Give me the answer: the paradox of dependency in Management Learning

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Abstract

The paradox of dependency arises when learners must become dependent in order to enhance independence. This double bind often excites demands for ‘quick fixes’ to reassure both students and staff that the dependent relationship can be fruitful. But this attempt to resolve rather than hold the paradox can be counterproductive. We present a structured seven-stage process illustrated by reference to an established executive programme. Our account is informed by psychodynamic concepts of containment, anxiety, individuation, role and task; we conclude with recommendations for management developers more widely.

Keywords: Anxiety, communityship, containment, dependency, managing, paradox, psychodynamic, role, roundtables

Introduction

This article explores a paradox that arises when the expectations of participants on management development programmes meet the temporal reality of acquiring applicable learning and insights. Whereas management professionals often enrol on programmes with an expectation that they will be offered ‘quick fixes’ – and programmes are marketed as capable of providing these - this mindset has to be confronted and overturned in development processes that seek to offer a more profound educational experience. The collusion between
teachers and learners is seldom addressed, but it is essentially this: it suits both parties to assume that students become dependent on the lessons to be delivered by the teachers; and it is indeed true that accepting that one has something to learn is a productive way in which to start. Yet if the proposed outcome is empowered managers whose knowledge is rooted in their own experience, such dependency is counter-productive. To illustrate this paradox we outline and explore an approach to management development used on the University of Exeter Business School’s *RoundTables for Practising Managers* programme ([www.embaroundtables.org](http://www.embaroundtables.org)) which challenges the dependency culture. We argue that an experiential learning programme with these aims should contain this paradox, rather than resolve it one way or the other. This containment is a critical consideration in both design and execution. We have come across calls for a quick fix in too many circumstances to believe that it is always a necessary expedient (which it is sometimes). Similarly, we have been drawn into the hope that, as teachers, we can provide such a fix. We think this attitude has become a habit; a way of managing in life and at work that is often both unhelpful and unhealthy. Sure, problems need fixing. But mostly the ‘fix’ is in the act of fixing, and these actions have their own rhythm that is linked to the maturation of insight and the self-organising tendencies of all systems of living beings.

**Shallow Learning Versus Deep Insight in Management Education**

Management education and learning has of course been the subject of a burgeoning literature, much of it focusing on methods, procedures, technologies, criticality of content (Grey & Mitev, 1995; Alvesson et al, 2009; Raelin, 2000) and appropriate pedagogic procedures (Reynolds, 1997), but surprisingly little attention has been paid to the question of dependency. In an attempt to redress the balance, we examine a development programme which explicitly embraces a *slow fix* approach to applicable management learning. The *RoundTables for Practising Managers* is a 5-day programme developed by Jonathan Gosling and Henry Mintzberg, designed to focus on the practice of managing, in contrast to the functional technical focus of most MBA curricula (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Mintzberg, 2006). Participants are drawn from business schools around the world, and almost all are current students on Executive MBAs (EMBAs), for which this is an accredited module. The intention is to draw largely on participants’ personal experience of the practice of managing, especially current challenges in which they are directly involved, and in which they face the potential for ‘moral hazard’ in actions they take.

In this respect the programme explicitly distances itself from typical ‘case studies’ in which students imagine themselves to be facing the protagonist’s dilemmas, and are invited to propose actions based on whichever analytic device is the teaching point of the case. Valuable as these might be for teaching analytic skills, they are inevitably rather shallow, being devoid of the moral and emotional culpability that characterise decisions in real
managerial relations. The moral culpability for decisions includes a very broad spread of issues, from responsibilities to humanity at large, through stakeholders, shareholders, customers to the individuals that a manager interacts with as peer or manager. It is these latter, closer relations that are hardest to grapple with in the more conceptual and theoretical approaches of traditional MBA education. Yet they are almost always the issues that cause the most anxiety in practice, and which underpin much of the anomie, abstraction and loneliness into which managers are sometimes driven. On the *RoundTables* programme we maintain our focus firmly on their actual current predicaments – what managers have to deal with when returning to work on Monday morning.

**The trouble with the paradox of dependency**

The paradox to which we allude in this article is not between theory and practice, but between participants’ idealistic expectations of ready-to-hand solutions to be supplied by tutors and the conditions necessary for deeper learning and insight to derive from an educational process. In other words, there is a **paradox of dependency** that participants potentially confront when enrolling on a programme, particularly if it employs an experiential approach to learning.

Our contention is that the desire for a dependency-based quick fix serves three functions, deleterious to sane and wholesome managerial practice. Firstly, it constructs ‘the problem’ as something objective and discrete, liable to cure or repair by the application of an appropriate tool to be supplied by tutors. Secondly, a quick fix would be a convenient way of avoiding potentially troubling reflexivity about culpability, personal inadequacy, or inherent un-fix-ability. A quick fix is a strong claim for simplicity. Thirdly, the desire for a quick fix expresses a wish to get straight to the point without circuitous or divergent processes. It is a desire for immediately convergent thinking. Such a unitary perspective is a well recognised preference of those in power (and often replicated in teaching contexts), but denies the possibility that the processes of debate, reflection and struggle may actually have a transformative effect on the situation and on the managing subject him- or herself. It also eschews the possibility that such processes are, in fact, crucial to the ‘fixing’. It is this third aspect that we will explore in the next section, describing the 5-day process of the *RoundTables for Practicing Managers* as a series of learning experiences which, while occurring in a supportive and contained teaching environment, challenges participants’ assumptions of dependency and aims to nurture an authentic and independent sense of agency.

**The RoundTables Programme**

1. **Un/Familiarity.** The first day is spent working in small groups, though mostly around tables in one large flat room. At the start of the day participants are assigned to tables of (ideally) six participants on the basis of apparent diversity – nationality, the
business school they come with, gender, and so forth. The agenda for the day is to compare experiences of managing: what it involves and the kinds of predicaments they find themselves in. After some introductory comments, designed to establish a sense of containment (Bion, 1961) and establishing the boundaries of time, task and territory (Lewin, 1935), participants work in groups of three, each in turn talking about the challenges he or she faces. The other two participants adopt and rotate the roles of: (a) listening for the facts of the matter, and (b) listening for the feelings expressed by the ‘presenter’. The two listeners then recount what they have heard – facts and feelings, respectively; and then discuss in a more general way. This formulation of a ‘primal triad’ echoes the psychological experience of the (archetypal) primary family. The predominant experiences of the table groups is one of interdependency (on each other’s participation) and consciousness of being a median group between the ‘primal triad’ and the whole group of 40 or so fellow participants, all visibly arranged around their own tables.

The upshot of all this is that by coffee time on the first day participants are immersed in an experience of familiarity, an evocation of the family with people who are (or were a few hours earlier) entirely unfamiliar. Their stories of themselves-as-managers have become a common currency, part-objects around which they can organise collective work. This is reinforced in the subsequent session, a lecture by Henry Mintzberg on the nature of managerial work, in which idealised notions of managing as ‘controlling, planning, coordinating’ (Fayol, 1916) are debunked in the light of empirical studies. This almost always produces some confusion: in failing to express a normative account of what management should be like, it may be that Mintzberg unsettles expectations about authority figures.

The juxtaposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar is sustained throughout the rest of the day. In the afternoon participants re-group on the basis of the declared nature of their managerial challenges: for example, those struggling with difficult team dynamics; pricing and positioning products or services; sustaining operations; personal career and life decisions; governance and accountability issues; and so forth. This feels more like work: the task is to construct a 3-D sculptural collage that expresses the import of each member’s managerial challenge and the common features amongst them. Importantly, the material for this activity is reminiscent of play-school: pipe-cleaners, coloured paper, stickers, straws and glue. It is an activity that invites play. Thus we evoke one of the first organisational experiences – outside the family – that people have. A critique of later education is evident here: playfulness is systematically excluded from the classroom as one progresses through school to university.
2. *Individuation and the Crowd.* The second day opens in plenary, everyone sitting in a single circle. The family groups of yesterday are dissolved, and each speaks as a solitary individual – but may experience themselves as lost within the crowd, a circle invoking expectations of uniformity (Tourquet, 1975). We often hear complaints that the small groups were more effective, that there is still work to do there, that we have been irresponsible in so quickly destroying the beginnings of work. We also hear expressions of awe at the size of the group, some excitement perhaps at the potential held within it.

This is a fraught process, and a difficult day for many. A key activity is a series of ‘observation exercises’, in which participants select a partner with whom to spend ten minutes silently observing the environment around them, a further ten minutes silently writing up their observations, and then 20 minutes comparing notes. For most people this evinces extraordinary surprise at how differently two can look at the same scene and see such different things. The exercise is repeated, this time with attention to what is going on in one’s inner musings as well as in the ‘outside’ world. The same writing and comparing follows. This consolidates the realisation that, despite appearances, each person inhabits a world of his or her own.

The process of individuation described above is not the explicit purpose of practising observational skills. These have a technical utility in the next day’s activities, and
might be considered a generic competence for those managers working slowly enough to take time to watch what’s going on.

In the following two sections, corresponding to the next day and a half, we consider experiences of participating in collective work. In the first our focus is more on the structural constructs of role and task; in the second (section 4) we approach the same issue of collective work from the perspective of personal drive and expressiveness.

3. **Task and Role.** On the third day of the programme, participants go in small groups of three or four to visit local organisations, with the aim of finding out ‘how managing is done’. They are counselled to use the listening and observation skills they have practised, and whatever conceptual models they find useful. They are specifically advised to consider differentiating the roles they each take in pursuit of the common aim – some to observe, others to ask questions, and another to listen out for feelings, and so forth. This very simple task definition and role differentiation is almost without exception a deeply satisfying experience for practising managers normally pulled in many directions, with contested responsibilities and incessant interruptions. For many it is also deeply reflective as they recognise aspects of their own managerial experience lived out in the people they are observing and interviewing.

4. **Expression and Structure.** Each of the ‘visit’ groups presents their findings in a rather structured process on the morning of day four. The structure is as follows: The presenting group makes its pitch for 15 minutes to one other ‘audit’ group, observed by two or three other groups. The ‘audit’ group asks questions and probes for further insights into ‘how managing gets done’, and then the observing groups talk amongst themselves about what they have heard, while the presenters and auditors listen. Participants thus experience a highly structured, time-limited and role-disciplined process in marked contrast to the ample time and relatively flexible schedules of the first part of the week. In these constraints, they have to concentrate their views into a very few points, selected examples and carefully chosen speculations.

5. **Saving/Savouring.** A second important aspect of slowness is evinced through the structure of the presentations described above. Although the field visits lasted little over half a day, mostly in sectors that the participants know very little about, many find it hard to resist slipping into a prescriptive mode, for example, suggesting what the managers they have observed could do better. It is as if they can really only conceive of one reason for being there: to save their benighted hosts from ignorance or incapacity. And very often this is precisely what is asked of them as MBA students – to prescribe solutions. In this structure the audit group is the first check on this, asking questions rather than joining in prescribing. But more significantly, the
observing groups, who have as much time to ponder the presentation as the
presenters had to present it, cannot really be drawn into this dynamic of salvation, as
they are so far removed from that visit and its representation. Rather, they are
explicitly invited to savour the presentation and its ‘audit’.

6. **Frankly Speaking.** Lawrence (1994) distinguished ‘the politics of revelation’ from ‘the
politics of salvation’. The former describe relations of power characterised by the
giving and receiving of insight into a problematic situation. This nicely describes the
aims of the next event, ‘Friendly Consulting’. Drawing on methods developed at the
Grubb Institute (Reed, 1976; Armstrong, 1995) and redesigned specifically for the
RoundTables, (though applied more widely by the present authors) this is a
structured process for small groups (of four to six members) to focus on the
managerial challenges of each participant. In a series of 45-minute sessions, each
participant takes a turn to present her or his challenge, as described above, speaking
directly to one other person, the session chairperson. The other two or three people
in the room observe the presentation (drawn onto a flip-chart at the same time as it is
described) and the chairperson’s questioning for a strict 15 minutes. Observers may
then frame questions for the presenter, but asked through the chairperson, who
poses them – or some of them – to the presenter. This apparently contrived
procedure turns out to be very powerful because the presenter hears the questions
being formulated and asked, and may be aware of his or her immediate responses,
but does not have to actually answer the questions until they are formally posed by
the chairperson a moment later. This procedural slowing down of the
question/response cycle opens a quite surprising space for thoughtfulness. In the
next stage the observers and chairperson sit in a circle to discuss the case as
presented. The presenter sits on the edge of the circle, facing outwards – thus
having no eye contact, and no participation in the discussion. In these circumstances
the discussants usually feel able to speculate about the presenter’s predicament in a
rather direct and frank manner. For the presenter this is often a cathartic experience;
to have one’s stuckness, failings and limitations sympathetically recognised along
with capacities and successes is an affirmation of the reality of one’s experience of
oneself. It is an experience of being ‘held’ and appreciated in a moral order that
comprehends shortcomings, but is nonetheless founded on care for the other’s
flourishing. This matches rather well the classical definition of friendship as a social
and political quality in which such mutual well-wishing is expressed in frank speech
(French et al, 2009).

These so-called Friendly Consulting sessions are where convergence occurs in
relation to the managerial challenges that participants are facing. Four days after the
initial desire for a quick fix, they are at last offered a brief, 45 minutes on their own
challenge. Almost all find it hugely satisfying – often described in term such as “I heard stuff I already know, but didn’t allow myself to realise”.

7. Communityship. If the slow fix is the converse of a quick fix, communityship (Mintzberg, 2009) is the obverse of leadership. The possibility of someone taking a lead is rooted in community, yet the virtues of communityship are seldom trumpeted, valorised or systematically developed. The Slow Fix, however, attempts to acknowledge the potency of individuals in the context of the shared work of the programme community. The final lecture of the programme in 2010 was on communityship. It is in effect a ritual affirmation of the interdependencies of this relational learning – and an ending of the event; the group gathered in plenary, no longer a crowd.

Concluding Remarks

This article has sought to show how a paradox may be turned to productive ends by virtue of being ‘held’ rather than ‘resolved’. We have argued that experienced adults entering a learning programme put themselves in a double-bind. They must become dependent on their teachers and the lessons (skills, concepts, practices) they are to be taught, yet the learning they seek has independent knowing and morally responsible acting at its heart. We suggest that this double bind often drives counter-productive behaviours by all involved. Students express their dependency by seeking ready solutions instead of ready learning processes, and faculty collude by teaching cognitive abstractions rather than engaging in the struggle to learn.

We have presented a particular example of how this dilemma might be met and turned to advantage, through a carefully crafted executive education course. The implication for management development tutors responding to this double-bind paradox is clear: (1) find ways to contain rather than eradicate educational dilemmas by concentrating on the primary task; and, (2) resist the desire to respond to emotions associated with that task. In this case the primary task was to learn to take managerial action in morally committed contexts. By resisting the desire to provide quick fixes, but remaining fixed on the processes of fixing, the paradox was able to be contained and turned to useable management learning.

References


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