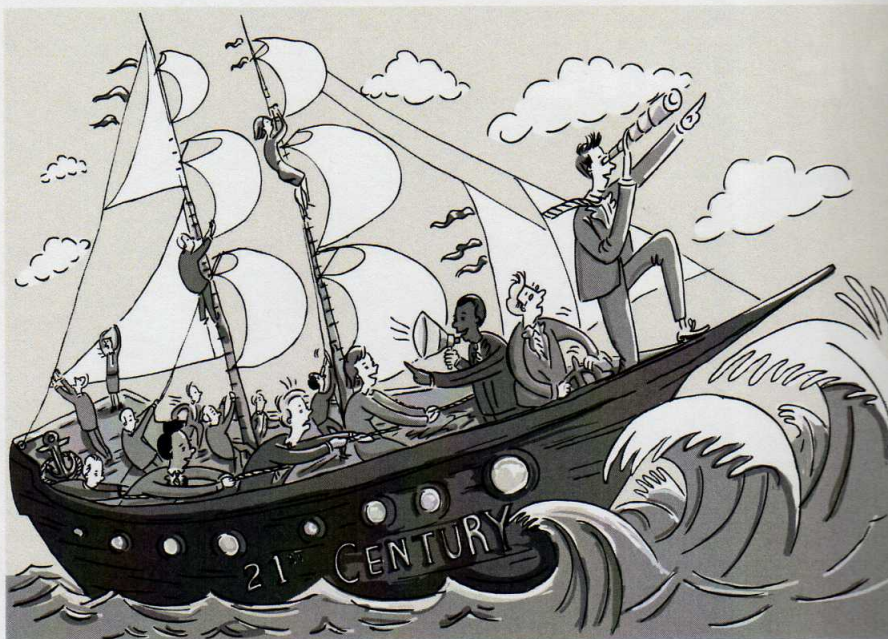


What Good Managers Do: Management Priorities for the 21st Century

By Jaume Llopis & Joan E. Ricart



Over many years Jaume Llopis and Joan E. Ricart have interviewed more than 200 managers that have attended their classroom to explain to MBA students what the priorities for top managers in organisations are. Below, the authors discuss how they have identified four fundamental priorities that explain what good managers really do.

As professors of Strategy and General Management, the question of what good managers do is a very relevant one. We are always worried about what is good management, what is a good manager, or what characterises good management. The question is clearly relevant but the answer is far from easy. Managers differ a lot in their responsibilities, in their style, on the type of problems that they face, on the industry in which they compete, on the strategy that the company follows, on the characteristics of the company, etc. There

are so many contingencies to take into account that to generalise is extremely difficult.

One could try to find an answer in literature, just to realise that there is no clear answer. The classic literature on this question should of course start with Peter Drucker (*The Practice of Management*, 1954) where he focuses on three areas for action: Taking responsibility for the economic results of the company (the business), managing the managerial structure or intellectual force, and organising the labor force towards efficiency. To do so, managers set objectives, organise, motivate and communicate, measure, and manage people.

Another complementary answer can be found in J. Kotter (1982), 'The General

Managers': good (general) managers have a clear agenda for the future and a good network of (internal and external) contacts they can use to get things done. Previously, H. Mintzberg (1973) in 'The Nature of Managerial Work' challenges some myths on the work of managers by describing people as less predictable, less systematic, and acting fast on minimal information. In a more recent publication Mintzberg insists on not studying management as a science, forgetting it is an experimental act where art and experience are as important, if not more, than science elements of the profession. More recently, Barlett and Ghoshal (2000) in 'Individualized Corporation' illustrate that the basic imperatives of strategy, structure, and systems, are substituted by the softer elements of purpose, process, and people.

Unsatisfied with these answers we decided to ask managers directly. For 10 years we have been inviting top executives from a very diverse set of companies to discuss with our MBA students their priorities and their agendas. In this period of time more than 200 professionals accepted our challenge. Many of them were further interviewed and a small sample reproduced in two books, one published (in Spanish) in 2007 and in 2013.¹ We provided very little structure to our research and allowed them to use their own words to describe what they considered good management practice, what had worked for them, and what they consider the essential tasks and priorities for their level of responsibility. What we found can be summarised in four fundamental priorities:

What is good management? What is a good manager? One could try to find an answer in literature, just to realise that there is no clear answer....We decided to ask managers directly.

