

Rationality and Management Learning and Education: Reconciving and Reinvigorating the Role of Reason in Managerial Practice

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This special issue raises three grounding questions for management learning and education:

1. In what sense is rational action the aim for management learning and education?
2. How do we cultivate rational managers and workplaces?
3. In studying management learning and education, what alternative conceptions of rationality emerge?

These questions have taken on pressing urgency for management educators. Questions about the efficacy of evidence-based approaches to decision making (Morrell & Learmonth, 2015), long standing concerns over whose and what rationality is at stake (Nkomo, 1992; Ross-Smith & Kornberger, 2004), and the associations between reason, selfishness and business schools' teaching (Ghoshal, 2005; Rollert, 2018), are being accompanied by doubts about the utility of rationality as a key tool in a manager's skillset (Newark, 2017). Relatedly, mounting concerns about the trustworthiness of information in the wake of fake news and propaganda warfare (McKay & Munro, 2012; Etter, et al.,

2018) are being amplified by the rapid rise of (big) data analytics, technological mediation (George et al., 2016) and artificial intelligence, that have begun to radically transform or replace human work (Richardson, 2016), including the “thinking work” of managers (Chun, 2016; Kallinikos, 2011; Zuboff, 1988). In asking how to educate managers to cope and excel in such environments, this Special Issue is motivated by a basic consideration: is the conception of rationality that frames and provides the content for management training programs and business school curricula adequate?

From its theoretical beginnings in Max Weber and Frederick Taylor’s classic contributions, through thinkers like Schumpeter, Follett, Simon and Chandler, management is conceived as rational activity (March, 2003; Joullie, 2016). Management learning and education, consequently, becomes a means of developing managers equipped with skills to design and encourage a rational ordering of material and symbolic wealth production through advocacy of generic standards, evidence-based procedures and calculable aims (Glen, et al., 2014; Akrivou & Bradbury-Huang, 2015). Importantly, this line of thought assumes an intimacy between management practice and agent neutrality, where evaluation criteria are taken as objectively settled and organizational roles and structures are defined through clear, procedural reasoning. With the onset of technology, and with reason becoming almost synonymous with information processing enhanced by digitized analysis (Kiechel, 2010), management practice—and education—has increasingly turned into a technical exercise involving KPIs, integrated governance systems, evidence-based decision making, best practice performance assessment systems, and many other rationalistic tools (Rousseau, et al., 2008).

This understanding of reason has been subjected to increasing criticism from a number of sources, raising serious questions about management practice and appropriate forms of management education (Kepes, et al., 2014). Studies in behavioral economy, for example, have mapped our extensive inability to live up to the standards of rationality, whether those instilled through the occupation of administrative roles or those associated with knowing and balancing of multiple interests (Kahnemann 2003). The insight into our proneness to systematic bias intensifies the need for new forms of management. It is in this context that the focus on nonrational behavioral modification, such as nudging, as central management tools, becomes relevant (Thaler & Sunstein 2008), and more broadly a shift in focus from improving the behavior of boundedly rational actors through learning and feedback

(Augier, 2004) to accommodating or expanding the boundaries of rationality, including interest in irrationality, as points of departure for inquiry into management and organizational learning (Kieser, 2008; Roberts 2012; Vince 2010).

Others question the nature and practical use of rational standards. They suggest managers learn and become experts through a situated capacity for discerning what to do in in specific situations (Contu, 2013; Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011); a skill which transgresses what can be made fully explicit in procedural terms. Instead of carefully calibrated value assignments and weighted decision making, a more immediate involvement with emerging events becomes articulated as a condition of judgment (Holt, 2018) as found in unfolding rationality (Quattrone, 2015), *phronesis* (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014), wisdom (Kessler & Bailey, 2007; Nonaka, et al. 2014; Rhee, 2010), practical reason (Hibbert et al., 2017), performative praxis (Cabantous & Gond, 2011), *metis* (Mackay et al., 2014), design thinking (Glen et al., 2014), and bounded emotionality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992).

Some even suggest the abdication of rationality altogether, instead entertaining “absurdity,” “play,” “luck,” “spirituality,” or “mindfulness” (Wagner 1978; Gebauer 2012; Izak 2015; Newark, 2017); non-rational immediate action based on “enthusiasm,” “confidence,” and “improvisation,” (Cunha, et al 2015); bricolage, practical coping (Dey & Mason, 2018); and managing as art and craft (Mintzberg, 2004). Others suggest simple rules associated with agility (Sull & Eisenhardt, 2012) as a more appropriate *modus operandi* for management practice.

These concerns for rationality in the context of management learning and education are accompanied by current developments in the field of philosophy, notably attempts to reconceive and thereby rehabilitate rationality (McDowell, 1996; Brandom, 1994). Whilst these philosophers agree that reason is “nonnegotiable” (Pinker, 2018), the modeling of reason according to ideals from the natural sciences remains contested. Instead reason may be conceived as a practical capacity for self-governance that presupposes training, exercise and cultivation so as to constitute agency and identity (Korsgaard, 2009). Relatedly, some discuss the kind of knowledge that may be conceived as expressions of reason and whether the forms of objectivity hitherto regarded as fixed, neutral, and context-free, might be better

understood as entwined with experience and hence with the objects and materials of interpretation (Barad, 2007; Figal, 2010; Hibbert, Beech & Seedlock 2017).

This Special Issue seeks to critically engage with this debate. In asking whether rational action can be an (or “the”) aim for management learning and education, we invite empirical and conceptual contributions that develop or help reevaluate the persuasiveness of the criticism of the traditional picture of rational management, as well as manuscripts reconceiving of rational management, such that it can overcome or circumvent these objections. We are therefore also looking for contributions that explore wider conceptions of reason which develop a fuller and more embodied understanding of human conduct in the context of management learning and education. In asking how rational managers and workplaces may be cultivated, we also invite papers that develop learning and education strategies or pedagogies.

One avenue toward understanding the prominence of the procedural picture within management and strategy is thus to engage with philosophical sources of inspirations for the paradigm of rational decision making within management. For example, Donald Davidson’s (1963) work on procedural rationality has had profound influence on the idea of rational choice in economics and management (cf. Isaac, 2014). On the other hand, philosophers, both living and from the tradition (Aristotle, *Eth. Nich.*; Kant, 1957; Korsgaard, 2009), have labored to articulate alternative conceptions of what it means to be rational and how this capacity can be cultivated. Such figures may also act as valuable resources in the attempt to develop an alternative paradigm or at least a more nuanced conception of rationality with relevance for management learning and education. We also encourage submissions investigating how a better understanding of reason can also be of practical help in clarifying our self-conception as management educators.

In addition, we encourage studies that show forms of managerial reasoning in action and how these have been sustained, challenged and refined, including alternative understandings of rationality. These challenges and alternatives can emerge from reflections on how reason is experienced within different educational and organizational roles and positions, within different cultural and social contexts, and within different experiences of self and group development, both as learners and educators.

Suggested topics:

- What is the history of reason in management and what implications can be drawn for management learning at the business schools? In particular, how, historically, have rationality and rationalization been entangled?
- What is the relationship between notions of rationality, learning and technology (both historical and current) (Zuboff, 1988), in particular the role of analytics and information processing apparatuses (e.g. Bachmann & Shah, 2016; Chun, 2016)?
- What are key developments, revisions, or modifications to our conception of rational standards within social theory, philosophy as well as management theory, and what are their implications for rationality as an implicit or explicit authority within management learning and education (e.g., Beyes, Parker, & Steyaert, 2016)?
- What notions of rationality are prevalent in management practice, education, and leadership development, and how is their effectiveness evaluated (e.g., Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007)?
- What can a revised conception of our capacity for reason, for example based on work within the behavioral sciences, offer to the discussion on managerial micro foundations and the behavioral strategies adopted by organizations and individuals (e.g., Greve, 2013)?
- How is rationality understood, developed and taught in different cultural traditions and spaces?
- How can we develop the idea of rationality as a situated capacity within the field of management using for example resources from the phenomenological tradition or design thinking, and how can we teach this capacity to management students?
- Are there differing conceptions of rationality associated with different organizational positions (for example seniority) and roles (research and innovation, risk management, marketing, strategy, and so on)?
- How do gender, ethnicity and age influence the conceptions of rationality and how they are incorporated into management education? (Ely et al., 2011; Nkomo, 1992; Richardson, 2016; Ross-Smith & Kornberger, 2004)

- What is the relationship between reason, humor and play in management education (Kark, 2011)? How can for example the capacity for irony, rhetoric and aesthetic playfulness—traditionally linked with the cultivation of reason—be used by management educators in order to shape and nuance our capacity for rationality (e.g., Whiteman et al., forthcoming)?
- How may developments or critical modifications of our conceptions of rational standards for management be incorporated into management education? What are the pedagogies and didactics implied by different conceptions of management rationality?
- What is the relationship between rationality, ethics, and character and how can business school curriculums integrate these relations (e.g., De Los Reyes, Kim & Weaver, 2014)?
- The use and influence of tools in reason-based learning, notably their being implicated in political and emotionally charged processes as readily as cool, analytic ones (e.g., Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015)?

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