

STAFFING: A FADING MANAGEMENT THEORY TREASURE?

Fred A. Ware, Jr.
Valdosta State University

A senior professor of management (in age and tenure) at a large, regional university is observed reflecting on the evolution of his academic discipline and voicing concern that important fundamentals appear to be dropping out of textbooks and business school curricula. He places some of the blame on unanticipated consequences of business schools' actions in the past while complying with international accreditation standards. The case is appropriate in undergraduate or graduate introductory management courses to provide the student a glimpse into the "real world" of teaching this academic subject and to gain understanding that while the discipline is constantly morphing and expanding to include more topics, basics may remain as foundations rather than becoming obsolete. Alert beginning students should learn to expect and ask for much more than behavioral science education in the management discipline despite the historic accreditation-driven focus on that segment. Between the lines, management academicians will find an issue beyond classroom interest but well worth examining from a pedagogical perspective. Hence, the case could be utilized in educational administrative courses or training sessions.

INTRODUCTION

Professor Arnold Addison was following his wife's unrelenting advice and gradually discarding class lecture notes and other material from his embarrassingly messy office. Glancing at his bookshelf, he knew that most of the texts there had not been touched since he moved into his current space twenty years ago. Having run out of space, newer books were stacked elsewhere. Two five-drawer filing cabinets were full and storage boxes were piled up everywhere. There was no more wall space for favorite art work, family pictures, souvenir coffee cups or plaques. Students took special delight in seeing the ancient and dusty eight-track player on the shelf. "Hey, the FM radio still works!" he had responded to the most recent young heckler. That made him think of his 6-year-old grandson who once pointed at a stored typewriter and asked, "Pop, what is that funny machine?"

Having been a Business Administration faculty member at Sunbelt University for nearly forty years, Dr. Addison had taught numerous different course topics and (as a self-confessed pack rat) had even managed to salvage some hand-written old lecture material that rivaled the Dead Seas Scrolls. As his academic discipline evolved over

the years, he had been routinely striking through obsolete notes and adding newer ones, often stapling current material on top of older pages. Seeing a sudden outpouring of students from the building passing his window, most with cell phones held to their ears, he reflected on how rapidly and how significantly the academic discipline had grown. Reams of empirical research had been published in the field after his first principles course taken as an undergraduate student half a century ago! Even today's cutting edge concepts will soon be eclipsed, he realized, but it somehow seemed a shame to toss out this compilation of hand-written material. Yet, what good is it beyond eventual archeological interest in the next millennium?

The telephone rang. "How is the cleanup going?" It was his wife. "Making lots of progress!" he cheerfully replied, glancing at the waste basket near his desk which contained two emptied packets of artificial sweetener and a plastic coffee stirrer. "I'll see you after work," she said. "Don't try to do too much in one day."

THE ABC'S OF MANAGEMENT

Professor Addison had gradually developed a ritual of keeping manila folders for each course taught, retaining grade sheets and student information data indefinitely for use whenever he was asked for letters of reference. Heavily-stapled amended lecture notes (needless to say, growing thicker and thicker in size) were routinely moved to new manila folders each term. It was just too much trouble to sort through them and toss redundant pages out. After a couple of interruptions and another sip of coffee, he decided to zero-in on the notes from Management and Organizational Behavior, the course now used as the introduction to the discipline of management and the prerequisite or co-requisite for all management courses. "Maybe I can prove to myself that either I am just putting off the inevitable or I really should hang on to these old yellow notes for someone's benefit," he thought.

Georgia, the departmental secretary, knocked on his door. "Dr. Addison, you are late for your next class!" she exclaimed. Arnold nearly tripped as he grabbed his text and lecture notes, and scurried down the hall. In the elevator it dawned on him that students in this Small Business Management/Entrepreneurship course should have learned and retained (theoretically at least) a lot of basic information from the introductory management course. When the elevator door opened on the third floor, he was thinking that it would be interesting to find out how valuable that prerequisite course really was in students' understanding of the special situations faced by small businesses owner/managers. Furthermore, were the old fundamentals being utilized?

"Let's have a pop quiz," he announced to the class. "Just kidding," he said with a smile having observed the stunned facial expressions in front of him. "But I do want to ask you a question based on what you should have learned in the prerequisite course to this one: Who can cite the well-known 'Functions of Management?'" Silence reigned. "Well, I'll bet you know the four 'P's' of Marketing," he responded, wherein various students hesitantly called out, "Product, place, price, and promotion." "Well, in

the discipline of management one way of learning it is to build on what are referred to as....," and pausing for emphasis he continued, ".... the *essential activities of effective managers, or functions of management*. Didn't you learn *those*?" Someone whispered, "Planning..." More silence came with a few looks of embarrassment.

"Take a look in your text (1) on page 129," Arnold said, noticeably unhappy. "Yes, Planning is one function, perhaps the most important, but you see in Figure 6.1 that there are four more: Organizing, Staffing, Leading and Controlling. Does that ring a bell with any of you? Over the years, each of those tried and true basic activities have expanded into major sub-disciplines supported with volumes of research findings and documented practitioner experience." One student said that she had a vague recollection of the list except she did not recall Staffing as being one. "It seems to me that there just four, like the four P's of marketing. That was probably on our first test!" she blurted out suddenly with a smile as her memory partially kicked in. "Actually, I remember from that introductory course that we had mostly psychology stuff. Wasn't that course called Organizational Behavior?"

Dr. Addison now knew that something of value in those old yellow notes had not made it through to the new generation of management students. Could his notes be obsolete or have the newer texts slowly, perhaps inadvertently, omitted material that is of great importance at least in his own mind? Even more sobering, was that material actually of little value or even obsolete?

IS "STAFFING" STILL ONE OF THE FUNCTIONS OF MANAGEMENT?

The "talk around the water cooler" (in this case the coffee machine in the faculty lounge) the next morning gave Arnold a chance to test the waters. The two assistant professors who usually taught the introductory course in management happened to be there at the same time. The gist of the conversation was did they think that the rise of the field of Human Resource Management over the years had impacted classical management theory by moving what was once an essential activity of *all* managers to the responsibility of HRM. Staffing was showing up in his newest small business/entrepreneurship text as a function of management (along with Planning, Organizing, Leading, and Controlling), but his students seemed to have never heard of it. Arnold pointed out that to his dismay the chosen texts over a number of years and currently adopted were in fact Organizational Behavior (OB) books, rather than basic Management books (3). Both faculty members said that they covered management basics including the classic functions, using their own material if the functions were omitted from the latest text. They felt the staffing "issue," in the current vernacular, to be "not a problem," and that "students just don't internalize details."

Yawns were politely stifled as Arnold gave an impromptu lecture blaming the international accrediting agency, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) for indirectly forcing Sunbelt's business school to revamp their Principles of Management course back in the late 'seventies. "Maybe the practitioner-proven functions themselves have been scattered to the sub-disciplinary winds," he was thinking, not daring to bring up another topic that would surely contribute even more suspicion that his perception of the discipline was truly out of date. Several blatant glances at watches triggered a mass exodus from the break area leaving Dr. Addison pondering what he should do next, if anything.

BACK TO THE FUNCTION OF STAFFING

Later that day, Dr. Addison took a closer look at his thick lecture notes on the "Functions of Management," and in particular, "Staffing." The oldest papers at the bottom were nearly in shreds; staples were plentiful (some had signs of rust!). He found numerous changes to student text page references, continuing toward the top of the stack. A pattern was noted in the marginal notes with chronologically changing page references as management texts began listing only four functions instead of the typical five (2). The responsibility of Staffing (hiring, training and development of employees and managers) began to show up more and more frequently in texts under the rapidly expanding activities of Human Resources, formerly Personnel Management. The word "staffing," it seemed, was gradually disappearing and those duties had moved under the HR umbrella in many texts. More marginal notes had been used as a reminder to bring this trend to the attention of students each term, such as "Give the Staffing mini-lecture today."

An oft repeated favorite classroom antic of his was making a special point to exaggerate and literally pontificate on the fact that staffing was absolutely an essential activity of *line* managers and could *not* be delegated (in his opinion) to the *staff* advisory position of Human Resources. "You just can't expect the HR people to determine which managers in your organization need training and development," he would nearly shout in class, "HR, of course, can help but they are *not* responsible. You are! The book is wrong!"

Now that's some exciting stuff for 22 year old university students, he chuckled to himself spilling coffee all over his calendar pad. "I wonder if I missed a committee meeting this afternoon," he thought.

EPILOGUE

On the way home that evening, Arnold Addison found himself still reflecting on the same thought: Practitioners, business school academicians and students would do well to understand that old fundamental about Staffing. Or would they? Was it worth worrying about and would anyone care? What about other old foundation theories that had lasted over time, being built upon and updated over the years? Most of the

well-worn practical rules of thumb in these tattered lecture notes should still be useful but maybe they had fallen out of the spotlight due to the exponentially growing behavioral and quantitative management contributions of new scholars. “When I go in tomorrow I should throw all of those old notes into the trash can. I should have done it today but I just didn’t have the heart.”

The thought quickly faded as he pushed several buttons rapidly in sequence, turning off the CD player, the GPS, and the computerized driver/passenger front and back seat synchronized air conditioning systems, then clicked open the electronically-controlled garage door.

REFERENCES

- (1) Byrd, Mary Jane and Leon C. Megginson (2009), *Small Business Management: An Entrepreneur's Guidebook*, sixth edition, McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- (2) Mackenzie, R. Alec (1969), “The Management Process in 3-D,” *Harvard Business Review*, Nov/Dec. pp. 80-87.
- (3) Ware, F.A. (2008), “Passing the Torch or Torching the Past?” *Southeast Case Research Association Journal*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, pp. 103-108.