**"Under the Surface with Dory the Forgetful Blue Tang fish:**

**Does Anyone Know Where We Are in Management Education?”**

**A Special Topics Fellows’ Presentation**

**by**

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**Abstract**

## This discussion will consider criticism of our management concepts. We admit our discipline might be limping a bit but using the film “Finding Dory” as a metaphor, we support the idea that “worth is not based upon your disability but what you do in spite of it.” In a “World Café” format, participants will engage four related topics: the fidelity of what we teach; the loss of vitality of our theories; the end of entrepreneurialism; and possibility of a new paradigm. Following small group discussions, participants will find the meaning of the topics and applications to our work as educators.

**OVERVIEW**

This is designed to be an interactive session where the panelists will share four basic themes of what we do or do not know about the current state management education. These themes are:

1. **The Fidelity of What We Teach:**  Fidelity is defined as faithfulness to a person, cause, or belief, demonstrated by continuing loyalty and support. The word is most often associated with sound where it refers to high-quality reproduction of sound to distinguish it from the lower quality sound.  Managing in and for the **presence** of others is one way of thinking about what we teach. Is the high-fidelity of managerial presence that is presumed in our textbooks, syllabi, and learning activities met with a corresponding high-fidelity managerial behavior in the workplace? Low-fi managing seems to mark ordinary organizational behavior today. Why? The positive assumption is that self-managed persons and teams allow for less time and attention from a manager. The negative is that the profit motive for in a business or a university is driving technology into the core of the workflow; consequently, driving out people.

In thinking about fidelity - high and low – it might remind us of the ongoing cult attraction for vinyl records over the newer forms of streaming music. Most audio experts agree that vinyl sounds better (Hughes, 2015) but will agree that streaming audio is convenient, scalable, and a good fit for the digital experience of much of our lives. So, why is vinyl better? Vinyl is what’s called a lossless format. Nothing has been lost when pressing a record. It sounds as good as the producer or band intended. Digital music is stored and broadcast in a compressed format, where details are lost and quality is reduced. The technology of digital music means that sometimes the music is too loud, sometimes not loud enough, and the tracks are not true to the intentions of the musicians. “Vinyl is an old technology, and one that has remained relatively unchanged in the past decade. But that’s because it’s as close as we’ll get to a perfect device for listening to music.” (Hughes).

What is the purpose of Management theory? One could argue it is to explain, or even predict, behavior of decision makers in organizational settings. However, when it comes to management theory it is also clearly aspirational in envisioning organizational realities as they should be. Such theories also seek to capture and embed core values in describing and relating organizational phenomena. When behavior deviates from theory, even for extended periods of time, is it time to abandon theories and the values that are embedded in these theories? Or does the overarching value of fidelity call for us to reiterate or reinterpret these core values? Management theories have retained key core values through the decades with a progression of approaches including but not limited to the human relations school, behavioral frameworks, equity theory, stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, responsible management, and humanistic management. The common thread is the retention of non-economic constructs that are essential to the human experience in organizations. This constitutes fidelity over time and any attempts to abandon core values, to better explain short term behaviors, is hazardous.

***What does this have to do with management education?***An in-person class is the teaching corollary to the analog music. Sometimes it is scratchy and inconvenient to move around but when it is done right, it produces a powerful sound known for clarity and adherence to the truth of the discipline. In other words, it has fidelity. A professor-driven teaching approach that uses technology but it not technology is as close as we’ll get to a perfect deice for learning. This is also true for management and most other human enterprises. The trend might be towards to digital but the value is found in the analog. For example, how we management educators enact presence for this purpose in a fully virtual classroom? High Fidelity Managing, would challenge us to produce even higher quality, appropriately novel, theoretical guidance for manifesting presence in every channel of work; that is to summon forth unique qualities of humanity needed to exceed the bounds of our electronics.

With respect to the fidelity of what we teach, to some extent there has already been some crowding out of core values with the commoditization of business education in general, and management education in particular, with increasing emphasis on ROI and annual listings of starting salaries by degree. There is clearly an urgent need to revisit and rebalance the emphases on fidelity to core values and economic arrangements at the individual and organizational levels.

1. **The Dead Theory Society –** As a rebuttal to the provocative Economist (2016) article, we consider the idea that a reformation is needed in management theory. Schumpeter (2016) proposes that Management theory is in dire straits and needs the same cleansing that Luther brought to the Catholic Church. That is, nothing less than a reformation of practice and basic beliefs to save the “religion” from itself. The sins of the church in 1517 (corruption, selling indulgences, etc.) have morphed into the academic and consulting sins of globalism, expertise from people who have never built or run a company, and being out of touch with practitioners. This seems like a case of someone finally mentioning that the king has no clothes. In other words, it has a ton of face validity – it seems to make sense as a “subjective assessment of whether something measures what it is supposed to measure.” (Andale, 2015).

On the other hand, we have been down this road before. Gary Hamel (*Leading the Revolution,* 2002) espoused adapting the role and innovating management from within the institution. But so far, the innovations have not happened. What would impel an insurgency? Better organizations that act as continual emanations of human learning; whereby people provide purposeful behavior and meaning far more essential than information. Having said that, it may be better to look before we leap as there continue to be critiques that question the currency and relevance of management theories (Ghoshal, 2005, <http://amle.aom.org/content/4/1/75.short?rss=1&ssource=mfc>). However, it is important to parse such criticisms in that it is not the theories themselves but rather the manner in which management researchers have framed their research questions and findings. The eagerness to gain legitimacy by adopting scientific methods led to bad assumptions and harmful practices based on partial analyses. Despite the hubris of those trained in economics, most important human and organizational processes do not readily lend themselves to economic analysis without discarding important elements because the analytic frameworks cannot account for them – so these become externalities. Both, research finding and critiques of such findings are of very limited value if they are based on flawed assumptions and focus on specific elements without regard to the holistic network of theoretical constructs. If management theory is to become more relevant we need to retain the core values essential to the human experience in organizations and embrace the challenge of communicating complexity in a world of slogans and tweets.

1. **The Decline of Entrepreneurialism.** Are things not going well in innovation and change? Perhaps right there under our surface are disrupting forces whose detectors and interpreters royally, thankfully, piss us off, as Schumpeter has done among the economists and political scientists. Pointing this out is a form of creative destruction and needs to be considered.

Or, do we even agree with the basic premise of de-development? Is there really less entrepreneurial behavior? Six Sigma Online defines entrepreneurialism “capitalizing on the opportunity to make the most of a given situation” (2016). Sounds good but the US Small Business Administration reports that Small businesses provide 55% of all jobs and 66% of all net new jobs since the 1970s. In terms of internet startups, the growth in the U.S. has declined in the last few years but more venture capital (over $11 billion in 2015) has gone into that sector than ever before. More importantly, startups around the world have increased exponentially (Agrawal, 2015). This is not a down turn, it is a movement away from Silicon Valley to…everywhere and it speaks to a vibrant and growing entrepreneurial climate. As the movie, *The Social Network* has Harvard President Larry Summers saying in his wonderfully snarky way, *“Harvard undergraduates believe that inventing a job is better than finding a job.”* And maybe it is.

But a new entrepreneurialism to what end? The most urgent imperative is upon us and it is twofold – the post-truth construction of social reality and the unsustainable nature of human activity and economy!! In order to address these challenges we need to find new ways to communicate meaning, new ways to be authentic, and new ways to learn collectively. This may very well mean that management practice, research, and education must increasingly occur through interactions in the field combined with a more considered and deliberate approach to altering our mental maps. The classroom may become an ancillary, but not central, to the educational process. This may also mean the end of the industrial process of mass education as we know it. The most important implication will be that education will become a collective entrepreneurial responsibility among individuals, family, and the community with potentiallygreater internalized constraints on individual liberty and global engagement.

1. **Seeing the New Paradigm While We Forget Where We Are in the Present.** Simplification for the customer’s use of a new product or service is definitely an intention of those managing for quality (De Feo, 2016). However, it may not address the speed and cacophony of technology governing so much of our work. Perhaps the new paradigm a managerial leader can bring to the occasion is **signification.** This would be a process of making meaning matter in a given situation. To simplify is to reduce complexity to a more salable form so that people “get it”. I think signification goes under the surface of it to the why. The work of finding significance delves into personal and collective purpose. Done with an open mind and caring heart, it produces a resonate message from the core of being. So, what we could be teaching differently is the manager as signifier; the person who may be counted upon to address the need for clarity, not simplicity. Finding a remembering and memorable Dory is finding significance in a vast sea of words.

**Another point of view:** The preceding paragraph suggests that the new paradigm a managerial leader can bring to the occasion is signification**.** This would be a process of making meaning matter in a given situation. However, the mental process that makes it difficult to see signification or any other new paradigm attribute is at least partly a function of **value attribution**. That is, the thinking that comes into play when we encounter a new person, object, or situation. The value we assign to it shapes our future perception of it. But we all tend to imbue someone or something with certain qualities based on perceived value rather than objective data. This is nothing more than a quick mental shortcut to determine what’s worthy of our attention. But it is powerful driver of decisions and beliefs. A great example of how value attribution keeps us from seeing a new paradigm can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gti4JFwP_o> In this video, an ordinary looking guy in jeans and a baseball cap took out his $3.5 million Stradivarius violin and began to play. He was Joshua Bell, one of the finest violinists alive, who routinely performs in the best concert halls to sold-out crowds. In this case though, Bell was in a Washington, DC Metro station and although he played Bach for 43 minutes, of the 1,097 people who walked by, almost no one stopped. No big applause and hardly any change dropped into his violin case. How come? The answer is that although Bell didn’t sound like a mediocre busker, he was dressed in jeans and a baseball cap and passersby didn’t hear an outstanding concert, they heard street music. The value attribution was low…and mightily wrong.

In a sense the process of signification is underway. We have begun to accept the macro ideas of and need for de-development, voluntary simplicity, no growth or smart growth, “unconsumerism,” and the like. These larger movements are visible in the signification of what it means to individuals, especially millennials, who increasingly do not have a driver’s license, live in micro housing, value experiences over possessions, engage in collective activity without a monetary footprint by using urban spaces and shared resources, don’t perceive boundaries or barriers with respect to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, seek non-confrontational ways to address differences, and are not incentivized by money or power but instead by authenticity and meaning. As management educators our personal interactions with new generations of young adults will bring about a sea change in our pedagogies and roles in the larger educational seascape.

The lesson of *Finding Dory*, the cartoon about the forgetful Blue Tang fish is that we need to check our assumptions. Two lessons (at least) come from this movie: 1) Don’t let your weaknesses define you and 2) you are capable of more than you can imagine. Great paradigm breaking lessons for Blue Tang fish, complex organizations, and less colorful, less complex management educators.

**What the Panel Discussion Will Do:**

We will begin the panel discussion with a brief overview of the four thematic areas. Designed to both introduce the topic and let the audience know how the topic will be engaged in this symposium. We will then ask participants to divide into four groups and using a “World Café” format of open communication on changing topics we will aim to enrich the collective knowledge of participants.

As a point of information, in the “World Café” format participants are divided into groups of 4 to 5 people and seated around a round table. The set-up is similar to the atmosphere in a café, hence the name. The meeting begins with a 20 minute discussion (‘research’) on a particular topic. After the discussion time is up, members from each table switch to another group. Every time there is a switch, the table’s speaker (‘host’) welcomes the new participants and explains what the group has come up with so far. Participants take part in a number of rounds of discussion and as they bring with them the knowledge and ideas from other groups, become enriched with various points of view. (*Genioso*, 2015).

Following the small group discussions, we will report the knowledge generated and depending on the time allocated to the session and the number of participants, create a plenary discussion where participants will find the meaning of the topics and applications to our work as educators.

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