

The Study of Real Skills
Volume 3



Management Skills

Edited by W. T. Singleton

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Edited by

W. T. Singleton MA DSc
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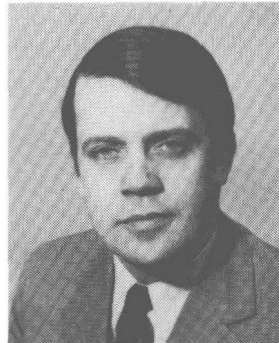
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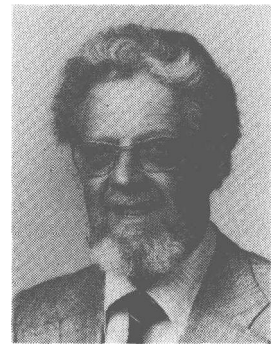
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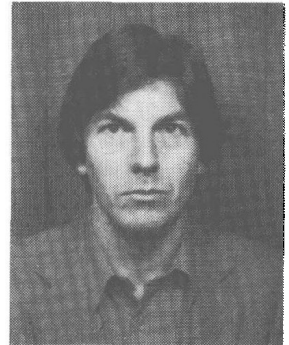
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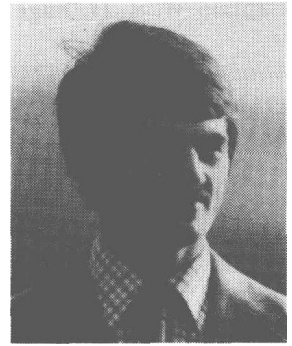
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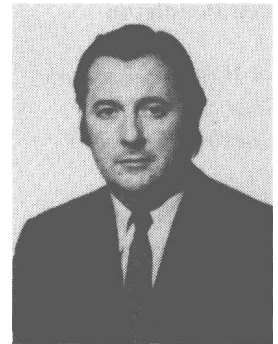
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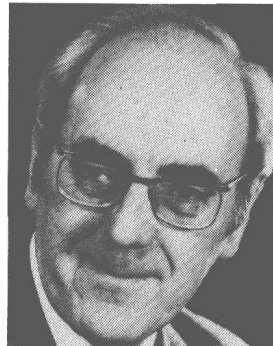
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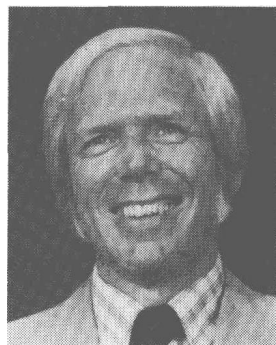
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Introduction

W. T. SINGLETON

THE CONCEPT

This is the third in a series of books devoted to the study of real skills. The topic is management. A book on social skills is still to come and it might seem that the sequence should be reversed on the grounds that social skills are obviously one element in management skills but it is appropriate to deal with management first on the criterion of increasing complexity. Management skills are easier to understand than general social skills. This is because the defining characteristic of a skill is a purpose. The purpose of organizations in which managers operate and the tasks in which they are engaged are not easy to define but they are certainly less obscure than are the more general purposes of communities and people interactions in which the complete range of social skills is practised.

Skills, like purposes, are inherently to do with people. It follows that the 'skills view' of management will be as a people-based activity. Individuals carry out management tasks and these tasks always involve other individuals, of whom some are subordinate, some superior and some equivalent within the hierarchy of the particular management organization. The concept of a hierarchy is as central to management as it is to skills. The alternative to hierarchy is anarchy.

Management is not solely concerned with people. The manager's job is to deploy the available resources – space, equipment, money and people – in an optimum way to achieve some purpose. Although every experienced manager is aware of the importance of the human resources of the enterprise he often does not give them the attention they deserve because the current fashion, particularly in higher management, is to rely on numerical data. The standard data are financial since they are generally applicable to all resources

but this only provides negative information about human resources. We can estimate the cost of the human resource of an organization in terms of expenditure required to acquire, maintain and develop it. This is important because there must be economy in total resources, but it is not crucial. What really matters is the value of the human resources to the achievement of purpose, that is, to the success of the enterprise as a whole.

The point was made in the first skills book that only a human being can make trade-offs between measurements or descriptions in different domains and that this is a general characteristic of skilled performance. Managers have to be human because they are essentially trading off costs and values. The key resource in organization costs is money; the key resource in organization value is people. For any enterprise and any resource it is so much easier to estimate a cost than it is to estimate a value. It is therefore not surprising that the unskilled manager concentrates on the relatively easy issues to do with space, equipment and money. He may try to avoid the values issue completely by relying on other people, his customers, to translate the value of his enterprise back into costs, in other words to pay for his products. This is the principle of the market place. The perfect market requires complete information, skilled customers and a clearly defined product.

Enterprises in modern societies are much too varied and complex for their success to be judged solely on rewards arising from what the customers pay. In many enterprises (perhaps most) someone at some level in the organization or outside it, has to make value assessments and convey these to people at various levels in the organization. The simple market discipline may operate for a small manufacturing or service company but even here there are many complications to do, for example, with the ability of the customer to assess what he is receiving. A National Health Service and a United Nations Organization are typical of enterprises where the value of the output is extraordinarily difficult to assess. One partial solution to this issue is to rely on the close relationship between the effectiveness of the organization and the effectiveness, that is the skill level, of the people in the organization. If the personnel are appropriately skilled the organization will be effective. This would be tautologous if we could only define skills in terms of achievements but this is not so. There are general principles of skilled performance which are independent of the particular achievement. In so far that these can be clarified, skill appraisal need not be entirely in terms of criteria such as organizational objectives. This is contrary to much current management thinking that the meeting of objectives is the beginning and ending of all criteria of management activity. This has become such an unquestioned axiom that the possibility of having to cope with situations where objectives are not definable is simply ignored. It has emerged in the earlier books in this series that skilled individuals function at the highest level when objectives are neither 'known' nor 'not known' but rather become increasingly clear as the activity proceeds. The hypothesis on which this book is based is that this proposition is as valid