Collaborating over Meanings in Management: Drucker Looks at Effectiveness

by Stuart Hannabuss, School of Librarianship and Information Studies, Robert Gordon’s Institute of Technology, Aberdeen

Introduction
In personal relationships, the clarification and negotiation of meanings is central. We live within a web of language and, by giving things names and through sharing and restructing knowledge, we communicate with each other. In personnel management in organisations, therefore, the management of meaning lies at the heart of things. Such management entails the ordering and co-ordinating of work done by ourselves and other people, as well as the mastery of complex social and technical patterns of thought and behaviour.

Meaning is embedded in every strategy and statement within the organisation, in the job description which reifies the managerial conception and perception of a work role, in a policy which operationalises key objectives and priorities selected from a context of the perceived reality, and in performance appraisal where, within authority structures and dyadic relationships, roles and intentionalities are negotiated. Effective personnel management exemplifies successful communication, a process made up not just of explicit and objective “public domain” facts and information but also overt and latent value and belief systems, attitudes and prejudices. At the same time, people in organisations use meanings for explanation and command as well as to suggest and explore hidden or half-realised symbolisms and myths. Meaning, then, as revealed in action and interaction, is a crucial interpretative dimension of the personnel manager’s role.

Knowledge Paradigms
The work of Kuhn[1], Mannheim[2], Ziman[3] and Gurvitch[4] shows how pervasive are the knowledge paradigms within which particular groups of people work and think. Such paradigms, of course, are made up of informational or cognitive elements (such as what we know, what we know we know, what experts are considered to know, what novices are expected to know) as well as value and belief-laden knowledge. Into this second category come what educational psychologists call affective knowledge (i.e. dealing with the feelings); but research has broadened our conception of this axiological area into a fuller view taking in ideology and symbolism, the pragmatics of discourse, semiotics and non-verbal communication. Ultimately, it is impossible to divide paradigms up like cakes, for the various components interpenetrate.

In personnel management, there is a natural interest in the operation and scope of such paradigms within the organisation (or, at least, interpersonally in group structures). Sociologists and social anthropologists like Burrell and Morgan[5], Harris[6], Willmott[7] and Astley[8] have illuminated the behaviour of people in such groups through looking at connections between explicit actions and perceived realities, and often there are important outcomes to this, such as a mismatch between the perceived priorities of top management and personnel. Greatest problems lie over central issues like power and roles, tasks and people.

It is difficult to conceptualise problems such as these in terms of hegemonistic meanings, that is, authoritative attributions of meaning to key concepts within the subject domain or activity. Unlike, say, botany or zoology, or even in a thersaurial structure of a knowledge database, where the syntactical and semantic relationships between concepts is often highly ordered (e.g. hierarchically, cohyponymically), the central concepts and meanings in the field of management are more consensually negotiated. This is, in part, due to the plain linguistic fact that sociological concepts are eligible to a plurality of hermeneutic approaches (e.g. concepts like “performance”, “socialisation”, “justice”), and, in part, to the origins of most common and useful meanings within an oral and practitioner-orientated tradition.

This is why Astley[8] correctly speaks of the management “discipline” as “an arena for the interchange of theoretical ideas uncoupled from their base in managerial practice”, emphasising the way in which, as if in an arena, meanings get shaped and reformulated through use, rarely stay fixed, and change over time as new combinations of skills and perceptions arise. An example of this, with reference to the concept of “performance”, is discussed by Hannabuss[9]. The pragmatic incrementalism of meaning in management, what Knorr-Cetina[10] terms “constructivistic”, characterises any area of professional activity where knowledge exchanges incorporate negotiated meanings of this type. At work, simultaneously, are facts and beliefs, knowledge and metaknowledge, factors deriving from the organisational culture.

Organisational Cultures
The researcher is encouraged to see this process holistically, partly because managers themselves have beliefs about the task and business of managing, i.e. they are vigorously metacognitive and self-critical. The beliefs they have about what effective management is[11, 12, 13] and the extent to which their own practice and attitudes conforms to, or diverges from this consensual paradigm (e.g. it might be a predominantly entrepreneurial paradigm), as well as how they themselves think about their own thinking[14], profoundly influence decision making in the office and on the shop floor. Moreover, they live within an organisational culture to which they themselves contribute in no small way. This culture is
Personnel managers engaged in assessing the range of meanings which staff in a company appear to need and use should look at the full paradigm, the complete arena of concepts and meanings, acknowledging the objectivity and the factuality which people use to make things mean, but also acknowledging the multifarious effects of valuation and belief, symbolism and myth on the use and establishment of meaning. We go back to the notion of negotiated meaning when we argue that, in management, consensual meanings are constructed collaboratively, and this is particularly true of key concepts like “performance” and “effectiveness”.

Management of Meaning

Even when such concepts are widely held to be central, and are defined magisterially by key textbooks and gurus in the field, this process of de-construction and reformulation goes on. This is to be expected in a sphere of activity where practitioners interact and establish meanings for things and actions. Managers spend much of their time talking[25], and Gowler and Legge argue that this is the oral tradition out of which much of the rhetoric and semantics of management arise. Management is “a social collectivity whose members share a set of implicit and explicit meanings acquired through innumerable communicative exchanges”. Through, and with the help of, these meanings, people in organisations make sense of phenomena such as power, conflict and work. Many of these meanings are intentional, and concern themselves with the technical and social realities of work. Others are implicational and help people to make sense of how values and beliefs define experience[25]. This is a useful taxonomy for explaining the continuum of meaning and meaningfulness which operates in an organisation. It is particularly valuable when researchers seek to analyse central concepts in management.

One of these is why organisations succeed and fail. The aims of the firm lie at the heart of management thinking. They may consist of growth or survival, profit or goodwill. Achieving such aims depends on leadership, which, in turn, depends on the ability to take risks, compete, and get work done through people. This mesh of concepts emerges from talk by managers about managing[26, 27, 28, 29, 30], where effectiveness is defined in conjunction with authority, efficiency, costs, time and orientation towards people. For example, “effective managers manage themselves and the people they work with so that both the organisation and the people profit from their presence”[30]. There is a heavy emphasis on practical knowledge, learned on the job; on axiomatic knowledge, in which key concepts are picked out and illustrated with almost proverb-like simplicity; at all times, an assumption is made that secrets of a mystery can be revealed if only the right verbal formulas can be found. Through meaning, then, comes wisdom and control. In a more theoretical but essentially similar way, the management literature attempts a similar task, picking out essentials of the management activity, encapsulating them in concepts, reflecting relationships in schematic models which serve to characterise the much more complex reality of real life. Contrasts, like that between mere activity and true effectiveness[31, 32, 33], demonstrate how both objective and axiological meanings can be mobilised when good management practice is being described.

We gravitate irresistibly towards defining concepts in management. This is not merely an academic activity, for it is part of the continuous negotiation and renegotiation of meaning. It is a tool for defining what the organisation
is for[34], for analysing the sub-systems’ interrelationships[35], and for determining commonly agreed meanings about tasks and roles (e.g. in a personnel specification). Analysis of concepts, too, allows us to examine, on a micro-level, the collocation of elements of meaning which lie at the very heart of management thinking, accepting the empirical proviso that they have been exteriorised in the first place (say, in comment, opinion, conversation, surveys, books, reports or policy statements). Often, we find through this that concept analysis reveals the open-text discourse structure which Eco[36] finds in narrative discourse, and the value-laden and symbolic agenda which impregnate so much professional and demotic discourse[37, 38].

Defining Effectiveness
If asked to define a chair, we might draw on semantic memory for an icon/image and/or concept label, and then give enough of its attributes to constitute a definition. Alternatively, we might point to one and tell our interrogator simply to look at it or sit on it. We might, as a third option, consult a dictionary. There, we would expect to find a concise accurate and consensually agreed meaning. Similarly, with words like “daughter”, “judge”, “civet cat” and “dream”. The expectation of both parties is that, ultimately, an ex cathedra definition exists. This, as far as the labelling process goes, is an area of inherited rather than negotiated meaning.

However, it is usual in the subject domain of management for major terms to appear and need to be defined ad hoc. It is not that such terms have no prior existence or that there is no consensual identity for them. It is simply that each writer needs to establish a zone of workable meaning for him/herself, and the act of reading his/her discussion (say, in a textbook about management) is an act of acceptance of his/her invitation into an area which is as much semantic as managerial, i.e. as much concerned with the linguistic phenomena of meanings as it is with the referent managerial concepts and processes.

Distinguishing information and differentiating it in category form...is a central part of all learning

An example of this establishment of workable meaning is to be found in Peter Drucker’s book The Effective Manager[39]. Early on in the book he concerns himself with the multiplicity of meanings and associations which readers are likely to bring to the notion of effective, manager and effective manager. He needs to establish, first of all, what kind of manager he is talking about, and does this by referring to the “knowledge worker”; such beings are executives, work mostly in organisations, and are expected in the course of their work (“by virtue of their position or their knowledge”) to make decisions “that have significant impact on the performance and results of the whole”.

He then needs to establish what he means by executive. One of the major challenges he faces lies in the many meanings and images the concept has for people. It might, for example, have overtones of bureaucracy, of activity, of taking or giving orders. The first step into this arena of meaning, therefore, is one which needs to do two important things: first, it needs to concede the plurality and subjective impressionism of meaning to the readers (although not, of course, overtly), and second, it needs to move through this position to one of its own in which a meaning can be built up that is workable and agreed. The notion of building up a meaning is important, since a dogmatic and lexicographic stance on the absolute meanings of a key term is impossible. The impossibility arises for two reasons, first the semantic complexity of the term itself, and, second, the susceptibility which the process of definition has for idiosyncratic meanings.

This approach is very revealing of the semantic exchange which characterises the negotiation of meaning in the social sciences. So many ideological or semantic overtones impregnate major concepts in management, for example, that this form of negotiation or wooing is necessary. It is necessary in order, first, to persuade the readers to accept a given meaning as plausible in context, and, second, to adopt it as their own in the immediate exercise of the interpretation of the text and possibly in the longer term as a functional element in their own personal lexicon.

Drucker, therefore, demonstrates that he knows of the many interpretations readers are likely to bring to the reading encounter. He presents thumb-nail sketches of different types of manager, encapsulating the gallery of alternatives, and, in so doing, making sure that readers feel they have entered a congenial and intelligible thought-world. Managers, he says, may be people with analytical and decision-making skills, or they are able to use power in organisations to get things done. At this point, and only then, is he able and willing to define what he thinks an effective manager actually is. Conceding that there is, tout court, no “effective personality” (in the sense that, say, there is a chair), he is then able to assert that effective personalities generally, generalisably, have “in common the ability to get the right things done”. The notion of generic or generalisable meaning seems crucial here as a way of describing what Drucker is doing with the central concepts of his argument. For it is an argument in the sense that we are being invited to work from and with meanings which he, the author, has decided to give us (like a semantic banquet). He is presenting the meanings far less in a detached lexicographic manner than in a propositional manner. The propositionality of this approach derives partly from the essential ambiguity and negotiability of the key concepts and partly from the broader characteristics and procedures of the rhetoric. For the reader, there is the challenge of meeting and understanding these meanings and propositions.

Of equal interest and relevance must be the factor of generalisability. In the reader’s own semantic memory and active cognitive processes, there is a powerful momentum at work categorising and ordering information into knowledge. Distinguishing information and differentiating it in category form (from A and not-A opposites to more complex taxonomies) is a central part of all learning. This process is also going on in the intelligence of the author, and in this case is exteriorised on the page of text. In reading the text and responding to it, therefore, the two sets of categories meet each other and the encounter generates new forms of category arrangement. It is possible that the authoritative statements of the author may overwhelm the arrangements (or concept maps) of the reader for that/those particular
concept(s). On the other hand, the cognitive dissonance set up for the reader may be so great that great difficulty or reluctance to accept and use the *ad hoc* meaning can arise.

We can see here how Drucker has to present the constituent parts of his argument, as well as the argument itself, in propositional and even polemic terms. Each definition, if you like, is acknowledged to have its own mesh of heuristics, *ad hoc* search strategies and requirements as the reader seeks to gain common and productive ground with the otherness of the presented definition.

**Negotiated Meanings**

"What all these effective executives have in common is the practices that make effective whatever they have and whatever they are?" Such practices are the same, he argues, if the effective executive works in business, in a hospital or in a university. From this point, Drucker is able to establish his chosen meaning. This is *not* a meaning that he (or indeed any reader) would or might get out of a dictionary. It is a term unlikely to be found as such in a thesaurus. The reason for this must lie in the idiosyncratic source of the meaning. Yet, paradoxically, such a meaning has magisterial authority. It can be accurate, persuasive, workable, integrable by the reader without any trouble or resistance. In fact, many of the most effective writers are able to *equip readers with appropriate labels for their own concepts*. Such concepts, and the reader's awareness of them, may be inchoate or latent, and the encounter with the new meaning is, like Adam naming the animals, a unique moment when the reader moves from vagueness to precision, from having a feeling to operating a concept in external discourse.

But we cannot expect, at the start, a neat comprehensive definition. Since we have discovered that in this world meanings are negotiable, we have to work at the meaning. At this early point, Drucker has been able to convince us that we are in good hands. This is an important feature in the process, particularly because the likely readership of the text will bring, from their own formal and informal experience, a cluster of meanings, associations and prejudices, which they, consciously or unconsciously, will wish to test out with the author as they proceed through the text[40]; for there is a case to be presented, not merely a few meanings to be exchanged.

We are given an *interim* meaning. "Effectiveness, in other words, is a habit, that is a complex of practices!" At the end, he returns to this provisional stage of intent and meaning when he says: "Effectiveness is, after all, not a 'subject', but a self-discipline". With this interim meaning, two things then become possible: the first is that he gives himself the opportunity to develop his argument and provide finer detail, and, second, the reader is given the opportunity to reject the argument, as far as it goes, or to concede the plausibility and usability of the interim definition and, of course, what it appears to promise.

The invitation is given and the gauntlet handed out. We are, to change the metaphor, invited to the ball. We admit to being willing to reformulate our ideas and even our concepts, and yet we feel that we have not been forced to abandon and reject what we already know and think we know about effectiveness. After all, since the word "effective" comes from the domain of common everyday discourse, we could not expect otherwise. And perhaps it is because of this very origin that this process of negotiation is necessary. A comparison might be made between this and other words like it which have both specialised *and* common meanings (e.g. "significance" in statistics and in common speech), and concepts like "electrolysis" which draw clearly away from the ambit of everyday speech. Further still, we might cite mathematical and musical notation.

We are moved into the next stage of the reading and learning encounter. The author is then able to develop his interim meaning in a fuller, more systematic manner. Following up on his statement that effectiveness is a complex of practices, he then proceeds to describe (and define) these practices. There are five key ones, an interesting piece of categorisation or codification in its own right, structuring knowledge for the reader, and implying not merely that effective management consists of these five key things, but also that a *comprehensive objective meaning of "effectiveness" would comprise or subsume such constituent parts.*

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**Contribution is the extent to which the executive, effective or not, contributes to the performance of the organisation**

Five practices need to be acquired by effective executives. These are (a) knowing how to focus on contribution, (b) knowing where their time goes, (c) building on their strengths, (d) concentrating on a few areas where superior performance matters most, and (e) making effective decisions. It is then possible to move to each of these for full discussion, and in fact the rest of the book is structured around these five elements.

**Clusters and Collaboration**

Contribution is the extent to which the executive, effective or not, contributes to the performance of the organisation. Drucker regards it as a key to effectiveness for a manager. It is about how a manager uses and views his/her efforts, and how he/she concentrates on results. It turns the executive's attention from his/her own concerns to the outside where he/she has results. He/she starts asking questions about these results, from others in the company and outside. It is valuable to notice here how **incremental** the meaning is: the author builds up the concept by subtle rhetorical stages, expanding his original idea, broadening it out. In doing this, he handles clusters of concepts, e.g. here the reader is compelled to handle "performance" alongside "effectiveness"; one concept is defined obliquely, though tangibly, in terms of another. There is no facile equation of one with another. Each is introduced as a valuable element in the map of concepts that go to make up "effectiveness" and, beyond that, "effective management" itself.

Another feature is of interest: that of **collusive or collaborative meaning**. In this, in the rhetoric of his exposition, the author not only introduces the reader to a nest of consensual attitudes and beliefs. Here, as in the literature of many practitioner-based subjects, he makes assumptions that managers will wish to be effective, that the aim of the manager is indeed performance, and that getting results in terms of profits or satisfied customers is the objective of management, or at least among the most typical.
and admirable. There is thus, in addition to the plain semantic interpretation, a moral agenda at work in the text, which is not only plain to see, but which readers, if they have not got this far, are willing to accept as part of the mixedly intellectual and affective framework of the subject.

It is then possible to build up more elaborate meaning structures. Being effective, for instance, involves developing your strengths. "To focus on strength is to make demands for performance". Such interrelationships of concepts are not merely propositional; they begin to form the essential semantic matrix of the concepts the reader is seeking to frame, grasp and co-ordinate.

As well as essential relationships of the kind we can detect between "effectiveness", "strength" and "performance", there are satellite meanings. These may be drawn from common language, such as when Drucker talks about weakness in the organisation, and how effective management 'neutralises' such weakness. We are now working with a re-designated "weakness", not the weakness that we might associatively think of in common language, but a form of weakness only embodied, within organisations, in such activities as ineffective management. Similarly, "limitations" is a concept used in this way, as are phrases like "managers being blind to..." and "being aware of limitations".

Since the text deals with negotiated meanings, and because it also deals with values and beliefs (the moral agenda), satellites may also take the form of anecdotes. These are satellites in narrative form that illustrate the concept. They are intended to exemplify the concept in parable form, and such a form is one in which arguably most readers would be willing imaginatively to share. Much managerial experience, moreover, is acquired and conceptualised in narrative or experiential form[41, 42]; so the notion of satellite meanings in narrative form like this is very logical and likely to enhance the power and effectiveness of the text.

Having essential meanings, with relationships of an "X is Y" type, suggests that, since we are on polemic ground, there may be "X is not Y" types as well. This is borne out in the structured arguments, and it is possible to characterise these in appropriate linguistic terms. For example, talking about effectiveness where personnel planning is concerned, a contrast is made by the author between "placing a man" and "filling a job". This is a central contrast in personnel management, where a choice has often to be made between unsentimentally filling a job or considering personal factors and possibly making special exceptions. Drucker's contention is that the effective manager unfailingly takes the first course of action, i.e. filling a job. To take the other course is to be ineffective. In this way, he is stating clearly that they are mutually exclusive courses of action and that, in order to define effectiveness (and a fortiori to be effective), that should be the reader's course of action too. The implied reader is, of course, a manager set on being effective. Such people are most likely to be reading the text. In this way, then, we can see that the meaning of effectiveness is being built up out of essential meanings, of the is and is not type, of satellite meanings, semantic and anecdotal, and of moral agendas.

At this stage, the reader is beginning to face a series of sets of alternatives, some overt and some implicit, about what effectiveness actually is. We find that effective executives lead from strength in their work; they are concerned with limitations; they "feed opportunities and starve problems". In all these, we find "X is Y" and "X is not Y" dichotomies, and through and with these we are encouraged to structure our thought and shape our response. We are given, then, incremental meaning in polemic form, as a form of collaborative meaning emerges. This can be seen, for example, when Drucker is talking about the way effective executives use their time. He argues that such people know that they have to get many things done and done effectively. "Therefore, they concentrate — their own time and energy as well as that of their organisation — on doing one thing at a time, and on doing first things first!" This statement is not just a definition with its implied opposite: it is a moral statement in which the author expects the reader to share.

The moral agenda is very clear, too, when he speaks about how much time and energy managers are keen to invest in projects which enhance their own reputations rather than that of the organisation which they serve. He calls this "investment in managerial ego" and continues:

...unless they are pruned, and pruned ruthlessly, they drain the life blood from an organisation. It is always the most capable people who are wasted in the futile attempt to obtain for the investment of managerial ego the success it "deserves".

By this stage, the different strands of objective semantic meaning, and that meaning which is impregnated with moral agenda, are difficult to disentangle. But that is not the way in which they should be seen; since we live and move in a web of language, and arguably language is the reality within which managers, like the rest of us, exist, it is logical to argue that the major concepts of management cannot be used, in their fullest meaning, without their axiological connotations and empirical usages. They cannot be disembodied from their practical context, because that is where they have acquired their significance and that is where, in the mouths and decisions of managers, they will go on living and changing.

Conclusions
Looking at the central elements of meaning in a work like this, we can see, then, that we encounter negotiated meanings, many of them generalisable and interim, and that the move to comprehensive meaning entails collision or collaboration and the integration of moral agenda. Also at work are essential meanings of the is and is not type, satellite meanings of the semantic and anecdotal type, and an incrementalism and collaborative activity without which effective communication and agreement would not be possible. By that token, of course, disagreement is equally possible. For these reasons, it is impossible to claim that effectiveness is like a chair; it has got far more legs, and many of them cannot be seen and may not even be there (yet), unless we both agree, or even perhaps if we do not.

Within organisational cultures and knowledge paradigms, both substantive knowledge and processual (or procedural) knowledge abound, and part of the processual knowledge lies in the acceptance of negotiated meanings of the kind we have been exploring. Personnel managers, like all managers, share in this domain of consensual meanings and procedures, and understand the art of being effective if they know what they know, and look hard at what they think, about what they are themselves as effective managers.

References