

# Management as Performance and Theatrical Events



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**Abstract.** This paper concerns a certain way of approaching and analysing the practice of management in terms of *performance* and *theatrical events*. It discusses a ‘theatrical’ mode of communication, and aims at exploring the dividing line between *public/private* within managerial practices and procedures. A manager presents him or her self in public. Here some concepts and insights are brought from the discipline of theatre studies, and analogously, management is regarded as ‘performative’ acts and as managerial styles are becoming expressed through series of actions.

A priority of academic theatre studies has been the analyses of live theatrical performances, and such studies have in most cases aimed at gaining a wider understanding of stage performances. But the researcher is then often considered as a *spectator* and an all-knowing observer of the *actors* and what is taking place on stage. On the contrary, actors and spectators are here regarded within an inter-active framework of a so-called ‘theatrical event’ (Sauter, 2000). Such an event is a ‘theatrical communication’ that is taking place within a cultural historical context. The researcher has to deal with encoded modes of communication, such as tradition, conventions or professional characters. The events also embrace notions of the past, the present and the future, i.e. *memory*. Experiences and actions are being expressed through *form* (lat. *per formam*).

The aim of the paper is first and foremost to discuss a methodological framework for applying theatre studies to management research (for example, costume design, lighting effects, dramaturgy of events), and to discuss some illustrating examples.

## Introduction: Style, Form and ‘Theatrical’ Events

Managers can be viewed as professionals whose everyday job is to put on theatrical performances. From Huizinga (1945) we know that *play* is essential to all cultural forms, including those of law, war, diplomacy, business, marriage, education, and the arts.

The public arena was for a long time the realm of political debate and public opinion, but on this stage we now often find managers acting as well. Today, the ‘art’ of managing involve techniques for giving off impressions in public, and the public media often serve as an important link between the company and the market. Managers are trained to be performers by their profession, where the know-how is a skill to demonstrate and invoke credibility to an audience, or to create a more or less believable image of the Manager and the business.

Then managerial actions are expressed through *form* (in Latin, *per formam*). We may view managerial actions in terms of transformations and in the light of the concept of *style*. When we apply these concepts to management research, we understand that actions can have style, and that style can be expressed in a series of events. Then we are judging actions from an aesthetic point of view. Style then means a unity of expression, and we can describe how one style can replace another style in the history of management. Or, as Gadamer writes on manifesting a style in action, “we are making ourselves visible to others, so that they know with whom they have to deal” (Gadamer, 1975/1989:496).

This paper concerns management as style, as performance and as ‘theatrical’ events. Such events occur whenever a manager presents him/her self in public.

The in most cases dominating thought style in management research has been the normative and rationalistic approach to how a manager *ought* to act in practise or how to achieve rational action in organizations. But in the last fifteen years or so, there have occurred a crucial shift of perspective from rationalistic models to reflective management research. We find this change expressed in the interest in, for example, symbolic management (Alvesson & Berg, 1992), and in the views of the corporate landscapes where symbols and artefacts are in use within a physical space of an organization (Gagliardi, ed. 1992), and in combining literary theory and accounting (Macintosh, 2001). And moreover, Wetterström (2001) described the historical process of organizing and re-organizing a managerial practice through different epochs with their cultural settings. She explored the configuration of the Manager within the arrangements of social space. We also find an interest in the dividing line between reality/fiction in the construction of organizational realities, and between theory/practice when narrative mechanisms

are at work in social practices (see Czarniawska, 1995). In paying attention to the aspects of semiotics, language games, and discourse, the limits of representation have been explored in terms of theories of knowledge. McCloskey analysed the rhetoric in economics and the economist's style of argumentation, as well as the fabrication of "facts" in practising an economic discourse that is marked by a neo-classical mode of thinking, positivism in methodology, and rational realism (McCloskey, 1985; 1994). In sum, there is today in management research a fresh consideration of what Ernst Cassirer once called "word magic" – the tricky relationship of language to myth, to knowledge and to human self-knowledge (Cassirer, 1946; 1944).

Our ideas of managerial actions are embedded in the social web of language. But this text must nevertheless somehow be transformed into *action* – or speech acts – and into routine and procedures and 'performative' acts. Thus it is important to go beyond the text and discuss how we may view and interpret such an act as a live performance.

### **Who is the Actor?**

Before the shift of approach happened in the field of research, modern management was often regarded as the activity of making use of rational techniques to achieve aims or to carry out a strategic plan. So the characteristics of a modern business enterprise have for a long time been understood as well structured, specialized and with well coordinated activities. The firm has been thought of as containing many operating units and a hierarchy of salaried executives that manages it.

In such circumstances, a key question is 'who' the Manager is within the conceptual framework of modern corporations and their organizational realms?

Chandler called the rise of modern business enterprise and its managers the "managerial revolution" in business that, according to Chandler, had its source in the American railroad companies. As soon as the modern administrative coordination once had appeared in the history of management it became the central function of the modern business firm. Management of an enterprise was separated from ownership, and the modern firm had in most cases an institutional *continuity* – managers came and left, while the institution and its offices remained. Managers had to invent new accounting routines and quantitative standards, new administrative methods to follow, and new modes of practicing management. *The visible hand* of management replaced what Adam Smith had called the invisible hand of market forces. And the great social invention was the creation of a managerial hierarchy. As Chandler writes:

“the existence of a managerial hierarchy is a defining characteristic of the modern business enterprise” (Chandler, 1977/1999:7).

Salaried managers directed these new bureaucratic hierarchies to make careers, and managers were from then on technical and professional. As the administrative hierarchies required specialized skills, their practices were based on formalized training, experience and *performance*, rather than on birth, family and inherited capital as it had been before the rise and appearance of industrial enterprises. People were now trained as professional managers. Instead of being monitored by market and price mechanisms, the modern firms were monitored by professional managers by means of their actions, i.e. their ability *to communicate, to visualize and to perform*.

Subsequently, the main task of a manager seems to be to protect the business firm in terms of an impersonal institution, which “never dies”. Just like a national state may illustrate a peculiar continuity of an administrative apparatus, the global corporations nowadays work by the same principle of continuity. This spread of modern managerial capitalism and the emergence of the managerial procedures is a socio-economic phenomenon. Today, large enterprises with salaried top and middle managers have grown in size and increased in numbers. And with the rise of professional managers there appeared associations, journals, training schools, examinations and consultants. Management is exercised within the forms of institutionalised practices and within the arrangements of a specialised *corpus* of managers.

So in analysing contemporary managerial practices an important distinction must be made between man and his/her profession (the Manager). Along this line of argumentation, the profession is the outcome of a task. In a profession, one is exercising or playing a certain role and is engaged in presenting self, or expressing one’s self-as-if. We here touch upon the well-known question of the *duas personas*, of man as a *private* person that is kept away from the *public* role adopted by an individual within the cultural context of a profession. A Manager is *as if* he/she was the pilot of Seneca’s ship:

“Two persons are combined in the pilot: one he shares with all his fellow-passengers, for he also is a passenger; the other is peculiar to him, for he is the pilot”. (Kantorowicz, 1957:498)

In a professional business context, a person performs the role of a Manager, and expresses and presents him or her self-as-character (the Manager). There is interplay between the self-presentation (the staging and the performance) and the care of the self (the training, the cultivation and the rehearsal). We may call this altogether *management as performance*.

Thus the aim of this paper is to explore managerial practices in terms of *performance*. The following part of the paper discusses differences between the professional role and the self, as well as technologies of the self. Then I introduce a communication model brought from theatre research as a possible way of analysing ‘theatrical’ events. My intention is to outline a frame of reference that makes problems visible rather than to solve them.

### **To Present Self-as-Manager: A Theoretical Frame**

In exercising management there is an inconsistency between *reality* and *representation*. Some things are presented and visible to others while some things are hidden and invisible. The mode of communicating a professional role – a managerial manner – will follow from the practising of certain codes of action; visible/invisible for example, since an actor keep his/her self invisible to the audience and perform the role. Then our questions have to do with the presented reality, and whether there is an authentic self behind the mask, or not?

#### **Self-as-Character: A Professional Mask**

In the early 1900s, Simmel already noticed the appearance of a calculating *character* in modern Western society, someone who acted instrumentally and rationally with money as a means to an end (see Simmel, 1990). Today, the character of the Manager stands out to be “the dominant figure of the contemporary scene”, according to Mangham’s reading of MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (Mangham, 1995:187). The Manager is the hero/heroine of our times: “the central character of the modern social drama” (Ibid. p. 188). The Manager represents and embodies the cultural and moral ideals of efficiency and effectiveness justified by expertise, and restricts himself/herself to neutral realms in which rational agreement is possible, the realm of fact and of measurable effectiveness. The Manager operates in the realm of the organizational in which ends are taken to be given and are not available for rational scrutiny. This character might also possess skills and knowledge for, say, successful manipulation of others. As a self, though, this person may still operate in the realm of the personal in which it is possible to make judgements, debate moral values, and act as a moral agent (Mangham, 1995).

The character of the Manager lies in his/her professional *expertise*. It is the Manager’s claim to effectiveness that we come to admire or, perhaps, dislike, as a certain style, and we are invited to measure and evaluate ourselves in this manner. Then he/she appears to be someone that has separated his/her *self* from the *role* of the character. This self, as MacIntyre

writes, ‘can be anything, can assume any role or take any point of view’ (the quotation is from Mangham, 1995:188).

Such is the Manager appearing in its pure form, the self-as-character in a ‘fictitious’ but believed-in reality. There is a split between the self and self-as-character and what is shown to us in professional life is representation, like a mask. But what is the relationship *between* the mask and the face? Is it unproblematic to go between the realm of the organizational and the realm of the personal?

In one of his prominent texts, C.G.Jung (1934) claims it to be a conflict if there is a too strong personal identification with one’s professional role and its title. This is viewed by Jung to be an “abnormal” state of mind, especially if a person acts as if he/she personally possessed all the qualities incorporated in a professional figure and with all the effects that comes with the exercising of a particular profession, such as power. Identification with the professional role could be expressed as a naïve underestimation of one’s possibilities or obstacles in real life, or, on the other hand, actions could be exaggerated and be expressed in the form of hubris. Thus to Jung there seems possible to distinguish a professional *persona* from an authentic self. It is important not to loose oneself in unreal visions and representations. To Jung, *persona* is nothing “real”, it is only compromise, a negotiation between the individual and society with reference to what one is representing. A name, a title, and a profession are in relation to an individual a kind of secondary reality, and merely compromises. *Persona* is show, appearance and disguise. The problem with the mask, according to Jung, is that it is collective and therefore too common and too general to be able to be individual. *Persona* is only a two-dimensional reality. To Jung it was important to emancipate the individuality from those archetypal roles that are working on the level of our collective unconsciousness (Jung 1934/1986:48-49).

Jung views *persona* as a minor experience while the self is the key to a major three-dimensional reality, if I understand him correctly. Now we are aware of the challenging relationship *between* the *self* and the professional *persona*, and that it must imply self-understanding.

### **The Art of the Existence – Technologies of the Self**

In philosophy in the 1920s, Heidegger brought up the question of the constancy of the Self and explored a self-understanding beyond the position of subjectivity, an experience that Heidegger called *being*. The Being-in-the-world is historical. The question of the Self concerned the ‘who’ of the Being-in-the-world, because this Self-constancy (in German *Selbst-ständigkeit*) was grounded only in temporality. The “historicality” was the historical horizon of the

self-understanding, which Heidegger claimed to be an ontological condition. He calls it “the thrownness of the Self”, a thrownness into the stream of time. And to Heidegger there is also a care of the Self, and the Being-in-the-world is an existential experience of a “between” (which also relates to birth and death) (Heidegger, 1962/1996:426). For the most part, though, the Self is lost in the “they” (Sw., *mannet*), in an inauthentic historicity, as Heidegger writes (Ibid. p. 435). But this they-self is blind for possibilities: “The ‘they’ evades choice” (p. 443).

Thus in this chapter in Heidegger there is tension between the conventionalities of a “they” and an authentic Self, and, further, there is vulgar self-understanding in form of subjectivity and a vulgar understanding of the “history” and world-history.

If we follow this line of thought of self-understanding we can turn to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer uses *play* as a phenomenological metaphor for how we reach a self-understanding beyond subjectivity. “All presentation is potentially a representation for someone”, Gadamer writes on the concept of play and use play as a clue to ontological explanation (Gadamer, 1975/1993:108). It is important to define play as a process that takes place “in between”. The play draws the player into its dominion and the player experiences the game *as a reality that surpasses him*. The play appears as presentation for an audience. The players do not simply fulfil a role but play their roles and represent them for the audience. In regard to the whole of the play, the audience is to become absorbed, and puts the spectator in the place of the player (Ibid, pp.109-110). The play can only be played if the presented reality, the make believe world, is *accepted by both* actors and spectators.

It seems to me that what comes *between* the self and the representation is a much delicate matter. From Heidegger and Gadamer we learn that the self-understanding also is beyond the individual subject and subjectivity. And from the later work of Michel Foucault we have also learned about the subject/object-discourses and how the creation of categories and self-knowledge can be linked to social power relations. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault writes about how to understand the historical horizon as an ontological condition: “the problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits” (Foucault, 1972/1994:5).

In “The Care of the Self”, the third volume on *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault deals with the question of the self as an outcome of practices and socio-historical conditions. In ancient Greek thinking, Foucault writes, educating oneself and taking care of oneself are interconnected activities (Foucault, 1986/1988:55). Foucault illustrates, for example, how the traditional ethics of self-mastery implied a close connection between the superiority one exercised over oneself, the authority one exercised in the context of the household, and the power one



exercised in the field of society. It was linked to three types of authority (over oneself, over the household, and over others) (Ibid. p. 94-95). Foucault suggests that self-knowledge is a key component of managing and governing. A central issue in Foucault's work is the relationship between knowledge of oneself and one's ability to manage and govern, i.e. the exercising of pastoral power.

Foucault argues that the Greeks viewed the cultivation of the self as an *art of the existence* (*techné*) dealing with the relation of oneself to oneself – like a twofold struggle between the Self and the image of the other (or a they-self). In Foucault's work existence is often the product and the effect of similar technologies of the self, or, for example, mechanisms of self-observation and the use of surveillance. This kind of struggle is both internal and external.

As Barbara Townley writes, Foucault claims in "The Care of the Self" that the ability to manage was not yet defined in terms of laws belonging to an art of governing others and thus managing was not yet a question of a 'profession' with its particular skills and techniques. The ability to manage depended on the ethical work of the self on itself (Townley, 1995:272).

However, we have to understand that the context of ancient management and administration was the household. This "economic" art is connected to a lifestyle and an ethical order. In a passage in Foucault's work he deals with how to manage the ancient *oikos*. Proper managing of the *oikos* is an art of *commanding*. Man must master himself to be master of the household.

Governing oneself, managing one's estate, and participating in the administration of the city were three practices of the same type. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* shows the continuity and isomorphism between these three 'arts', as well as the chronological sequence by which they were to be practised in the life of an individual. (Foucault, 1985/1990:152 ff)

Managing the *oikos* or a household economy implies *both* an ethical *and* an administrative internal social order, contrary to the arrangements and functions of *professional* categories at work within modern management practices and corporate bureaucracies. But we find that technologies of the self, self-formation, and self-knowledge are interconnected activities in which it is no longer a question of revealing an authentic self from a disguised and unknown life behind a mask. Foucault does not deal with hermeneutics, but with the stylisation of attitudes, modes of subjectivation and the "aesthetics of existence". The self was known and described in a state of formation and *becoming*.

An overall question is, though, if this process of self-formation is accessible to us in the professionalized practices that are significant to our modern management discourses? Let us turn to Goffman, as he dealt with descriptions of contemporary social and everyday life.

## **The Individual as Character – The Individual as Performer**

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1956) turned to the vocabulary of the theatre to explain the way persons *gives off* an expression of him or her self in everyday social life. Goffman likewise found certain techniques used in staging the self and named it the “art of impression management”. “The very structure of the self”, Goffman writes, “can be seen in terms of how we arrange for such performances in a society” (Goffman xx: 252).

Goffman makes this distinction between the *performer* and the *character*. As a *performer* he/she is a fabricator of impressions and is occupied in working on staging a performance of him/her self. As a *character* we find a figure, the self-as-character. Every appearance requires different attributes. In our example, the character of the Manager would require artefacts as accounting reports, a serious outfit and a supportive team. A specific dramaturgy is a certain ordering of facts and events, such as keeping strategic secrets away from the market.

The performed character is “a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not the *cause* of it”, Goffman says. The self as performed character is not an organic thing that has a specific location and whose fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising from a scene that is presented. The crucial concern, then, is whether this character will be credited or discredited by an audience. The self is a product of arrangements, of a back region with tools for shaping a body and a front region with its scenery, a whole machinery of self-production. But the individual as a *performer* has this capacity to learn and is being exercised in the task of training for a part. He/she is having real fantasies, dreams or anxiety for the performance in the front region.

We recently witnessed such a ‘theatrical’ event when Ericsson presented their latest quarter report.

## **Management and the Theatrical Event**

### **Dramaturgy: The example of Ericsson**

We must realise that acting in public space is not synonymous with commercial advertising. In the creation of public images transmitted, there is an ongoing battle of *whom* the organizer will be of the reality presented. In a newspaper there is this opportunity for an editor to arrange series of photographic pictures and present the story; and the same goes for television and radio broadcasting (Internet is somewhat different). The storyteller – or the director – can

combine series of events, pictures, graphic illustrations, music, voices, background noise and headlines to create an effect on an audience (see Fiske, 1987). In the “theatrical” event we might be aware of the typecasting. Politicians are quite attentive to the use of these editing techniques, politicians often seem to co-operate and sometimes even try to take over the role of the narrator. When a Swedish top politician was accused in public of some administrative errors, she appeared in the press conference dressed in a white outfit as an innocent character of a drama; and the announcements on the level of the rate are sent out from the Central and National Banks almost as if they were ceremonial messages received by the audience on the global market. The former discretion, silence and secrecy of business life have turned into ‘theatrical’ events and high-sounding speech-acts in front of cameras and audience.

A Monday in April 2002, Ericsson announced their First Quarter Report, which was telling the story of heavy losses. This soon became the headline news in the media, and on stage there were the two leading parts of the drama appearing as spokespersons: the Ericsson Chief Executive and the Chairman of the Board.

The following day, the most important daily morning newspaper in Sweden had the Ericsson report as their front-page news. On top of the page there were three short notices; in the middle there was a photographic picture of two men with troubled features; and to the right the editor had used two graphs to illustrate the rapid fall of exchange on the stock markets when the Quarter Report was known in public. The view of the time-span used in the graphic illustrations was so compressed that a person without any financial training whatsoever obviously could realise how prices were falling heavy. A black headline was stating: **“We are all losers”**.

Inside the newspaper another photographic picture shows the CEO; a white middle-aged man in a dark suit with a tie and an ordinary face is standing alone on stage with the financial report as *mise en scène*. He is facing people and cameras and microphones. The photographer’s snapshot grasped a sudden moment in a hundredth of a second, a truthful but perhaps not an intended moment of doubt in the corner of an eye. We find this person to be the performer playing his part as Manager and CEO in a difficult public situation, and he is surely the protagonist of this drama.

There is a clear dramaturgy of events in the Ericsson case; the presentation of the Quarter Report was an event and a financial turning point. Firstly: three short notices on the front page were arguing with some “facts” and statements: Ericsson lost 5,4 billion SKR the first quarter 2002 and it will effect the national economy as 5,000 jobs might disappear; many employees are shareholders and will hopefully understand the cutting down in size and costs; the share

issue is showing employees and public opinion that shareholders will carry the burden. Secondly: the tragic element of the drama is the fatal; we are addressed as audience as if we could not step aside to become observers of the on-going play. We become, as Gadamer wrote, drawn into the presented reality and become absorbed by a drama that puts the spectator in the place of the player. If, or when, we accept the dramatized reality, we become re-creators of this reality. Thus it is most important to consider the *techniques* used by which a dramatic managerial reality is created.

### **A Communicational Model of Theatrical Events**

In a recent book, the professor of theatre studies Willmar Sauter (2000) has developed a communication model as a way of theorizing what he calls a “theatrical event”. Sauter’s model applies to theatre research, but his attempt is nonetheless to leave the restricted area of theatrical activities and look at similar social situations. They would include “stock markets, board meetings, fashion shows, political rallies, Olympic games, carnivals, and graduation days” (Sauter, 2000:253). Sauter does not define these activities as “theatre”, even though they bear a number of similarities to theatrical communication. Through the media...

“...We are confronted with continuous role-playing, extravagant costume design, delicate lighting effects, and an efficient dramaturgy in the presentation of public events.” (Sauter, 2000:254)

What characterizes a theatrical event? Sauter asks. He finds it to be the mutual inter-action *between* performer and spectator and for this reason it is not a traditional sender-receiver communication model. There is internal communication and external communication, where the external refers to the cultural context.

Sauter uses the word *symbolic* instead of “fictional”, and stage actions are called “presentation” as a basic mode of performance and to which perception is closely tied. The most important aspect is what is going on *between* stage and auditorium, as well as the circumstances in which the communication is taking place. Time is a crucial and dynamic part of his model, as there is this “event-ness” of all theatre, Sauter writes, as a past and present and a *memory* of an experience. Time may include theatre history, cultural historical changes and historical conditions. Presentation (actions) and perception (reactions) work on different levels, such as the *sensory*, the *artistic* and *the symbolic* levels. For example, the artistic level includes encoded actions presented and characterized by genre, style and such skills that are depending on tradition. Here we find professional aspects of the activities.

Sauter's model is one of many possible ways to interpret what I call "management as performance". If we turn to theatre studies we might gain new insights through these already developed conceptions that are available at hand, and we may also describe the *acts* in managerial practices beyond mere analogue or with the simple use of a "theatrical" vocabulary.

## Conclusion

It has been my purpose to discuss how management can be viewed in terms of "theatrical" communication, i.e. *management as performance*. In sum, any performance goes beyond subjectivity; we must understand the event as part of an inter-active network of actors and spectators. A possible way of theorizing management as performance is to treat managerial acts as public "theatrical events", and a model was introduced and discussed in short.

Furthermore, an event takes place *between* the actor and spectator, as a performance is always a presentation for someone. Here we should regard the actor's role and the self-presentation. Then it is important to be aware of the complex of problems that we come across when dealing with management as performance, and that such descriptions might imply the very art of the existence and thus include technologies of the self (self-knowledge, self-formation, self-understanding etc.), as well as the identity as fluid in a "postmodern" style of thought. But this so-called deconstruction of the subject nevertheless arises problems of agency. As Kelly Oliver writes: "If there is no unified subject, then who is the agent of political action or change? Without the subject how can we have agency? And without agency, how can we take action?" (Oliver, 1998:xi).

As an actor, we tend to comprehend the Manager to be the central figure in the corporate world. Then perhaps corporate culture at large is what it has claimed to be: shared fantasies, the "result of the organizational members' projections of their own experiences onto the organization and various organizational phenomena" (Alvesson & Berg, 1992:115). Because the Manager seems to be a *monument* of our time, a character created out of the historical context of organizing an administrative reality, a character created out of the written *work* of reports, memos, and other *documents*. But even though this managerial character may appear as a possible figure in discourse – in theory, textbooks and business journals – many actors make the Manager come into existence by the choice to perform this role and style in the life of a company. There is also an audience that choose to believe in the presented and made-up reality. Since we recall, 'there is no Hamlet on stage: he is only in the mind of the spectator'.

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