

4. The speaker is a military man who is addressing a gathering of fellow senior officers. The speaker appears to be somewhat older than the group. His relative rank or status is under investigation but not known at this time.

5. Partially decipherable marks on the outer casing containing the video tape device indicate "G.O. MANAGEMENT SPEECH, USAWC." Exact meaning of the first and last terms is not known. Dating is indicated and reads "20 FEB 199-." The last digit is indecipherable under field conditions.

6. Curiously, we are finding repeated indications of the subject society's basic understanding of management principles, though its military and government sectors appear to have been infantile in implementing them. Detailed analysis continues.

Chief Cryptosemanticist

Enclosure: Translation of subject video device artifact contents

The Translation

You've invited me here today to speak to you about my philosophy of management. I appreciate that, and I'll try to do my best to rise to the occasion. In any event, the fact that you have invited me indicates that you've already hit on one of the basic tools of a good manager: Make the other fellow feel good by making him feel important.

The topic is "Management" and that, broadly, is what I'll address. I propose to offer my philosophy by first trying to define more clearly this somewhat ambiguous term "management," and then addressing each of its components with a little theory and a little practicality. Let me tell you at the outset that I believe my philosophy is applicable at all levels and in all endeavors. We're military here, but these tenets I'll address apply in any environment, whether business, government, academic, or whatever. After all, if you're going to go to all the trouble of developing a philosophy, it might as well have universal applications!

What is management? Well, everybody and his brother (or her sister) has defined it, so I might as well do so too. First, management is neither an art nor a science. It's both, and the real trick is to determine the right mixture at the right time. Further, the process consists of several functions: planning, organizing, directing, motivating, controlling, and measuring. Maybe this is a simplistic and somewhat old-fashioned approach to defining a complex subject—but then, I'm a somewhat simplistic, old-fashioned guy. Then again, I must have gained some degree of either success or notoriety applying my views, else you wouldn't have invited me here, would you? So, let's have a look at each of these components in turn.

Planning is simply a matter of settling upon the methods by which you hope to achieve a goal or sub-goal. Inherent in this definition is the allocation and prioritization of resources, including time, money, and effort. The important consideration here is the concept of setting goals. I suppose I should pause here and define a few more terms. A "goal" is what you want to attain. It can be an outcome, a product, a status, an event, etc. To attain these goals, we develop and apply "policy," that is, a guiding frame of reference by which we intend to attain our goal. We also use "procedures," which are nothing more than those processes and actions directed toward the attainment of a goal or sub-goal. A "goal," then, is what you want; "policy" is the guidelines you will work within; and "procedures" are the actual methods you are going to use to reach that goal—"how" you're going to do it. Whether you use the term "goal" or "objective" is irrelevant—the concept is the same. Before you can get anywhere, you've got to know where you're going now and where you want to go; then lay out the route and press on.

Now, I want to emphasize that the goal you set must be realistic and attainable. If the goal is not in fact realistic and attainable, you'll wind up

Colonel Donald C. Askew, USAR Ret., is owner and CEO of D. C. Askew and Associates, a management consulting firm in Woodland Park, Colorado, specializing in industrial security problems. He is a graduate of the University of Illinois (B.S., Management & Marketing) and the US Army War College. His active-duty assignments included the senior USAR advisorship to the Commander, Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1982-85; and the senior reserve component advisorship to the President, National War College, 1985-87.

wasting a lot of effort and resources spinning your wheels. Even worse, you'll create frustration in yourself and in those who work with you and under your direction. The result is pure unpleasantness, and people will not long tolerate unpleasantness. They particularly won't tolerate it when they perceive it to be the result of somebody else's decision. This doesn't mean you'll have wholesale quitting or open revolution in your organization, but you can surely bet that mystical and essential thing we call "productivity" will drop like a rock.

Planning, in sum, consists of defining your goal and the methods you will use to attain it. Planning includes the prioritization and allocation of resources. It must be realistic and it must take into consideration the environment within which you must work. You also need to add a few milestones along the way, to give you a little en route guidance and mark your progress so you'll know how fast you're going and whether you're on course. That's planning.

Organizing is the process of putting together your resources to best facilitate reaching your goal. The term "resources" includes men, material, time, money—everything you've got at your disposal. Furthermore, the process of organizing should be done with the goal in mind and with a solid sense of priorities. There's a great danger in organizing, in that if you don't keep sight of the goal, the darn process tends to get out of hand and you wind up organizing just for the sake of organization. I think our ego plays a big part here, and I would challenge each of you military managers to remember that if something doesn't effectively and efficiently contribute to goal attainment—don't do it. Remember your priorities.

Flexibility is very important in organizing. Don't become so rigid—organizationally, socially, or psychologically—that you can't rapidly adapt to change. Ideally, you should organize so that you have the capability to take off on a different course if an opportunity presents itself for exploitation. Tactically speaking, I firmly believe that no one ever won a war on the defense; nonetheless, we must defend at times. To organize solely and uniquely for defense, however, is pure folly, since you would be unable to respond rapidly to an opportunity for decisive offensive action. The same holds true in industrial, civic, and political situations. Be flexible, be imaginative, and be audacious. Organize so that you encourage creativity by providing opportunity. This gets to the "people" aspect of the process now, because that's really where the full effect of "organization" applies. The organization is the framework within which effort is applied—it is the "environment" that the theoreticians speak of so fondly, and it provides some degree of direction and control in itself. Organization is not to be taken lightly. With too little organization you will be turned and tossed like a rudderless ship; with too much, you may lose sight of your goal, waste resources, increase complexities, frustrate your personnel, and stifle progress. Too much organization can bring on the Rock of Gibraltar syndrome: solid, stable, interesting, pleasant to observe and study, and pretty damned unproductive.

It goes without saying, I hope, that the organization we have been speaking of here is the formal organization as set forth on the organization chart. I have not discussed the unofficial alliances, informal groups, old-school ties, and carefully cultivated personal and political relationships that also serve to channel power in an institution. But any manager worth his salt must be aware of such informal organizational structures and assure that they conduce to the benefit of his managerial goals.

On to the next component, *Direction*. Now that our organizational rudder is in place, "directing" is simply the process of steering our ship, of making sure that our effort is moving in the desired direction. This is where decisionmaking becomes critical. Here also is where the controversy over the distinction between leadership and management runs rampant. I believe that there is a big difference between the two, a difference that can be simply stated: If your goal is to control, you manage; if your goal is to motivate, you lead. The significant difference is in the relationship—your relationship—to people. You don't lead money, material, or time. You do lead people. You direct their effort by influencing their behavior so as to attain your will. Ideally, you do so to the recognized benefit of all.

People are by nature seekers of direction and, as the Good Book says, "Seek and ye shall find." The manager's problem is that they might not find the kind of direction that's in line with his desires. Therefore, it becomes prudent to insure that adequate and appropriate direction is provided by the manager or director or leader early in the game and throughout the course of endeavor. Herein lies another managerial pitfall: Too much direction is just as bad as, or worse than, too little. Too much direction stifles initiative and creativity, discourages communication, and produces an overworked, ineffective, and inefficient manager. All of us here, involved as we are in a large bureaucracy, are well aware of the problem of too much guidance. Like leadership versus management, the issue of centralization versus decentralization dogs us. But questions of the propriety of central or decentralized direction are not as easily resolved. There is a time and a place for both. There must be no doubt that the manager is the source of direction and the ultimate authority. But, whenever possible, the manager should define the task, assign authority along with responsibility, provide only that minimal guidance necessary for clear understanding, and then let the subordinate get on with the job. I have great faith in the ability of people to accomplish things if we managers provide the necessary resources, environment, and motivation. Indeed, it was no less an authority than General George S. Patton who admonished, "Never tell people *how* to do things. Tell them *what* to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."

So directing is the process of insuring that organizational effort is moving toward the goal. The wise manager does this through judicious decisionmaking, sufficient allocation of resources, prioritization, and motivation. The process isn't all that mysterious or complex, but it does require

intelligence, decisiveness, confidence, keen perception, sensitivity, and old-fashioned nerve on occasion. It's not an easy process, but as I used to tell my children, "Anybody can do the easy stuff."

Motivating. Here's the big one, the tough nut. How do you influence behavior along the lines that you desire? I can't tell you how to motivate people. I doubt that anyone can. The process is maddeningly personal and unique to each individual situation. What works for one leader with one subordinate may not work for another leader or another subordinate. People all have their own individual goals, hopes, dreams, aspirations, and needs. They will move along their own path, at their own pace, toward the attainment of their own perceived goals. You, as a manager, as a leader, must understand their goals and harmonize them with your goals, bringing the two together so that mutual benefit is clearly perceived. If you can do this, you have a framework for motivation. People respond to reality as they perceive it to be. What is important is that the manager and the individual perceive reality similarly, thus establishing a shared frame of reference. Then you're verging on communication—and communication is, I believe, the key to effective motivation from a managerial standpoint. Let me try to clarify that, because it's important. When I say "communication," I am referring to a shared frame of reference, not speaking, holding meetings, memo-writing, or having "open door" policies.

You have to remember that people behave in terms of their goals and their concepts of reality. If you want to motivate, you must think in these terms. Your goal doesn't matter to your subordinates other than how it applies or relates to their goals. Don't simply assume that you know what they want or what they need. Find out. Make every effort to develop that shared frame of reference through real, sincere discussion. We use the word "meaningful" too often and too carelessly. I contend that "meaningful" is purely subjective: it really means "provides some degree of satisfaction to me in terms of my goals." For example, "meaningful training" may mean entirely different things to a commander and to his soldiers.

Let me tie together my thoughts on motivation with these six simple observations:

- What motivates you as a manager does not necessarily motivate your subordinates or others.
- You can't motivate based upon a need that's already been satisfied.
- Fear is never a good motivator for the long run.
- People are creatures of emotion, not logic.
- Organizations plan for the long run; its people live in the short run.
- Remember the Golden Rule—it may not be very scientific, but it's been around for a long time and comes from a highly respectable source.

Controlling is the next of my components of management. What, you might ask, is the difference between "directing" and "controlling"? I'll admit that there's a fine line of distinction, but it's a distinction worth making.

Earlier, in defining “direction,” I drew the analogy to steering a ship. Well, I view “controlling” as the process of insuring that the ship stays on course and at speed. Controlling is more inclusive. Enlightened controlling takes in directing as well as the other management functions, combining them into an integrated process—all directed toward accomplishing the overall goal. To be an effective manager, you must be capable of orchestrating all the resources toward the goal, but, at the same time, you must be able to identify and isolate aberrations and take corrective action in light of the long-range effort. In short (to shift analogies) you must be able to “get the flute out of the woodwinds” without ever missing a beat and while continuing to lead your orchestra harmoniously.

In a more narrow sense, controlling also can be defined as the process of insuring that what is desired is, in fact, accomplished. In this narrow view, we may often call it “follow up.” I personally don’t like that term. To me, it implies a dangerous lack of trust and confidence. Granted, the task must be accomplished, but there just ought to be a better, less insidious term. It reminds me of those little signs you sometimes still see, stating, “An organization does well those things the boss checks.” Someone who puts up one of those ought to be shot—that much ignorance and callousness is inexcusable in a person of influence.

Measuring. How well are you doing? To know, you need a measuring device. Businessmen have a pretty powerful and accurate measuring device in their profit or loss statements. We in the military don’t have such obvious measuring sticks, so how can we measure our progress in non-tactical organizations? There may be as many theories about this as there are consultants. I offer only two simple thoughts. First, whatever system you use to evaluate your organization’s progress must be both valid and reliable. It must be valid in the sense that it accurately measures what it’s supposed to measure, and it must be reliable in that it does so consistently. If these criteria are not met, you are simply kidding yourself, and your efforts at measurement will probably cause more problems organizationally, operationally, managerially, and psychologically than you will ever be able to solve. My second thought is this: Measure against realistic and appropriate criteria. This fits squarely with my earlier comments about setting realistic and attainable goals.

That concludes my admittedly broad look at each of the functions of management. Now, before I close, I’d like to make a few observations based on my experience over the years. I think they encapsulate a good deal of wisdom, if I do say so. You can title them “Earning your pay as a manager.”

- Be realistic in your planning. Dream, if you will, but insure that your initial goals are attainable.
- Develop the ability to look down the street, to plan ahead.
- Make realistic assumptions. Don’t assume away a problem.
- Don’t ever run out of alternatives.

- Hearken to the old rhyme that goes, “As you travel on through life, whatever be your goal, keep your eye upon the donut, not upon the hole.” Get your perspective straight and don’t lose sight of your goal.

- Remember that a committee is a terrible form of organization unless you just want to talk. The decision will be made by one individual anyway. Someone wisely remarked that a camel is a horse put together by a committee.

- Have self-confidence. Develop it. If you don’t have confidence in yourself, how can you reasonably expect others to have confidence in you? A leader may be wrong, but never, never uncertain.

- Realize that there’s no such thing as an objective decision. All decisions are subjective and based at least partly on emotion. Objective data can and should be used to help arrive at a decision, but that decision will be based on subjective interpretations of reality by the decisionmaker.

- Don’t habitually hide behind lack of analysis (insufficient study, need for more detail, etc.). Some problems are best viewed as a whole, and some decisions shouldn’t be delayed. A timely decision based on the information at hand is better than a more-thoroughly researched decision made too late.

- Don’t create or permit an organization that “eats it’s own young.” Be creative; encourage growth, development, and the free interchange of ideas. Every organization needs a maverick to keep the creativity going and a devil’s advocate to keep it honest. Really.

- Communicate. Remember that shared frame of reference I talked about. Treat your people as human beings with hopes, fears, dreams, desires, and ideals. They are not “units.” Recognize their individual dignity and conduct yourself accordingly.

- Speak and write to express, not to impress. Why call something a “facial shaving system” when in fact it’s a razor? Whom do you hope to impress, and what makes you think they really care anyway?

- Earn the respect that you must have. Don’t demand it by virtue of rank, authority, or position. If you try to demand it, the “respect” you’ll get will not be the kind that you really want.

- Surround yourself with people who are infinitely more competent than you are and let them do their work. Devote your time to managing them and creating an environment in which they can fully develop their talents.

- Be wary of statistics. Remember, it is statistically safer to climb Mount Everest than to drive from New York to Philadelphia, since fewer people have been killed climbing Everest. I used to have a sign over my desk in the Pentagon that said: “I am 99-percent correct . . . 3 percent of the time.”

- Remember, *you* control. Not a computer, not a system, and not the environment. Don’t genuflect to black boxes and blinking lights.

- Make sure you have more time than anyone else in your organization. If you don’t, you’re not doing it right. Go see your subordinates, but don’t always lay demands on their time—they don’t have as much as you.

- Reflect. Spend some time philosophizing.
- Be audacious. The only time a turtle makes progress is when he sticks his neck out.
- Don't be impressed with yourself. Maintain a good sense of reality and a strong sense of humor. Develop the ability to put everything in its proper perspective.
- Don't fall victim to temporal parochialism. This is *not* the only time that ever was or ever will be.

You invited me here to present my philosophy of management. Well, it isn't easy to present such a thing in a few words or a tidy package. If you have detected a common attitudinal thread running through my remarks, then you have my philosophy.

Some statisticians love to suggest that "If you have an infinite number of monkeys sitting at an infinite number of typewriters for an infinite period of time, sooner or later one will write *Romeo and Juliet*." That may be true. It also would be a helluva sorry way to get *Romeo and Juliet* written. It is not the function of management to orchestrate monkeys to perform tasks well beyond their capacity. If the goal you seek is a piece of fine art, then hire an artist. It is the function of a manager to orchestrate people, material resources, and time to provide a quality product that meets the needs of the market, the producers, and society. In the military, or in government, the product may be more difficult to define, progress may be more difficult to measure, and success may be more difficult to achieve. But the techniques of good management in business apply equally in other fields of endeavor, including the military.

Management is a challenge. Management implies, even demands, action. It is not enough to define a problem, to analyze it in depth, and to dissect each possible course of action down to the nucleus of cause and effect. The challenge to management—to you, to me, to all of us—is to direct our resources efficiently and effectively toward solutions to problems, to the attainment of realistic, meaningful, and worthwhile goals within military organizations. I am an ORF now (Old Retired Fud). I have seen many problems (most of which I caused myself!). If I have any fear at all, it is that at some far distant time, some future archaeologist will sift through some ruins and comment: "Those folks in the 20th century had some of the best thought-out managerial theory in the history of the planet. Apparently they couldn't apply it. Too bad."

Postscript to the Artifact Translation: The basic grasp of management principles evident in this find seems to have been widely shared in the subject society, as indicated by the similarity exhibited in other finds of the era. The society's inability to apply its collective management wisdom to solve the debilitating organizational problems experienced in its military and government is as yet unexplained. For some reason, the fear expressed by the speaker was well-founded. As he presciently and sadly commented, "Too bad." □