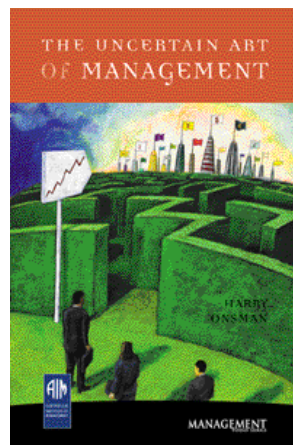


Management — isn't that just a theory?

Any value to be found in management theories lies not in expecting a guide in how to “manage”, but in examining why they don't work and whether they can be made to work

REVIEWED BY DAVID JAMES



The Uncertain Art of Management, Harry Onsman, (McGraw Hill, 2002)

Management theories are noted for being as dubious as they are jargon ridden. So much so that a cynic might say their principal purpose was to line the pockets of management consultants. A cynic would be right. And the cynic's name is Harry Onsman, whose book, *The Uncertain Art of Management*, provides a commonsense overview of the “difficult and disturbingly ambiguous practice of management”.

Not that Onsman is just a cynic. He can be sardonic as well. Describing the “big” ideas of management discourse as “phatic communion”, he suggests much management theory is the “speaking or chanting of meaningless mantras in order to create a sense of togetherness”.

Were this book simply a list of the inadequacies of managerial insights it would be amusing, but of little value. But it is more than that. It is an attempt

to put the ideas in historical context, explore why they often do not work, and provide basic suggestions about how to make them work. Onsman also follows the most important trail with management ideas: their significance as symptoms of what is occurring in the workplace. The trend towards worker “empowerment” he accounts a sign of managers' own powerlessness, not the sudden discovery that it is a good idea to give workers more control over their activities. This explains why it is an initiative at once habitually advertised and rarely implemented.

Managers rarely have the time to sift and critique the ideas being presented by consultants who are nothing if not self-interested. They are too busy managing. As Onsman observes, managers usually find themselves alone in a way they did not entirely expect: “If you are a manager, you had better look after yourself, because I don't believe anyone else will look after you! This is not because no one cares, but simply because, in the scheme of things, nurturing managerial talent in all its dimensions is no one's job, so it doesn't happen.”

Any number of multinational companies would disagree with this assertion, but the worldwide proliferation of management schools in the last two decades suggests it is a workable generalisation. Onsman takes a quick and practical look at areas such as on-the-job training, trust, competitive advantage, human resources, and the gordian knot, leadership.

He is not able to consider any area in great depth, but his knowledge of the more important management thinkers

Carolyn Barker, AIM's Management Today Series editor, says: “Australian managers are finally recognising that there is no management panacea or ‘one best way’ that will solve all their problems. There is, however, always a better way to do things. And there is certainly a huge body of knowledge for managers to tap into. The trick is to be able to evaluate critically which theory fits the realities and practicalities of your situation.

“We think that this book, the third in the Management Today Series, provides managers with a commonsense guide that puts the theories in perspective and assists them to ‘cut through’ when decisions need to be made.”

— such as Peter Drucker, Mary Parker Follett, Henry Mintzberg, W. Edwards-Deming, Australia's Fred Emery — and his largely concealed erudition makes for a rigorous and penetrating look at many of the more important fields of inquiry.

Onsman debunks some of the populist ideologies, including the notion, common among economists, that organised labor is inherently evil: “Profitability is not possible if the workforce is unionised? Check out the mountain of research that shows the opposite and none that supports the proposition.”

Defenders of management ideas might say: “It's easy to be critical.” This is entirely correct. It is extremely easy to be critical of many management theories. Most do not work or simply wrong. But, happily, we have Harry Onsman to show us how to go about the task of pulling them apart with vigor. 