IF MANAGEMENT IS "COMMON SENSE",

WHY IS SENSE IN MANAGEMENT SO UNCOMMON?

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INTRODUCTION

I am most honoured by the invitation of the IFSAM President, Professor Santiago Garcia-Echevarria, to present this paper to the IVth World Congress of IFSAM and, in so doing, to reflect on my experiences in, and evaluation of, management. My immediate reaction, I must confess, was one of "What can I say? I am a relative newcomer to research and teaching in management!" On the other hand, and in the best traditions of management theorists, I am also able to draw on three decades of direct experience of management and managers in a variety of large and small organisations – I have been a manager as well as one of the managed; been a bureaucrat as well as a victim of bureaucrats. I will therefore draw liberally on my reflections on this experience to inform my presentation to you.

A regular response of Australian management students, and Australian managers in general, to the insights provided by management researchers and educators is that *it* (management) is all 'common sense'. According to *The Macquarie Concise Dictionary* (1988:185), 'common sense' is a 'sound, practical perception or understanding', but I'm not sure that's what the managers mean when they use the term. Rather, my experience is that the term is used in a dismissive way, essentially to let management researchers and educators know that they haven't presented anything new or different,

or to say, from the managers' perspective, 'we already knew that'. When combined with experience of managers and their observations about management theory, the author is often left to utter what has been called 'Lamond's Lament' (and what has become the title of this paper) – "If management is 'common sense', why is sense in management so uncommon?"

From experience, it would appear that management 'sense' (reason and intelligence) is not as 'common' (widespread; general; ordinary) as it might be. I mean by this, if there is a common view on what makes sense for managers, why don't managers practise it? Why is it that when one stands in front of a class and there is agreement on the 'sense' of the theory, exhortations to practise the theory are met with dissembling and excuses as to why the theory will not work in the "real world". This paper examines some of the reasons for such a response and, in doing so, utilises an analytical framework for understanding management provided by Thomas (1993:33ff). It concludes with some observations about the kind of management education that is informed by a notion of management as 'uncommon sense'.

MEANS AND ENDS IN MANAGEMENT

A recent critique of management fads and fashions (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1997), which explored the thoughts of an alphabet of contemporary management theorists, characterised management as an immature discipline that is about one hundred years too young. In doing so, the authors (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1997:330) provide a number of examples of 'fuzzy thinking' that passes for management, *viz*:

"The three most popular public-sector fads – downsizing, re-engineering and total quality management – are, on many points of substance, mutually incompatible.

Downsizing argues that workers are expendable; TQM sees them as an invaluable resource. Re-engineering depends on ripping up the organisation and starting again; TQM is a doctrine of continuous, incremental improvement."

If management is 'common sense', how is it that we have a situation where not only are three disparate theories about management practices developed, but then implemented side by side without seeming consideration of their inconsistencies? The answer lies, at least in part, in the theory development process and the assumptions which apparently inform the process.

In his contribution to the "What is Management?" debate, Thomas (1993:33-34) draws our attention to two key assumptions which appear to underpin the various theories developed to understand management. These relate to means and ends. The first assumption is about the rationality of the management process and relates to the extent to which the means adopted by managers to achieve certain organisational ends are held to be rational. The second assumption is about the sectionalism of organisational ends and relates to the extent to which the ends or objectives of the organisation are widely shared by its members and other stakeholders.

Thomas (1993:35) defines rationality as "an attribute of the means managers use to implement given ends, that is as an attribute of managerial techniques". Following on recent interpretations of Max Weber's writings on rationality (see, for example, Brubaker, 1984; Lamond, 1991) Thomas (1993:35) delineates objective and subjective rationality as it relates to the relationship between ends (objectives) and the means (strategies) to achieve them. In essence, an action is subjectively rational if it makes sense to the actor, while action is objectively rational if it makes sense to the observer, by application of the scientific method. Clearly, an action may be *subjectively* rational,

because it makes sense to the actor, but it may not necessarily be *objectively* rational, because it is not amenable to demonstration by the scientific method.

The second assumption to which Thomas (1993:34) refers is sectionalism – the extent to which management theories assume that managers are concerned with the pursuit of generally agreed, unitary ends or with the advancement of the interests of specific groups of organisational stakeholders. We might see this assumption more closely linked to the first when we witness managerial techniques applied to goals which serve the interests of managers and employers at the expense of the employees and ask the question 'rationality for whom?' (Clegg, 1979).

Combining these assumptions in a two dimensional 'map' produces an analytical framework for understanding management, summarised in Figure 1. By examining management against these two dimensions simultaneously, we can identify managers as belonging to a rational profession (which is informed by common sense), as agents of sectional interests, as magicians or as politicians. My experience of managers and as manager suggests that each of these is a legitimate basis for analysing management, in so far as they each capture a part of the management process as it is played out. What follows is an examination of each of Thomas' (1993) approaches to understanding management incorporating a series of case studies and models which show that each can be useful according to the circumstances in which managers find themselves.

	Means		
	Objectively Rational?		
	Yes	No	
Unitary	Rational Professional Practice	Magic/religious experience	

Ends
Sectional Exploitation Political exercise

Figure 1: A 'means-ends' framework for analysing management (adapted from Thomas, 1993:34)

Objectively rational strategies, unitary objectives

According to the first category in Figure 1 (rational professional practice), management is "a process focused upon the construction, selection, evaluation and implementation of courses of action which are judged according to organizational criteria, especially of efficiency and effectiveness, and which are means to the realization of widely shared ends" (Thomas, 1993:37). This definition is one that reaffirms the view of management as 'common sense' and is similar to one used in a recent report on leadership and management skills in Australia, known as the Karpin Report (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995a;1995b). In this report (Midgley, 1995:60), management is defined as:

Primarily a set of formal and explicit tools and techniques, based on rational reasoning and testing, that are designed to be used in remarkably similar ways across a wide range of business situations.

The report examined the skills and knowledge required by current and future Australian managers, and the kinds of educational experiences necessary to foster them. In doing so, the report made critical assumptions about the kinds of functions and behaviours that can be properly called 'managerial'. The response to the report was mixed (see for example, Lamond, 1995a; 1996a) and

was eventually all but ignored by government when its findings and recommendations were made public. It is, nonetheless, an important touchstone for an understanding of management in Australia, and indicates a preparedness to accept the notion of management as a rational process in an Australian context. At the same time, one might ponder briefly what constitutes these "formal and explicit tools"; whither the place of intuition (which March and Simon (1993:11-13) among others identify as a major source of intelligent organizational behaviour); and what about "non-business" (government and not-for-profit) situations?

Another example of the willingness in Australia to accept the notion of management as a rational practice is given by the establishment in the Australian state of New South Wales of a Senior Executive Service (SES) (Lamond, 1991). The implementation of the SES scheme took place "in the spirit of bringing the corporate ethos to the big slumbering NSW bureaucracy" (Steketee, 1991). In this regard, the NSW Government followed a well-worn path which had been widely described, examined and debated (Bryson, 1987; Cole, 1988; Considine, 1988; Harris, 1989; Holmes, 1989; Keating, 1989; Painter, 1988; Paterson, 1988; Weller and Lewis, 1989; and Yeatman, 1987). This debate turned on the question of the business of government and, as a corollary, the appropriateness of what is seen as a private sector approach to a public sector dilemma.

Critics like Bryson (1987), Painter (1988) and Yeatman (1987) argued that the new management ethos imported, without serious examination, a bunch of private sector techniques likely to distort the operation of the public sector. As Plumptre (1988:49) pointed out, the work of government is different from the work of business and, in the words of Lord Bancroft, former head of the UK Home Civil Service:

Much has been said about the analogy between running a business and running a government. This is a sloppy analogy for a start. If one simply substitutes "running a business" on the one hand and "governing a parliamentary democracy" on the other the falsity of the conceit is obvious...[In government] there is immense concern to see that individuals and groups, large and small, are treated fairly and equally, and receive all the benefits that may be open to them....[T]he pursuit of evenhandedness in the treatment of the enormously varied individual circumstances of the millions whose affairs become the business of government makes for highly complex administration

These complex issues demand a set of governance competencies at all levels of the public bureaucracy, becoming crucial at the points of interface between the elected government, in interagency co-ordination, with the media and with various interest groups (Lane and Wolf, 1990 p79). That this set of skills is not gained in the private sector was borne out by the NSW experience (Lamond, 1991). There has been and no doubt will continue to be debate about what constitutes the skill base and ethical standards required of *public sector* mangers and how much emphasis is given to the wants of the community as against the government of the day. In the meantime, the emphasis on the adoption of business practices by government agencies may obscure why they were situated in the public sector in the first place (Plumptre 1988 p49).

Objectively rational strategies, sectional objectives

The first breakdown in the notion of management as 'common sense' is acknowledged in the category in Figure 1 that identifies management as exploitation – managers are still concerned with the application of efficacious techniques to realise particular ends, but now those ends are identified with the interests of one or more specific groups of stakeholders – the managers themselves and the

shareholders. An example of management of this kind is given by the experience of the employees the then State Bank of NSW (Lamond, 1995b).

In May 1990, the State Bank of New South Wales (SBNSW) was formally incorporated under the Companies (New South Wales) Code. Corporatisation was welcomed by the Bank's Board Chairman as "a welcome step towards what we hope will be eventual privatisation and full private sector competition". It (corporatisation) was to form "the basis for assessing the Bank's performance in meeting its objectives and being profitable, efficient and competitive". Subsequent reports of the Bank's performance were framed against its Statement of Purpose and Statement of Corporate Intent.

In 1993, at a time when the Bank's privatisation appeared to be imminent, the Industrial Relations Commission of New South Wales considered an application by the Australian Bank Employees' Union (ABEU) for a pay rise. In essence, the ABEU argued that the Bank's performance had improved over the previous five years and, since the Bank's employees had made a contribution to that improvement, the employees should share in the gains via a salary increase. The Bank's response was that, although there may have been an improvement in the Bank's performance, this was largely due to technological and other efficiency enhancement factors, so that the employees' contribution did not warrant sharing in the gains.

The evidence presented by the Union to demonstrate improvements in organisational and employee performance was based on publicly available information such as Annual Reports, and it was reasonable to conclude that there had been a significant improvement in the performance of the State Bank of New South Wales since 1988. It was also clear that, in terms of the Bank's own

performance indicators and the narrative of the Bank's senior management, the Bank's employees have made a substantial contribution to improvement in that performance. The Bank, however, rejected much of the evidence presented by the Union as "arm's length" and lacking "any substantive basis".

Here was an organisation focused on being more efficient and effective and which had put into place a series of initiatives to that end, but when it came to sharing the gains of those initiatives, the managers and their shareholders were reticent to share them with the employees. The question 'rationality for whom?' seems particularly appropriate in this context. Indeed, the Bank decided to settle the matter without arbitration and negotiate a pay rise when it became clear that any other course of action would have been considered not only objectively irrational but non-rational.

Subjectively rational strategies, unitary objectives

Thomas (1993:39-40) calls the third category magic/religion – organisational objectives are generally agreed, but the means designed to achieve them are not able to be shown to be objectively rational. Having said that, Thomas (1993:39) is quick to reaffirm the view that behaviour which is not objectively rational is not necessarily unreasonable or insane. Rather, as was noted earlier, managers, faced with multivariate, complex, and uncertain operating environments rely as much on the intuition identified by March and Simon (1993) as on scientific approaches. One might describe it as a magical or religious experience to the extent that even when managers rely on 'scientific' methods, their use is often an 'act of faith' rather than because they can be linked to results that show unequivocal evidence of causality. On the other hand, it might be more appropriate to refer to such an interpretation as the *art* of management.

Returning to the Karpin report (Commonwealth of Australia, 1995) discussed earlier, we see in the report a sample of historical perspectives on the role of managers, summarised in Table 1. This table neatly illustrates how even when there may be general agreement on the objectives to be achieved by the organisation and its managers and the activities to be carried out by those managers there are, between the different theorists, different ways of characterising those activities. Indeed, one of the theorists (Mintzberg) has dismissed the ideas of another (Fayol) as 'folklore'. More recent analyses suggest that Fayol and Mintzberg actually have much in common (*cf* Lamond, 1997a, 1998; Tsoukas, 1994), but even that may be seen as a rapprochement based on subjective rationality. Suffice to say, it is difficult to argue a case for management as predicated on objective rationality when management theorists are unable to agree on what management is.

Fayol (1949)	Mintzberg (1975)	Kotter (1982)	Luthans et al. (1988)	Hill (1992)
Planning	Figurehead	Setting goals and	Exchanging	Team Leader
		strategies	information	
Organising	Leader	Allocating resources	Handling paperwork	Sales Leader
Command	Liaison	Monitoring activities	Planning	Boss
Coordination	Monitor	Getting information,	Decision-making	Supervisor
		cooperation and support		
		from superiors		
Control	Disseminator	Getting cooperation	Controlling	Organiser
		from other groups		
	Spokesperson	Motivating, controlling	Interacting with	Liaison
		and managing conflict	outsiders	
	Entrepreneur		Socialising/politicking	Politician
	Disturbance		People manager	
	handler			

Resource allocator Motivate/reinforce

Negotiator Managing conflict Negotiator

Table 1: Historical perspectives on the role of managers

(from Commonwealth of Australia, 1995:21)

One might also note, *en passant*, that Thomas' (1993:39-40) approach appears particularly apposite for understanding the management of people in an organisation, in so far as it recognises that the process of managing people is not some form of linear determinism. Rather, it is consistent with the observation by McBride (1993:58) that

The rationale for the behaviour of persons is fundamentally different from the rationale for the behaviour of things. Human behaviour is not subject to the laws of nature. We have free will, we are capable of conscious intelligent self-direction.

We may decide, for example, that we understand the relationship between reward systems and our employees' motivations as a basis for developing a performance reward system. As we take account of the free will and conscious, intelligent self-direction of those we manage however, much of our knowledge of the motivations of those we manage is imputed rather than known directly, and our imputations may or may not reflect the reality of individuals' motives. To the extent our interpretations do not accord with those of others (including those we are trying to motivate), it is likely that our actions will appear objectively irrational while being subjectively rational.

Subjectively rational strategies, sectional objectives

Thomas (1993:40) notes that the political approach is the one that departs most radically from the rational or 'common sense' view of management. More than just the agents of capital that the exploitation view suggests though, here are managers recognising that there are multiple interest groups to be satisfied and, because the processes are 'complex and essentially indeterminate, management acts rather like a player in a multidimensional game of chess' (Thomas, 1993:40). This was the experience when employing faculty directed management consulting projects as a core educational experience in an Australian MBA program. In trying to offer a "real" learning experience that was at once relevant and academically rigorous, there was the perennial problem of trying to "serve two masters" - to ensure the project was a valuable learning experience for the students and, at the same time, make sure the results satisfied the needs of the client (Lamond, 1994; 1995c).

The consulting projects were undertaken by students at the Macquarie University Graduate School of Management (MGSM) in Australia, as an action learning approach to management education which was designed to complement and supplement the knowing and understanding elements of the rest of their MBA program. The feedback from the clients was overwhelmingly positive, as was much of the feedback from students. On the other hand there were difficulties in trying satisfy both groups with different requirements. The main problems were experienced by the students.

While trying to satisfy the client's needs was important, the students were primarily engaged in a problem solving exercise, and they were expected to maintain high levels of academic rigour. In discussion with them, many students indicated they had been used to a "near enough is good enough" approach in their workplaces, as they got about "getting things done". This almost exclusive emphasis on "doing" rather than "thinking" led them to become too willing to accept the

ideas and theories to which they were exposed, both in the workplace and at the MGSM. In their search for the "quick fix" solutions to their management problems, their concern was mainly one of finding the appropriate "formula". The idea, therefore, of being constantly challenged as they presented their diagnoses and prescriptions for their clients was a difficult matter with which to come to terms.

Yet, with hindsight, many students appreciated this emphasis on critical thinking. For example, as one student put it:

For a number of reasons, this unit was a painful experience. At the same time, the biggest pain (a relentless insistence on discipline in an academic sense) was my greatest personal gain.

For others though, the critical analysis of their work was often interpreted as a "lack of support". This apparent bimodal response of the MGSM students to their project experience is similar to that reported by Baburoglu (1994) who, in describing the intra-group processes of self-managing student groups in a change program, identified two broad groups of participants, the "disintegrators" and the "integrators". Examples of comments and actions from the former group were given as "just give us the recipes", "there is too much reading material", belittling the knowledge base ("I know better"), and "I don't understand". Integrators' comments in turn were "let's discover", "that's why we're here", "teach us", and "it's OK (for the moment) not to understand". The resulting student evaluations of that course were also described as bimodal - "the students either loved it or hated it" (Baburoglu, 1994).

In managing this activity and taking account of the needs of the different stakeholders, it is clear there was no unifying objective between the clients and students (or even, in some cases, amongst the students themselves). Further, in an area where, at the time, not much had been written, there was little in the way of scientific knowledge against which to determine what was objectively rational. Rather, the approach was firmly rooted in what appeared to be subjectively rational, given the disparate ends to be achieved.

Management in Context

A number of contemporary writers on management have approached an understanding of management by way of metaphors (Morgan, 1986/1997) or frames (Bolman and Deal, 1991/1997) that proffer multiple perspectives from which to view organisations, and the processes of management and the behaviour of managers within them. These authors reject the notion of a commonly understood view of organisations, their objectives and the means by which they are achieved, for a pluralist view. In doing so, they all reject the notion of management as *common* sense. Rather, management 'makes sense' according to the perspective from which you view it.

This section moves beyond Thomas' (1993) taxonomy to consider more explicitly the context within which management is practised. It examines the application of the learning organisation concept, developed as 'common sense' in a Western operating context to one where the potential for cultural differences was maximised. Several years ago, the author had the privilege of working with Universitas Terbuka (the Open University) in Indonesia on a human resource development project for the university. Among the outputs of this project was a case study of unit manager participation in human resource development (Lamond, 1996b; 1997b).

The approach to this project was explicitly informed by the concept of "stakeholder management" as central to producing an outcome that would benefit the organisation and the individuals which populate it (Greene, 1988; Hegarty and Sporn, 1988; Lamond, 1994; Lamond, 1995b). This approach is based on a recognition that often the client doesn't know what the problem is (or at least has a notion of the problem but is unable to articulate it) and may need help to figure it out in what Schein (1990) calls a "mutual inquiry process that ... creates a shared sense of responsibility". However, previous research (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1994; Hofstede, 1980; Marquardt and Engel, 1993) had raised a series of questions as to whether the stakeholder approach and the 'learning organisation' concept make sense in a different cultural context. In particular, it raised the question as to whether the particular stakeholder approach used by the author in a number of Western contexts (Lamond, 1994; Lamond, 1995b) was an appropriate approach to working with line managers in an Indonesian organisation.

The technical process of identifying the qualifications/skills gap to be filled at UT was a relatively straightforward one. At the same time, recruitment restrictions in place at the time of the project meant the range of strategic choices in filling the gaps was significantly narrowed, and, so one might argue, the identification of an appropriate strategy was also made more straightforward. However, the gap between the ideal staff profile and the actual staff profile existed in spite of considerable time, effort and money being expended on HRD. Rather, there appeared to be no easy answer. A set of related activities – questionnaire survey, stakeholder interviews and a two day planning workshop – was developed as a basis for taking the process forward.

The questionnaire survey circulated two weeks before the workshop served a dual purpose. On the one hand, the responses provided valuable information to frame discussion during the workshop and

so give it a meaningful structure. More importantly, it introduced the respondents to the idea of HRD as a strategic activity with benefits for the organisation and individuals alike. Further, it made explicit the notion of a responsibility for HRD beyond the staff development unit. This view was reinforced in stakeholder interviews that supplemented the questionnaire data gathering. The workshop then became the vehicle whereby the responses from the questionnaire and the interviews could be examined in a non-identifying, and therefore non-threatening, way.

The results of the questionnaires, interviews and the workshop, showed there was a consensus about what the problems were and how they should be tackled. What was needed was a mechanism that would make this consensus explicit, and so provide the momentum for the actions by which the problems would be addressed. This would not be achieved simply by circulating a statement of the desired qualification profile and encouraging managers to ensure people had the development opportunities (as experience to this point had unfortunately shown). Instead, it was the workshop and its attendant processes that provided such a mechanism.

Again, it would not have been sufficient to represent the data so gathered in a report form and submit it to the decision-makers. The aim was not to get agreement to a pre-packaged set of phrases but to facilitate the fashioning of a set of phrases that had meaning for the participants. Recognition by the participants of the consensus that existed came about through the small group discussions and in the plenary sessions that followed. As a consequence, the final document submitted to the Rector of UT was less a report than a communiqué from the workshop participants.

The subsequent establishment of a HRD Unit at UT and the implementation of its charter of responsibilities represent a positive response to a generally acknowledged problem. They also

highlight the importance of developing a common understanding of the problem and reaching agreement about its solutions as a basis for gaining the commitment of the key stakeholders to their successful implementation. In this regard, it was the stakeholder management approach which enabled the technical aspects of human resource planning to be embedded in an organisational process in a way that established HRD as an ongoing activity which is the responsibility of every individual, faculty and administrative unit at UT. More importantly, it appears that both the stakeholder approach and the learning organisation concept can be successfully translated but not merely transported to different cultural contexts. Ideas that constitute common sense in one cultural context may need, at the very least, a process for coming to understand their value in another.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS FOR MANAGEMENT SCHOLARS IN AN ERA OF GLOBALISATION

We have reached a time when we are being encouraged, inappropriately, to throw off the shackles of old theories and embrace new paradigms in the name of globalisation (*cf* Lamond, 1996a). If there are lessons to be learned for management scholars, they centre on the idea that globalisation cannot be another word for homogenisation. Rather we need to understand some of the challenges for managers in this era of globalisation as related to their capacity to:

- Master many different competitive environments, some of which will be complex, fast-changing and possibly unfamiliar
- Manage relationships with customers, suppliers, partners, owners, colleagues and workforces of all backgrounds
- Master *all* the drivers of competitive success

- Lead organisations of *many different* designs
- Work well with *all sorts* of colleagues

There is little room in this list to suggest unitary ends or that a manager can respond effectively with 'common sense' that is matched by a management education program narrowly based on rationality and 'scientific' knowledge. Rather, if managers are to respond effectively to these challenges, they are likely to need a 'classical' education of the kind recommended by Carter, Nicholson and Barlow (1995:1269) that

- is intellectually testing and broadcasting
- is paradigm and world view challenging; not limited to Western and Judeo-Christian traditions;
- includes world studies in economics, histories, religions, traditions, cultures
- includes detailed knowledge of basic business skills and management tools
- includes organisational theory; communication skills; motivational psychology;
- provides an understanding of public policy issues

In the introduction, it was noted that a recent critique of management fads and fashions (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 1997) characterised management as an immature discipline. It is to be hoped that the pimply-faced teenage angst of which they speak is a phase through which it will not take another hundred years to pass. Whether this is an prolonged process depends, at least in part, on the extent to which we, as management scholars, are able to separate the common sense from the conventional wisdom and apply it in our research and teaching.

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