

Designing frameworks to do and get done. An analysis of team management in the horticulture sector

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Abstract. This article presents a research study on work management in a horticultural company. We consider the manager to be an activity designer who relies on primary frameworks (both natural and social) (Goffman, 1974). In order to organize efficiently the work to do and to be done, the manager will design action frameworks by constantly facing situational contingencies (Schön, 1983). We show that for this to happen, the manager transforms primary frameworks in secondary frameworks by conducting both daily and occasional microprojets, thus producing a succession of transformed frameworks, some of which may crystallise in the form of artefacts.

Keywords. Management, Framework, Microprojet, Horticulture.

1. Introduction

1.1 Providing frameworks, a defining characteristic of management

The work of managers is not well known despite being a determining factor for working conditions. Scientific literature describing their defining task, the act of managing, is indeed scarce. The French school of Ergonomics has studied the work of managers partly inspired by work sociology. This led ergonomists to work on collective regulations (Carballeda, 1997), which in turn led the manager to be considered as an operator with peculiar working conditions, his intermediary position leading him to be stuck between hierarchical constraints. Other studies have been more centred on cognitive dimensions (Langa 1994 ; Six, 1999 ; Lebris, 2010) and have pointed out the complexity of the work of managers, who are juggling multiple tasks : interpersonal relationships, sales, output management, human resources (Mascia, 2001) while they are being tasked to manage uncertainty and simultaneous time constraints (Zara-Meylan, 2012). Still the question remains on how managers define the work they have to do and the work they have to get done?

We hypothesise that line management can be analysed as a conceptual activity in which the manager designs “frameworks for action” (Gotteland-Agostini, 2013). E. Goffman, (1974), argues that individuals rely on interpretive frameworks, which he refers to as “primary frameworks” (either natural or social), to define the most adequate conduct for a given situation. These frameworks are not sufficient for the individual to behave in the most adequate way. To paraphrase Schön (1983), we could say that the actor “holds a dialogue with the situation he is in”. He’s faced with situational contingencies, resistances he has to take into account or, on the contrary, opportunities he may grab to act, all of which leads him to create “secondary frameworks” (Goffman, op. cit.). In this presentation,

we wish to describe how we analyse the line managers' activity of conceptualizing "secondary frameworks" in the horticulture sector.

1.2 Primary frameworks of a company in the horticulture sector

The company, in which this research took place, accounts for 20 permanent workers and as many seasonal workers during high season (March to June). At this time of year, selling perennials, zonals, and bluegrasses adds itself to the producing work. Two distinctive features stand out:

- The production is carried out in a dynamic and open environment, which is a defining characteristic of the horticultural sector (Zara-Meylan, 2012). The uncertainty, which is tied to nature, is ever-present (weather, living products), as are the cultural rules, both sanitary and botanical, which are needed to produce healthy quality plants.
- The company belongs to a national grouping of producers, which itself links three regional groups and impose its own rules to the company. This grouping operational principle determines the internal setting of rules inside the company.

All of these characteristics involve constituting elements of primary frameworks (both natural and social), which are anterior to the work of managers. These are frameworks for action which the manager will rely on to design secondary frameworks also known as action frameworks (Gotteland-Agostini, 2013). They are designed, among other uses, to help manage the teams who are under the manager's responsibility.

2. Methods

To understand the conceptual activity of the manager, we have first looked for pre-existing primary frameworks (both natural and social), which were issued from the grouping and the organisation. We have then relied on the ergonomics analysis of work to identify the secondary frameworks which had been designed : those, which help do (i.e. to think about the situation and what it entails for the manager—planning- and the others – resource allocation) and those, which get the work done (i.e. to help achieving production work and orders). We have observed a variety of situations linked to production management, to the production process, to sales and to days which involved both producing and sales work. We also conducted interviews based on traces of activity (scripted notes, provisional schedules) to which we had access and benefited from self-confrontations on work prescriptions.

3. Results

3.1 Three steps to developing action frameworks to do and to get done.

The analysis of results shows how the act of management isn't only about transmitting "as is" natural and social primary frameworks. On the contrary, it conceptualizes secondary frameworks to do and to get done following a three steps process (see Diagram1 below).

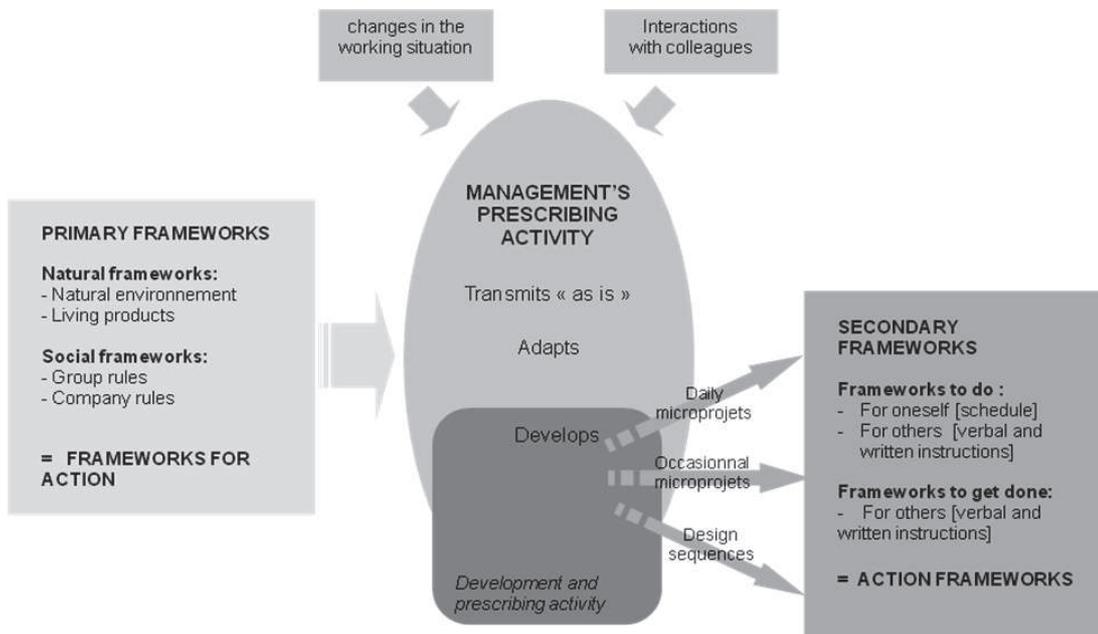


Diagram 1: management's prescribing activity, conceptualizing secondary frameworks also known as action frameworks.

Step 1: The manager defines what he needs to do and what he needs to get done. In order to do so, he relies on the primary frameworks (both natural and social) which are peculiar to the company. At this stage he asks himself the reason for doing each task, “what to do”, what process should begin, which order should be processed, what are the tasks and which one have priority?

Step 2: The manager frames the actions. He develops frameworks for his own tasks and those of others. At this stage he asks himself how to get tasks done? How to assign them? How to organise? To do so, he transforms primary frameworks into secondary frameworks with the help of information he finds on the setting and in the tools he's building (provisional planning). He answers first the question “How to get tasks done?” which centres on how to organize the work using the means and staff he has under his supervision. This step leads to the construction of both frameworks for the manager himself as well as for others as well as frameworks he can use to get tasks done by his subordinates.

Step 3: It is now time for the action to be undertaken. The manager carries on with the development of action frameworks through the confrontation with reality, taking into account the progress of the work, changes in the work situation (employees, plants, weather, etc.) and interactions with his subordinates, peers, executive management, and clients. He ensures that “tasks are getting done”. To do so, he coordinates the work and makes sure it is “getting done” by his employees, either on the producing site or during the sales period.

3.2 The process of development: framing and reframing

The description of the three steps process should not let the reader think that action frameworks are set in stone once and for all. The manager may take into account the interactions, industrial variability, as well as other parameters and decide to rethink action frameworks both for him and for the others, to do and to get done.

This redefinition of framework can be partial, which we'll refer to as “framing”, or complete, which we will refer to as “re-framing”. More commonly, the act of redefining is always part of “microprojects” (Gotteland-Agostini, 2013). Managers tend to tackle the

activity of development when they conduct individual short-term projects.

The following example explains why we use the term “microproject” and illustrates the redefinition of frameworks. The evening before the workday, the manager devises a work schedule, he “bets on a fair weather”. When the morning comes, rain is falling. Our results bring to light frame designing activities (frameworks to do), which correspond to successive transformations of secondary frameworks that the manager, who relies on his schedule, is responsible for. Through managing this daily microproject – the aim being conducting it on the whole day to organize this day’s work to do - he creates organization.

On this peculiar day, we identified several frame designing actions, which depended on the weather changes and were linked with the urgencies pertaining to vegetables. Executive management informed the manager of the latter because, not only did the mix of sun and rain make it mandatory to define new specificities to the work which needed to be done, but it also involved resources allocation since the needed manpower had a chance to be lacking because of unforeseen absence of seasonal workers.

Our analysis also highlights three key moments in the schedule which are related to the arrival time of permanent workers, 8 o’clock, the arrival time of seasonal workers, 10 o’clock, and finally the 13 o’clock arrival of seasonal workers because of the bad weather.

3.1 *Projects conducted by managers but shared framings: co-framing.*

While the manager is ultimately responsible for the development of action frameworks, he isn’t the sole contributor. Colleagues, subordinates and others take part in their development during the conduct of projects.

In the following example, the aim of the micro project is to organize and carry out a mission, which involves preparing order of Phlox for shipment the following week. Contrary to the previous example, this project cannot see its completion in one day. In order to stress the difference in rhythm, we will refer to this type of microproject as “occasional microproject”. This being said, in this peculiar case we will focus on the co-framing actions (involving both frameworks to do and frameworks to get done) which were partaken by the manager and his colleagues, from either the company or the grouping. These actions take place in the span of days in which the project is being carried out:

- The definition stage of the project takes place a Monday morning when the executive management informs the manager of the expected goal: 1200 Phlox for the following Monday. The executive manager also informs him of the criteria set by the client (flowered plants in various hues).
- The development stage begins the next day and involves interactions with colleagues, each one having specific skills. The head of exterior works helps with setting up the cleaning part of the project. The head of crop maintenance helps set up the watering planning. Seasoned workers also help. One permanent worker helps preparing the slab preparation test and a seasonal employee helps preparing the plant cleaning trial.
- The execution phase takes place on Friday and involves workers continuing to prepare and the clean the plants, as well as the phytosanitary treatment of Phlox by the head of crop maintenance:
- The finalisation stage involves workers shipping the order on the next Monday and the group’s driver delivering it.

In this case, we notice a series of co-framings, each one of which enables the development of a framework either to do or to get done. On the manager’s side, collaborating with this variety of actors is a way to take on their specific skills. This allows him to acquire a growing set of knowledge which help ensure the feasibility of the project. Let us point out that, like in any other development project, irreversibility can take place. In

this case, omitting to treat diseased plants Friday doesn't only, i) endangers the order which is ready to leave on Monday, ii) leads to a new urgent preparation but also, iii) has economic consequences on the company because of the resulting credit notes and goods returns.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The activity of framework developing is almost exclusively oral, on the spot, when dealing with the situation. The secondary frameworks are being developed during workday and linked to work progress, which depends on, among other factors, informations he shares with line management throughout the day, discussions with colleagues, meteorological conditions, changes and potential emergencies. The development process can be analysed as adding up frameworks to do and to get done, which result in “the stratification” of secondary frameworks.

Intermediary products which are produced during the development process are part artefacts needed to organize work; for example the manager's work schedules which aren't always written or shared with colleagues, and part artefacts needed to prescribe work, such as instructions mainly given orally.

Management can be considered a complex conceptual activity which is being developed under uncertainty. It is simultaneously framed and framing. It is framed by primary frameworks, both social and natural, and by the development process itself. Indeed, project development entails an irreversibility which follows each validation stage up to the final solution. This activity is also “framing” because it allows for development of frames to do and to get done. We can thus say that management is about transmitting and adapting “as is” frameworks for action as well as about developing action frameworks in the mist of micro projects in various spans of time. More precisely, through his conceptual activity, the manager carries out only a partial reduction of uncertainty since the latter is linked with both weather and some variability types (both human and industrial), which he cannot affect.

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