THE FIRST STAGES OF A PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION IN JUNIOR MANAGEMENT TRAINING: LESSONS FROM THE ‘APPRENTI MANAGER’ PROGRAMME IN FRENCH BUSINESS SCHOOLS

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Abstract:

The research aims at revealing how professional identity is constructed at a very early stage of initial management education. Our research aims at questioning the notion of "metier" in management field. Defined by Icher (1999), it “cannot and must not be confused with words like ‘profession’, ‘work’, ‘occupation’ or (…)’job’ or ‘career’ (…) but first and foremost it is an encounter between man and work, but that meeting does not take place in isolation”. D'Iribane speaks about the Honour Principle (1994) which makes itself manifest in ideals such as ‘lover of the craft’, ‘skill involved’, and ‘nobility of work’ (p.90). The core question concerns the manager as individual, actor and couple individual-metier. Our findings suggest that from their very first immersion into the “real world” of being a corporate employee at junior management level, students construct a professional identity which is based on disillusion, cynicism and avoidance strategies rather than on a genuine belief in their role, their mission, and their existence as “professional man” (or woman). Some conclusions are proposed about developing an aesthetics in the management.
The first stages of a professional orientation in junior management training: lessons from the ‘Apprenti Manager’ programme in French Business Schools

Introduction

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The case context

The context is the French ‘apprenti manager’ (management apprentice) programme. This programme, increasingly common in French Business schools, has precursors in the German system of ‘Berufsakademie’. In brief, the programme involves students attending courses during two days per week, and work at a sponsoring company during three days. Typically, the programme is financed as a public-private initiative, with sponsoring companies bearing 40% of the total cost. The programme has been accredited by the French education authorities since 2002.

Students apply for the programme after having been admitted to the ‘standard’ business school programme. Application to the ‘apprenti manager’ programme involves a letter of application and an interview with a mixed jury composed of both professionals and academics.; if they are rejected, they can still follow the standard programme.

Once accepted, the participants sign a formal contract with a sponsoring organisation. This raises the status in the firm from ‘stagiaire’ (intern) to that of an employee. Consequently, they are entitled to pay and benefits roughly equivalent to that of a management trainee (taking into account the 3 days out of five work schedule).

The programme organisation itself is based to some extent on that of classical apprenticeships in manual and crafts professions: The student reports to two supervisors; at the company, this is the
“maître d’apprentissage”, a sort of professional mentor. At the business school, the student is assigned an academic supervisor, the “tuteur universitaire”. There are three scheduled meetings per year between the company mentor and the academic supervisor. Both are jointly responsible for assessing the apprentices’ quality of work and overall progress. Continuing assessment is also ensured through both supervisors having access to, and filling in comments and reports, in the students’ ‘livret d’apprentissage’ (apprenticeship log). This log book records different features of a students’ progress in areas such as acquisition of know-how, general behaviour, professional and personal attitudes, tasks given and way in which they were completed, etc.

The ‘apprenti manager’ programme is divided into three streams: Marketing, Human Resource Management, and Finance & Control. Our case study is concerned with the participants of the third year of the programme in the academic year 2004-05. It involves 15 students in the Marketing stream, 7 in HRM, and 10 in Finance & Control.

**Methodology**

Data were collected through observation and open-ended interviews with six apprentices from the Marketing stream. They were all working as Assistant Managers for a large international company. We decided to focus on this relatively homogeneous group of students (same stream, same job title) in order to control for variations in professional culture. Each interview lasted for about 90 minutes.

Following a Grounded Theory approach to data evaluation (see, for example, (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); (Martin & Turner, 1986); (Strauss & Corbin, 1998); (Eisenhardt, 1989); (Locke, 2001), in a first round of data sighting the material obtained was checked as to whether there were any common themes or ‘issues’ that were brought up with a certain frequency. Concentrating on these “in vivo labels” (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), or the main issues addressed in discourse, was based on the idea that selectivity is an essential characteristic of consciousness (Scott, 1995), i.e., the ‘perceived truth’ (or what one could call ‘para-truth’) is very much a function of selected and re-produced discourses.

**Data analysis**

The following table gives a brief overview of the students who participated in our case study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Industry sector</th>
<th>Profile (derived from interview and self-descriptions of students)</th>
<th>Performance (assessment in livret d’apprentissage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pierre G</td>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>Very implied, loves initiatives, high work addiction, very flexible, need for recognition</td>
<td>Very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline A</td>
<td>Jewellery</td>
<td>Calculated, rational, a predefined desire of the job, lack of confidence</td>
<td>Very good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabine A</td>
<td>Pharmaceuticals</td>
<td>Very focuses on the mission, prefer to be executive, lack of confidence, intolerant to the ambiguity</td>
<td>Quite good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the interviews and informal discussions with the participants, we saw three in vivo labels, or issues, emerging. These are

- the lack of support from their mentors, and limited legitimacy.
- the perceived need for role-play vs being genuine
- criticism of management practices, sometimes leading to a questioning of career choice

**Lack of support and legitimacy**

Literature defines legitimacy according three dimensions: to be accepted, recognised and justified (Accardo A. & Corcuff P. (1986)).

In our sample group, formal acceptance was not considered a problem thanks to the contract which gives them the status of employee (different from internship). However, participants clearly identified problems of recognition and a justification for their existence in the firm.

One issue that was frequently brought up was the mentor (the maître d’apprentissage).

Participants complained about their mentor over-protecting and controlling them, and avoiding to give them true responsibilities. As a result, other members of the organisational team were prevented from perceiving the trainee as an autonomous future manager. Linked to this was the question of the sense which the trainees gave to their trainee status. Even though their mission, the goals of the traineeship or the trainee’s place inside the organisation were explicit, they failed to consider their role –and their daily work- as worthwhile and contributing to their professional and/or personal development: “So what ?” – type questions were frequently raised, and led, in some cases, to the trainees developing doubts about their partaking in the programme. While they failed to see a deeper sense in the days they spent at the companies, they frequently mentioned two sources of “entertainment”; namely the variety of mixing student life with work (and the relatively higher amount of free time they had compared to other people in the firm), and a detached, and sometimes amused, observation of the power games going on within the firm. Some remained on the sidelines and watched, while others recognised that they quite enjoyed participating in these “games”.

CA, “I must fight every day just to be allowed to go to see someone in another department when I need some information. My mentor seems to be afraid that I could make any mistake.”

SA, “It is clear that your life in company depend on the area of responsibility of your mentor. You see only what he wants to show you but then you understand that all you’ll ever get to see is his own little world. So your existence is so linked to your mentor’s power that if you ever want to evolve, you would need to link more to other people. And that is difficult.”
CA, “Nobody want understand that the informal way could become the formal way: my boss has told me that I am playing with the evil by saying that”

AR, “I was happy to learn that my favourite option has been adopted by the board but my boss seems to be chocked by my lobbing: he told me that my behaviour was inappropriate”

There were also slightly cynical voices, which saw life at the company as a game:

ET, “I have found a game: I love observing the people and the way they try to influence each other... I was told so many things about power that it is really funny to see that in reality”

Interestingly, several students were quite confident about their own abilities, and resent being curtailed. The stifling of innovative behaviour was a major source of complaint.

ET, “We quickly realise that we actually could do a lot on our own, just by our academic training. But they won’t let us.”

AR, “I remember asking a question during the lunch: what the interest of selling this type of product or managing customer relation... it was a bit provocative ok but the collective answers has scared me: ‘eh little boy, the question is not what but how to do more how to be more productive’”

CF, “I have asked my mentor whether it is a sign of an efficient manager to be overbooked all the time? The answer is something surprising. We are in such position inside the company that we can not take the time to imagine another way of acting. The right way is learned by seeing the others doing things and being promoted for that. So why take the risk to do differently?”

The need for role-play versus being genuine

ET, “We use the term “enchantement” for selling our product. We use experiential marketing in our retailing shop to stimulate our customers’ senses. But inside the company, in terms of management, it’s very very different. It is amazing to see such a distance between what we sell and what we are”.

PG, “Be sincere with the customer, believe in your product: that were the first words heard at the beginning of my training in the company. After several weeks, do look like you are sincere, you believe. It is Hollywood! Everybody play a role. The hardest thing is to understand in which movie you are”.

The above quotes are typical. All participants very quickly realised that there was a need for role-play on one hand, and a lack of relevance assigned to one’s inner feelings.

There is a true lack by the “apprentis” to build their own being. It is not a question of professional of social identity (Sainsaulieu 1988): it is quite more complex. The apprenti play a role: the role of the perfect manager. But the definition of the role should avoid the notions of feeling and soul.

Here we can identify the dissonance between surface acting and deep acting (Grandey 2003). The surface acting is the formal role that you play without go in deep emotionally in the character. The deep acting is a research on the emotional background of the character. In surface acting: you play like a play in tradition with comedia dell arte: you are given a formal guideline of your role. In deep acting: you integrate the psychological dimension of your character and you define you role in consequence.
The apprenti have consciousness that they have to play a role. They have been informed by the academic world and is truly confirmed by the reality in the company. But the feeling of dissonance comes from they must position themselves toward the world of business. The reality is so less motivating that they surface acting and are good in it.

That is why they choose a strategic or political point of view, take distance and propose to be a good actor by building a wall between professional life and individual life which means wall between acting emotions and feeling emotions.

There is the necessity of developing a true deep acting for helping the apprenti to become manager but how?

AR, “In this company, you have to be an actor. A role is not only a “description” of your mission. It is a reality in terms of acting. For instance, I have learned to modify my face regarding the situation. I am quite sick to do something that I do not defend in a different context but that is my job”.

CA, “Where are the emotions in organizations? I have the bad impression that people simulate in all situations even in face to face lunch”.

CF, “Being professional is a long process in which the most important thing is not to be but to look like. It is not very hard to accept that but if you want to play the role, you have to play it entirely”

CF, “I can express my competences but nothing must be known about what I feel; that is quite hard but I begin to learn to do this in a better way. Finally it is quite cool”

AR, “I am not paid for being the company but only to play a role inside the company: it is very important to keep that in mind”

PG, “the most important is to smile or to look like angry: that is often enough to transmit a message. But as soon as I feel truly sadness or anger, I have been learned to hide that: it is not the role of a manager”

SA, “I was very touched by my MA who confesses me that she do not understand why the people prefer playing a role that being sincere in their job. She was very sensible to that but in the same time; I feel pain but also fear about the job”

ET, “My Ma has explained me that to be too much involved in this job cause psychological damages which are hard to cure. At best, you take distance with the company but also with the people and the products that you managed; I must confess that I do not have understood the interest of remaining in this company”

**Questioning a Career Choice**

Ultimately, there was widespread disillusion among students: They realised that working in a corporate environment was far from being a ‘métier’ in the sense described by d’Iribarne (1994).

One student described it thus:

PG, “Love what you do : that my father’s principle ! I am not sure that I will be able to follow his principle by doing this job”
Another added:

CA, “Do I want to become a top manager? To get more trouble and more money? NO interest for me”

It seemed they lost respect for the work of a manager:

AR, “I know everything about the business world: respect the norms, learn to follow the right people, do not think too much and you will succeed in being promoted”

…and, ultimately,

CF, “The everyday life in a company is not very exciting, once you understand that there may be one or two interesting projects in three years, and even then you cannot be sure that you will be part of it. So it is a short term excitement that leads to permanent frustration”

Many did not see their mentors as role models:

CF, “I asked myself how my mentor who is a brilliant woman can be such a workaholic: there is so much better to do in life, isn’t it? and I prefer not asking to myself how could I bear this situation when I won’t be student or spend full time here”

There were also expressions of feeling trapped in an unwanted professional situation:

AR, “It is hard for me to come to terms with the thought that this is not the way of living I want! But I do not have the choice … I can not just quit four years of training to change my orientation. I am going to try to do the best I can within the limits of my daily motivation”

Implications for HRD

It may be the time to develop a conception of aesthetics (Schiller (1795)) in the management. This does not concern the formal technical content of the mission but more the philosophy and the definition of the management that we want to defend or quite the definition for which we are ready to defend.

The concept of management seems to suffer from a lack of substance that the life in organisation tends to reduce to a vacuum. It is time to give substance to the concept in management learning. For that, it could be helpful to apply the process of sensemaking and give priority to the interpersonal interactions inside the couple “people who manages – people who are managed” (Weick 1976, 1979).

Taking distance from his position in the company is very important but it seems important to avoid cynicism which leads to despise his function and the people around (Flemming & Spicer 2003). Some authors defend the contribution of the art in organization studies and management processes (De Monthoux & Strati, 2002).

Indeed, management learning should deal with two types of knowledge:

- some technical knowledge that be learned through traditional learning
- some more complex and intangible notions like duty, honour, ethics; Art could give life or interpretation and sense to these notions.

Here the notion of sense must be understood in terms of signification (content, substance), sense (feeling, emotion), sense (direction, orientation). This “sense management” could help the young manager to create an identity which reflects who they are, the causes that they want to defend, to build a critical but not cynical point of view, and help to develop their own way of deep acting and finally, to be the manager that he deeply wants.

The young manager seem to appreciate that individual genetics, philosophy and value determine which kind of actor you can be and your limit in terms of acting and so the limit of your intrinsic performance. The limits can be overcome by teaching not only a perspective of surface acting but mainly the background the acting.

Surface acting as manager profile has lead the management learning to produce a number of techniques and methods with a number of limits when the surface acting must be taught. It is necessary to open the domains of teaching, the set of concepts to the influence of other domains like arts for example.

This new perspective could see the manager as an interpreter of a text written by somebody else: interpreting does not mean telling lies or telling the truth: the importance is the “la justesse” of the interpretation. Then becoming more skilled the manager could develop his own text to interpret.

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