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OF MANAGERS, IDEAS AND JESTERS

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Of Ideas and Managers

Typically we think that we own our ideas but really, they tend to own us.

To have ideas is seen as distinctly human: H.G. Wells (1920) states that "*Human history is in essence a history of ideas*". Management history can be depicted as a history of management ideas (Hamel, 2007). Ideas are generally thought as opinions, beliefs or convictions, intuitions or plans and schemes.²

A typical managerial representation of ideas is objects of aspiration or thought we can manipulate and create at will (e.g. Kelley, 2001, Dodgson et al, 2008). They have an unfinished quality: in order to have (commercial or material) value, ideas need to be elaborated on and realized as products or activities. Ideas are thus commonly viewed as instruments in the hands of managers and organizations, and they are owned by these. Humans are in charge, they can adopt and jettison ideas on their discretion, and they can patent or copyright certain ideas. Even when ideas such as lean manufacturing or time management fundamentally shape management thinking and practice, ideas are seen as subservient to the managerial actor. A typical description of the relationship depicts the manager as the dominant partner and the idea only as the manager's appliance.

We see that disparagement unfair to ideas. In this paper we argue that there is value of seeing ideas as (more) equal to humans (see Figure 1). Ideas often control and affect managers deeply. Ideas shape organizational behavior and they tend to stick around (Stinchcombe, 1965). Thus more appropriately, ideas can be seen as social entities in

² a. In the philosophy of Plato, an archetype of which a corresponding being in phenomenal reality is an imperfect replica.

b. In the philosophy of Kant, a concept of reason that is transcendent but nonempirical.

c. In the philosophy of Hegel, absolute truth; the complete and ultimate product of reason.

Source: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/idea>

their own right. In this paper, we consider the perspective that it is ideas that tend to possess us rather than us that own ideas and thus can manipulate them at will, as to dispose of old bad ones, and create new hopefully innovative ones. We will argue that managers tend to be prisoners of some debunked idea that refuses to leave them, like Jevons and sun spots or Ricardo and the precise measure of value, as Stigler writes (1983:536). He draws attention to the difficulty of great economists to overcome certain non-productive ideas (like sun-spots having an impact on commercial cycles). World literature recounts multiple instances where the hero has become obsessed with a particular idea he cannot escape. Don Quixote in Cervantes' great novel is a story of a man madly obsessed with the idea of a knighthood. Herman Melville's Captain Ishmael is a tortured man, whose free will must be questioned and whose ability to fully command his actions is diminished. The idea of the white whale had possessed him. Similarly, many a manager has been unable to move beyond the existing strategy idea, manifesting severe cognitive inertia (Tripsas et al, 2000).

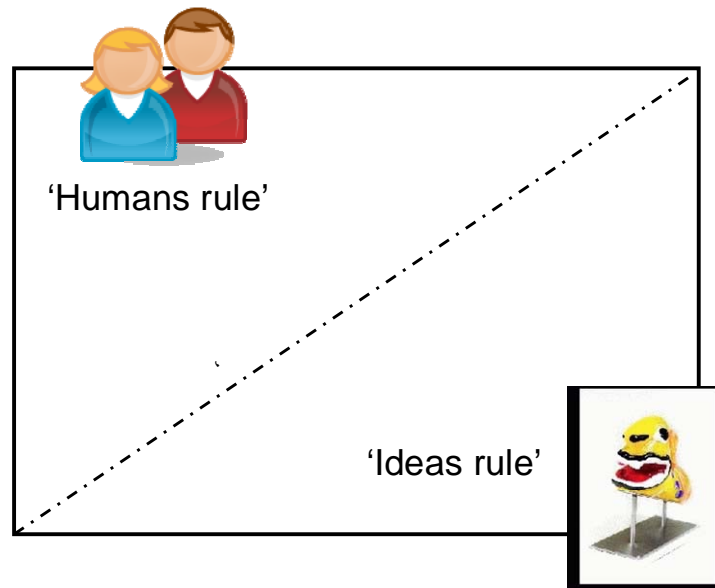


Figure 1. The Primacy of Humans vs. Ideas

We therefore contest the dominant view that ideas are as mere instrument for rational or innovative choice, for example as starters towards a successful decision making leading to a commercial end. A similar attitude to a related concept, information, is held by March and Sevón (1988) who write about idle talk first as a form of (useful) system maintenance but then confess that contrary to dominant thinking in decision theory, they believe there is value to information without decision relevance (they call such information gossip to stress its non-relevance to choice processes) simply because of our need to understand and interpret “what is going on in life”. However, gossip, not unlike ideas, has a life of its own that humans are rarely able to control. Thus perhaps ideas, not managers, have the upper hand in organizations.

The view on ideas as primary relative to the human actor is not without precedent. Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) popularized the gene-centered view on evolution – selection acting at the level of genes rather than organisms – but also reintroduced the word ‘meme’³ as a self-replicating unit of social evolution. Memes are like ideas that travel through diffusion but they are not typically seen as social entities that are able to change themselves and other entities they meet during their travels. Also the Scandinavian Institutional Theory (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996, 2005) depicts ideas with the capability to travel. Ideas are also independent in that (unlike their human carriers) ‘they won’t go to jail’⁴.

In what follows, we wish to consider the role of ideas in managerial actions while giving ideas their (long) due (see Table 1).

³ Historically, the notion of a unit of social evolution, and a similar term (from Greek *mneme*, meaning “memory”), first appeared in 1904 in a work by the German evolutionary biologist Richard Semon titled *Die Mnemischen Empfindungen in ihren Beziehungen zu den Originalempfindungen* (loosely translated as “Memory-feelings in relation to original feelings”). According to the OED, the word *mneme* appears in English in 1921 in L. Simon's translation of Semon's book: *The Mneme*. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meme>

⁴ This is a quote from a speech by A. Whitney Griswold in 1952.

Table 1. Toward a More Balanced Perspective of Ownership and Embodiment

<p>Humans rule over ideas:</p> <p>Humans elaborate ideas with an unfinished quality Humans use ideas as instruments Humans apply ideas to their own ends Humans are in charge; ideas are servant Humans can adopt and jettison ideas on their discretion Humans patent or copyright certain ideas</p>	<p>Ideas rule over humans:</p> <p>Humans are trapped by ideas Ideas survive humans Ideas are stronger than humans Ideas take hold of humans Humans do (sometimes unexplainable) things in the name of ideas Ideas trample on the "free will" of humans Ideas mark people as their own</p>
<p>Humans embody ideas:</p> <p>Humans stand for an idea Humans seek expression of an idea in their behavior Humans use ideas to advance their careers or other life goals Humans seek consistency and meaning in ideas embodiment Humans dress to convey certain ideas Humans judge ideas and people who embody those ideas as good or bad</p>	<p>Ideas embody humans:</p> <p>Humans become spokespersons for ideas Ideas take hold of humans Humans become symbols for ideas Ideas masquerade as humans Humans become possessed by ideas Behind every human, there are one or two ideas</p>

Our discussion includes an introduction of a specific role that makes the primacy of ideas as unusually discernible –that of a jester. We will propose the jester as a potential mediator between ideas and managers in their battle for primacy. First, however, we examine three notions that are pertinent to the relationship between ideas and managers and to the important role ideas play in managerial cognition.

First notion: Ideas socialize.

Ideas meet. Ideas keep company and associate with other entities and as such, they are perceived as subjects: they meet other ideas or human actors. Some of their meetings we can trace via Google where we find several thousand hits for the phrase "ideas meet..." The hits reveal that ideas meet new and old ideas, and that they are active in different contexts. Ideas are active in the business world: they meet organisations, for example entrepreneurial ventures, they meet industry, and new technology. They also mingle with

the financial world, meet money and investors, and they meet presidents of important countries. Ideas fight at war and win over weapons. Hence, ideas are often described as independent actors, engaged in (inter)action. They thereby come into contact with human actors as well as their environments.

However, even though ideas are pictures as actors above, we do not wish to claim any agency to them. Rather we wish to consider them *as if* they had a capacity to travel, meet, combine (mingle or unite) with other ideas or human actors, and change, succeed and fail, as apparently *they do*. In this view we keep company with authors such as Schumpeter (1939), Quadagno (1979), Nelson and Winter (1982:130), Henderson and Clark (1990), Hargadon and Sutton (1997). Legro (2000) wrote about collective ideas and the difficulty of explaining their success or failure at a particular time. Yet it is the notion of memes (Dawkins, 1976) that perhaps best allows the ideas their social character though even then, ideas (or memes) are merely units of behavioral imitation (see also Payne, Payne, and Doehlert, 1988) rather than social actors in their own right.

Seemingly, ideas not only meet, they also travel. Czarniawska and Sevón (2005) claim that such travel trajectories of ideas can be fascinating. Ideas travel in time and space by adapting while maintaining their essential (recognizable) identity. In doing so, many ideas survive people and organizations. Holt (2008) tracked ideas for jokes across history and found that some of the same jokes are told in today's Hollywood movies as in the middle ages! However, when management ideas travel in space they do so, according to Czarniawska and Joerges (1996), by being translated into objects (models, books, transparencies), then sent to other places than those where they emerged, then translated into new kind of objects, and then sometimes in actions, which, if repeated, might stabilize into institutions, which in turn could be described and summarized through abstract ideas, and so on and so forth (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005:8).

Ideas are traveling, through translations and simultaneous transformations, everywhere today globally. One example is reported by Pantzar (2008:25) who documented how Tapiola Garden City in Finland was built as a "suitable and beautiful environment for everyone". The related design ideas, supported by humans, travelled from the US (e.g.

with Lewis Mumford) and Europe (e.g. with Ebenezer Howard and Patrick Geddes) and gained their expression in the garden city that was visited and ideated by luminaries from all over the world as an example of ‘crime-free’ proper living environment.

Second notion: We become our ideas, and ideas become us

Such travelling of a human with an idea can be depicted as a traveler who is embodying an idea rather carrying the idea as an object in a suitcase. Yet, the traveller can equally be the idea that is embodied as a human. A well known example of an embodiment of an idea is the principle of liberty that was personified as a woman in a huge painting of a half naked woman by Eugène Delacroix in 1830 to commemorate the July Revolution in France the same year (Figure 2). Interesting is also the fact that the same painting is now seen as the symbol of the French revolution of 1789. The idea, by being embodied in a human form in a picture, has travelled to an earlier time to depict another revolution.



Figure 2. La Liberté Guidant le Peuple ("Liberty Leading the People") by Eugène Delacroix. 1830

A jester is an illuminating example of an idea becoming a (live) human. The character of a jester has universal presence according to Otto (2001) – such fools are recorded throughout the history of Europe, China, India or the Middle East (as well as America and Africa). One becomes the jester by performing as the king's fool. After many such performances, the jester will appear as a fool, and the idea of a fool can no longer be removed or separated. Thus becoming a jester is 'a career-limiting move' (sic!): Jesters can never become unfools again (nor kings).⁵ Thus the kings can trust them because the past performance will constrain the jester's future capacity to act other, potentially contradictory, ideas. Otto recounted multiple instances where fools suffer from overstepping their license and receive a punishment (sometimes death).

Coser (1964) studied the political functions of eunuchism, not perhaps unlike a court jester in some regards. Also outcasts and rootless aliens with what is customarily viewed as irreversible physical handicap or at least incompleteness, Coser (1964) viewed eunuchs as reduced as human beings. Yet through this very humiliation, they become not only useful but also potentially powerful members of the court (for example the case of Chinese eunuchs, see Mitamura, 1963 as reviewed by Chang, 1965). Similarly, the person playing or performing the jester is now bounded by the idea of a fool, drawing both power and constraint from the idea of foolness he (or occasionally she) embodies. For example, Will Sommers, the fool of king Henry the VIIIth, was an important member of the court (Otto, 2001).

Thus it may be with women. After many gendered performances, we appear as our gender, or more specifically, we become the embodiment of the gender ideas that inhabit us (cf. Carlsen, 2008). These ideas can no longer be removed or separated, they have become our identity. The idea of a woman requiring a certain kind of performance is told by Mazzarella (2007) in her book *Fredrika Runeberg*. The social norms required for female writers at that time, in the late 19th century, strict conformance to social expectations. In society, Ms. Runeberg could not become a writer, only a female writer at best. That is an example of the *logic of appropriateness*, the tendency to act in

⁵ There are a few exceptions amidst hundreds of fools recorded in history who have actually managed to become rulers themselves (Otto, 2001).

accordance with (or be defined by) the dominant social norms (Cyert and March, 1963)⁶. A similar example is reported by by Burke and Reitzes (1981: 90-91) who studied the expression of certain identity dimensions or ideas such as Academic Responsibility in student behaviour. They conclude that “in order to be (some identity), one must act like (some identity). If being feminine, for example, *means* being tender and one defines oneself as being feminine, then one must act in ways that will be interpreted by oneself as well as by others as acting ‘tender’ and not acting ‘tough’.”

Ideas are performed – and performing – in different drama genres that range from minor mimicry to major theater. We can see increasing interest in such performances where ideas become people but people also become ideas. For example, there is a fascination with reality TV that shows ordinary people often in dramatic circumstances. Ordinary people become hero personalities, actors in their own right. There is a lot of drama, and a remarkably vague borderline between what is perceived as real and what is seen as fantasy. Movies may influence our perception of reality too. Californians have even elected a movie action hero as their governor! Others would rather be treated by the actor playing doctor in the well-known TV series *ER*, than a real MD at the local hospital (according to a newspaper survey). And the TV public suffers with the employees under their pathetic boss in the English soap opera *Office*. Such public drama performances shape other people’s perception of who we are and what we are capable of. People may use such almost realistic shows as social norms in their choices according to the logic of appropriateness.

However, there is a risk of acting out a ‘wrong’ or contextually inappropriate idea. In the case of the Opportunity Discovery Department at AT&T, Muller and Valikangas (2003) recount the many creative ways in which the “ODDsters” – as the group was called – contributed ideas, language, and humor to the strategy making of AT&T in an effort to revitalize the slowly stalling juggernaut. Their ideas shaped AT&T strategy, for example, in a form of an ODDster-produced strategy document that was discussed by AT&T’s Board (see also Wood and Valikangas, 2008). AT&T’s ODDsters were evaluated,

⁶ Not many researchers have discovered that *the logic of appropriateness* is an early model of the process of social construction, appearing already in 1963,

however, in the end on their patent activity – as scientists from Bell Labs, they were supposed to do patentable research (Muller & Valikangas, 2003). Their protest that they had been working on AT&T’s strategy received no sympathy: the strategy was formally the job of a CEO, and therefore, by definition, a group of ODDsters could not have contributed to it. They had thus not confirmed to the perceived idea of their performance, and therefore not performed (or performed poorly) as researchers in the Bell Labs even though their performance as AT&T employees was remarkable. Their performance did not fit the idea of a scientist they embodied.



Figure 3. CEO, the Beaten Boxer.

A CEO, too, must exercise care in the idea he or she is seen to perform. As a company’s public face, the CEO must embody the idea of success and communicate belief in their company’s future achievements. Interest groups, including the press, may interpret the personal appearance of a manager as an indicator of company fortunes. Such embodied performances may then have a substantial effect on the company’s market value. One such example, described by Sevón (2003) concerned a former CEO of the Swedish

telecom company Ericsson who, after presenting a positive quarterly report in 2003, was depicted by the local massmedia looking like “a defeated boxer” (signaling a lack of faith in the company future) (see Figure 3), which, according to the newspapers influenced the price of company shares negatively.

Third notion: Ideas escape

Despite our intellectual freedom, we may become mental prisoners of our ideas but the opposite is not possible: We cannot keep ideas in prison. Illustratory of the human dilemma is a statement by a well-known management author who lamented the difficulty of “escaping one’s past ideas”. Viewing himself a prisoner, his past published ideas had devoured him: they limited his ability to imagine or credibly present new, different ideas. Similarly, among managers and politicians it is common to experience that the success of the past is a hinder for a different future (Kets de Vries, 1989). Winston Churchill was not re-elected despite having won the Second World War, presumably because he symbolized the hardships, and people needed relief and joy in their exhaustion (e.g. Jenkins, 2001).

Also managers may have difficulty in moving beyond their past. Their idea performances may determine the capacity to take (credible) action in the future: A CEO, who bet the company on a particular strategy and failed, rarely has another opportunity to set a new course. As one CEO described it: “You can be wrong, and it is even a good thing to be a little wrong once and a while, but you cannot be totally off”.⁷ This in part explains why many people/managers have such trouble admitting they were wrong: it would not do much career good as they cannot escape these fallen ideas. Self -justification is one proposed reason for such continued and escalated commitment (Brockner, 1992).

However, even if managers, and people cannot, ideas do escape. That ideas get out of control of people and organizations, that ideas take their own routes, change with context and those they meet has consequences. Authors, for example, cannot control their ideas

⁷ Regarding the business focus on stainless steel (as the strategy idea).

even if they wanted to. Perhaps one of most well-known examples is Thomas Kuhn's attempt to intervene in the wide usage of the word 'paradigm', as it had become meaningless in his view.⁸ His insistent intervention to stop the practice however entirely failed. Invoking Kuhn had become "like a talisman" (see Fuller, 1988), and he was unable to control its usage. As Melian (2007) has described, open source-inspired systems are built on the very notion that ideas "like to be free" – they travel from one person to another, from one context to another, and gain different expressions and combinations.

Griswold said in a speech that "ideas won't go to jail". However, they may get people in jail. An editor of a Hungarian humor magazine is attributed a remark that "Telling a joke is more interesting when you can go to jail for it" (Otto, 2001:135). It is playing with fire that makes wit interesting. Ideas, like jokes, can get out of control and not only the person's mind but also the body may become imprisoned. Perhaps then, it is not surprising, that defense mechanisms have evolved to defend humans against the power of ideas.

One of those defense mechanisms is the universal institution of a jester.

Of Jesters

We have here argued for a perspective where ideas are much more persuasive than commonly held. We have claimed that ideas are powerful actors in the managerial environment. Managers, and humans more generally, occasionally become imprisoned by the idea of personal success, for example, exhibiting strong cognitive inertia even when faced with the necessity of change (Kets de Vries, 1990; Tripsas et al, 2000). Signs of ideas ruling over managers include such persistence with obsolete strategies or competitive notions (Barr et al, 1992), an obsession with a particular (faddish) management technique, such as TQM (Backstrom, 1999), and the act of engaging in gross misbehavior or brutality in the name of an idea or a cause (cf. Huntington, 1998).

⁸ The presentation by Oliver Røtlev on "Boundary-Work in Organisation Studies: A Framework and Application, Helsinki School of Economics, 19.9.2008

We suggest a jester is a unique social institution that evolved to help humans cope with the ideas that refuse to leave them. A jester is a tradition dating back to medieval times that counterbalances, as one of its important functions, the power that ideas hold through a unique privilege, the freedom of (humorous and witty) speech. This freedom was gained as anything that a jester would say was “in jest” or an “utterance of a fool”, thus seemingly discounted (yet still effective). A fool has many names: buffoon, clown, minstrel.⁹ Klapp wrote in 1949 that

“the fool is a symbol of fundamental importance, representing a role especially valued by the group. The fool is a social type found widely in folklore, literature and drama.” (p.157).

We suggest that jesters mediate the battle of power between ideas and humans (and this is one of the reasons for its universal prominence as an institution in human history). The mediation is particularly visible in the case of court jesters and kings. To be able to jester, the first step is to remind the king of the fragility of his position. The jester “...becomes the person who through various means reminds the leader of the transience of power. He becomes the guardian of reality, and in a paradoxical way, prevents the pursuit of foolish action” (Kets de Vries, 1990:757). The jester is thus a useful antidote for the persuasions of power that tend, over time, to diminish a person’s ability to judge his/her own performance and capabilities objectively (Kets de Vries, 2003).

Thus it is in companies also. The role of the jester, first and foremost, implies the right and skill to make people to see themselves and their actions more clearly. Paul Birch, now a former British Airways’ corporate jester, is quoted as saying: “Fools pinpoint absurdity by acting out the absurd. They act as a mirror in which people see their mistakes without having to admit to them. This enables Fools to challenge accepted wisdom and create new alternatives. As such, they’re entrusted with the sensitive task of managing and controlling change.”¹⁰ A jester can thus be a key player, the master

⁹ Also harlequin, jongleur, fou, narr, stultor, scurra...and more.

¹⁰ <http://idler.co.uk/features/you-have-to-be-mad-to-work-here/>

interpreter, in the power struggle for the definition of the firm's strategy, for example. Kaplan (2004) has documented strategy making as such a framing contest – a battle of whose view will prevail in directing the firm's future. However, the function of a jester, and that of humor more generally, a likely aid to such contesting and familiar in the courts of kings, is not visible in academic discussions of corporate strategy making.

A jester may be a role, played by someone like Paul Birch at British Airways or it can be the frequent collective referencing to a cartoon like Adam Scott's Dilbert in corporate presentations. A jester may be an outside consultant too. But jestering is an important social institution we should recognize. Many people we have talked with claim themselves as jesters in corporate life. Thus we should include jestership in our accounts of organizations and leadership. Not only because such jestery is probably common but also because of its distinct benefits, as we have argued in this paper, as one of the few defense mechanisms humans, and managers, have against the power of possessive, sometimes obsolete, ideas.

A jester's ability to mediate between ideas and humans stems from the privileges of being a fool (Otto, 2001). Only fools (and perhaps children as in emperor's missing clothes) can be forgiven the unique privilege, without demolishing the social order, to point out the (too) obvious, the forbidden, and the partially hidden. To make the ideas that embody us and that we perform, sometimes unknowingly, visible. A jester facilitates the undressing of such masquerades. A good jester's wit then also serves as a lubricant to the reckoning. The nakedness that would be rejected off-hand, were it not coated with humor, now becomes more palatable. There is less denial. And the hold of ideas on us diminishes with laughing at ourselves.

The humorous absurdity or incongruity of it all eventually shifts perceptions (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006). "The fool breaks down the boundary between chaos and order, but he also violates our assumptions that the boundary was where we thought it was and that it had the character we thought it had. " (Willeford, 1969:39). The jester may thus aid the accomplishment of cognitive innovation – a breakthrough or a break-out of the ideas that normally characterize or dominate our thinking. This breaking out of ideas can be

collective too: The use of humor has been found helpful in navigating contentious situations in corporations (Hatch, 1997) while shared laughter communicates ease or non-threat (Ramachandran, 1998).

A jester can be a potentially powerful agent of change, enhancing the organizational ability to escape obsolete or misguided ideas and absurd orthodoxies. Of course, jesters can also work toward maintaining the status quo. A jester can act as a social controller, by ridiculing those who profess heresy or are outsiders (Klapp, 1962). So choose your jesters carefully, so that they too will not become possessed by the undue persuasions of too powerful ideas. Humanity's actions can sometimes be unexplicable in their dark consequences – perhaps ideas then rule over humans.

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