

Unplugged - My Own Book Review

Henry MINTZBERG, *The Nature of Managerial Work* (1973) & *Simply Managing: What Managers Do - And Can Do Better* (2013).

reviewed by himself

Paperback: 298 pages
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The “unplugged” section seeks to experience new forms of book reviews. We regularly grant a wild card to a world-class scholar to review his/her own Classic. In “My own book review”, authors will tell us the story of “what I was trying to do” with sometimes some auto-ethnographic considerations. By recounting the building process of one seminal research with a contemporary lens, they may give some insights for the current craft of research and also share with us renunciations, doubts and joys in their intimate writing experience.

Reviewing one’s own book is an interesting idea; finally a chance for some objectivity in a book review!

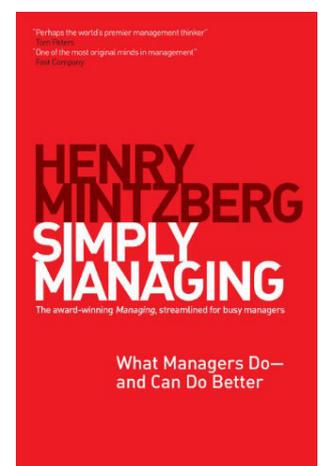
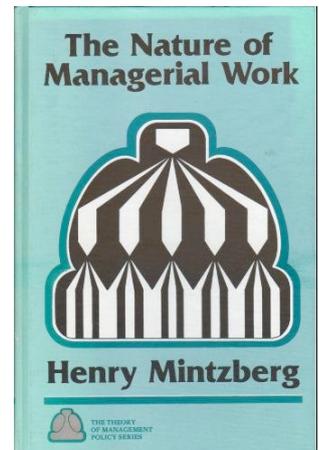
I will review my first book *The Nature of Managerial Work*, (1973), together with my next-to-last one, *Simply Managing* (2013), because they address the same topic, 40 years apart. (In fact, *Simply Managing* is an abbreviated version of *Managing*, published in 2009, with some of the more formal material taken out.)

The samples are different. The former was based on one week of observation of 5 chief executives, three of them in businesses, while the latter was based on a day of observation of 29 managers at all levels, more distributed across private, public, and plural sector organizations.

The structure of the two books may appear to be similar, with a number of chapters paralleling each other, although some are in fact quite different. I shall review these similarities and differences, chapter by chapter, before asking in conclusion what I learned in these ensuing 40 years.

OPENINGS

The openings are rather different. In *Managerial Work*, I summarized the book in the first chapter and presented a review of earlier literature on the nature of managerial work in Chapter 2—in terms of various schools of thought—as would be expected in a book that derived from my doctoral thesis. *Simply Managing* is meant to be a more popular book for managers, so there is less literature review and a more provocative introduction: to various myths of managing (for example, the distinction between leaders and managers). On the other hand, the whole of *Managerial Work* debunked a number of myths of managing, so perhaps the two books are on the same page, so to speak.



CHARACTERISTICS OF MANAGING

I was happy to keep the next chapter of *Simply Managing* much like that of *Managerial Work*. It was the best received chapter, and since I claim in one of the myths of Chapter 1 in *Simply Managing* that managerial work is a fundamental practice that does not change, why change this chapter? It points out the pace and pressures of managing, which perhaps resonated with readers tired of this job so often having been described as akin to orchestra conducting (in performance anyway, not rehearsal!).

Yet maybe I too got a little caught up in this. Of the 29 days of observation discussed in *Simply Managing*, some certainly demonstrated these characteristics (e.g., the entrepreneurial head of a chain of retail stores and the head nurse of a surgical ward in a hospital), but others were somewhat more calm. Other characteristics described in both books do, however, seem to apply more generally, such as the oral nature of managing and the wide range of contacts that managers have, both inside and outside the unit they manage.

CONTENT OF MANAGING

The next chapter of both books considered the context of managing, what I called its “working roles” in *Managerial Work* and “a model of managing” in *Simply Managing*.

The ten roles I described in *Managerial Work* (figurehead, leader, liaison, monitor, disseminator, spokesman, entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, negotiator) received a good deal of attention: finally something in print beyond the tired words of “planning, organizing, coordinating, commanding, and controlling” (all words for controlling) that had dominated the literature for half a century.

But I was not especially happy with this by the time I came to the revision. I didn’t feel that this description was wrong so much as inadequate—constituting a list instead of a model. So the chapters of *Managerial Work* and *Simply Managing* differ markedly. I like the model in *Simply Managing*, shown as managing on three planes—information, people, and action—into the organization and out to its surroundings. On this model, I laid various roles, similar to those of the earlier book but conceptually tighter. I think this captures the spirit of the practice of managing well, but I’m not sure that anyone has taken much notice, at least compared with the earlier ten roles. I hope this changes.

VARIETIES OF MANAGING

Both books have chapters on varieties of managing. That of *Managerial Work* was much more systematic, presenting hypothesis on the effects of, for example, the nature of the industry, the level of the job, and the size of the organization.

But what were managers to do with that? So in *Simply Managing*, I dropped the hypotheses. I studied the 29 days carefully and came up with a conclusion that surprised myself: that some of the factors we assume to be most significant—such as national culture (for example, managing in China versus the U.S.)—may not be all that significant, while others—such as the form of the organization (professional versus machine, etc.)—may be more so than previously thought. Myths remain in understanding managerial work.

SCIENCE, CONUNDRUMS, AND EFFECTIVENESS

From here the two books diverge. *Managerial Work* went into an aberration about science in managerial work: programing it for greater effectiveness. I rarely repudiate what I have written, and I am not sorry I included this. It did indicate my inclination back then. (I had worked in Operational Research at the Canadian National Railways before I did my graduate studies at MIT.) But I soon realized that this was a bit of a dead end.

What I did instead in *Simply Managing* particularly pleases me. Before concluding with a chapter on managing effectively, I added a chapter on the conundrums of managing (some threads of which can be found in *Managerial Work*). As an objective reviewer, I find this chapter terrific, and hope it will get much more attention. Imagine asking “How can a manager keep informed when the very nature of the job removed him or her from the very thing being managed?” Or “How to maintain the necessary confidence without slipping into arrogance?” I think these conundrums get closest to describing the intricate complexities of managing: I use them when I do workshops with managers. The last chapter of *Simply Managing*, called “Managing Effectively”, is playful, but I am happy with it because I believe it addresses the right issues with serious intent: the inevitably flawed manager; selecting the devils you know; the difficulties of assessing managerial effectiveness; and how to develop managers by recognizing that, while no manager can be created in a classroom, people with experience in the practice, can there be given the opportunity to learn by reflecting together on their own experience.

40 YEARS LATER

I am quite happy with *Simply Managing*, happier than with *Managerial Work*, even though the latter has done so well. *Simply Managing* has yet to succeed like that, but I feel that it deserves to. The job of managing is important, and the more we all understood it, the better it will be practiced. We are still inundated with myths about managing, such as the nonsense that “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.” Whoever measured with any sophistication the culture of an organization, the potential market for a truly new product, or managing itself. Indeed, has anyone ever even tried to measure the performance of measurement?

What have I learned in the ensuing years? To be more playful for sure—to ease up and let go. Readers learn more, and so does the author. I also learned to see managing more comprehensively. With that one exception (of programming the job), I think I was on the right track in 1973; now I can see better where that track is headed. As I state in Chapter 1 of *Simply Managing*, the practice is fundamental and does not change—not ensuing 40 years. But my perception of it has.

At least what I call “Managing Naturally” in the last chapter of the new book hasn’t changed. What has changed is that now we have so much more managing unnaturally: “leaders” who sit on “top”, measuring and then exercising their authority by remote control, instead of rolling up their sleeves and facing the fact that good leadership is embedded in engaged management. If this is not clear to you, let me suggest that you read a really good book. It’s called *Simply Managing*.