

Mintzberg on (Ir)Responsible Management

Henry Mintzberg (main texts)

Oliver Laasch (commentary)

Abstract

This publication's title "Mintzberg on (ir)responsible management", is a play on words eluding to Henry's seminal publication "Mintzberg on management". Its purpose is to make Henry's perspective on responsible management accessible, both for managerial practice and future research. We tie together the pearls of Henry's wisdom on the string that is the extant responsible management literature: On the impossibility of ignoring social consequences- On rebalancing society through management- On irresponsibility in and outside the letter of the law- On responsible management puzzles- On responsibility to the ones closest to us- On the responsible action plane- On face-to-face responsibility- On judging managers by their (ir)responsibilities. Henry's thought on responsible management is expressed in a manner that is frank and candid, controversial and political. It includes practical illustrations of (ir)responsible management practices in varieties of settings and cases, from tourist-trap restaurants in Paris, Uber, and Cambridge Analytica, to (ir)responsible leaders and managers like General Electric's Jeffrey R. Immelt, Starbucks' Howard Schultz, Donald Trump, and Robert McNamara. Brief commentaries connect Henry's ideas with the extant responsible management literature, and pinpoint salient implications, and future research directions.

Keywords: Responsible management, irresponsible management, rebalancing society,

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Introduction: Mintzberg's work on management and society.

While Henry Mintzberg is arguably best known for his seminal work on the nature of managerial work (Mintzberg, 1973, 1994; Mintzberg, 2013), on strategic management and organizational design (Mintzberg, 1978; Mintzberg, 1983b), as well as management learning and education (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003, 2004, 2006; Mintzberg, 2004), he has been equally prolific and impactful in topics related to the societal role of management. For instance, in his seminal publication “Mintzberg on Management” (Mintzberg, 1989) an entire section was dedicated to critical perspectives related to management and organizations in society. He has written on the case for corporate social responsibility (Mintzberg, 1983a) and how it ‘is not a piece of cake’ (Marques & Mintzberg, 2015). In his recent book *Rebalancing Society* he calls for radical renewal with intriguing implications for responsible management (Mintzberg, 2015c). We bring together Henry's seminal writings on responsibility in management, from classic writings in the 1970s all the way up to very recent thoughts (e.g. <http://www.mintzberg.org/blog>), with a recent interview centered on the topic of responsible management.

The Relevance of Responsible Management

On the impossibility of ignoring the social consequences of (y)our managing. *Henry, you've recently begun to re-focus on the balance between economic and social goals more generally (Mintzberg, 2015c). Is it legitimate for managers to focus both on social and economic goals?*

“I don't see how you can manage any institution in society, whatever it is, and ignore the social consequences.”

I don't see how you can manage any institution in society, whatever it is, and ignore the social consequences. That doesn't mean you go to the other and pretend you're a government. I don't want to be governed by corporations. I don't want them to decide, you know, what's moral or not.

Henry's answer complements a point Nancy Adler's has made, namely that we need to move away from the perception that there is some type amoral or 'aresponsible' management that is devoid of questions of (ir)responsibility (Adler & Laasch, 2020). Together, these two management and leadership pioneers' answers highlight the omnipresent importance of (ir)responsible management: Wherever people engage in practices of management, there will always be a dimension of (ir)responsibility. There is no neutral middle ground: Management is always either responsible, or irresponsible, never 'aresponsible'.

On rebalancing society through management. *Responsible management fundamentally goes beyond the commercial logic. Different logics come together in responsible management. There is a commercial logic, of course, but you are likely to also have a social welfare logic. Often you will act on a sustainable development logic. Might responsible management— if it's balancing all those different logics— become a way of rebalancing society, maybe from the inside of a business as opposed to creating more organizations in the third sector? Do you think it might happen that such rebalancing also happens from the inside of the corporation?*

“It raised some interesting questions as to how far you’d go in a corporation or how far you can go. Clearly any big company doesn’t want to be embarrassed by irresponsible behavior.”

Of course. You’re talking about the role of senior management or any management in helping to make the corporation more responsible. Yeah, it’s back to the same issue really which is being responsible and, yes, of course, it raised some interesting questions as to how far you’d go in a corporation or how far you can go. Clearly any big company doesn’t want to be embarrassed by

irresponsible behavior. The news today about Starbucks¹ is kind of— Starbucks has been generally viewed as a responsible concerned company mostly because the fellow who created it had the power to drive that. Of course, he would argue it pays to be good. He would argue that if they’re responsible, then that’s the kind of clientele they attract, then they’ll be more appealing to their clientele. And then one franchisee, or store owner, or store manager, or whatever, has these black men thrown out of the store. In this case, it looks pretty obvious. It’s terrible for Starbucks because there’s always going to be nuts, crazy people and irresponsible people. It tarnishes the whole company with that brush, which isn’t fair. They’re doing what they can to deal with it, but Schultz who created Starbucks took it farther than most. Is it good or bad? I mean, Friedman would have said “It is bad, he has no right doing that with shareholder’s money”. Schultz would counter and say “well, I’m creating an image for the company”, which of course makes his behavior mercenary whereas he may just believe in being decent.

I’m more and more with the young people. By young, I mean sort of young career, like 30s or 40s who are wanting to do more. A couple of them have adopted my rebalancing society as a central thing. One is a consultant in a major company in the U.S., a strategy guy. I don’t mean consulting on strategy, but strategy for the consulting firm. He sees rebalancing society as a kind of

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major thing to appeal to chief executives who want to be doing more. I think that’s good. I don’t think anybody can lose sight of what their primary purpose is, which is to run their business, but you can run a business in a responsible concerned way.

In his book on rebalancing society (Mintzberg, 2015c), Henry calls for strengthening the “plural sector”. Along the same lines, responsible management is rooted in plural sectors and overlaps between sectors (Ridley-Duff et al., 2015), resulting in a managerial logic that is pluralistic and heterogeneous (Laasch, 2018a; Radoynovska et al., 2020). Such a logic radically de-emphasizes market and corporate logics and rebalances by having varieties of other logics taking their place, including logics of social welfare, sustainable development, family, or faith. Future research could study this pluralistic logic, the underlying grammars of responsible management, and see how it does or does not contribute to rebalancing society.

¹ At the day this conversation took place news broke that an employee of Starbucks had called the police. They arrested two men at a Philadelphia Starbucks shop, sparking widespread protests: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/16/arrest-of-two-black-men-at-starbucks-for-trespassing-sparks-protests>

On irresponsibility in and outside the letter of the law. *Over the decades and very recently, we have seen varieties of instances of corporate irresponsibility, often even illegal practices and actions. Who do you think should control the corporation (Mintzberg, 1984)? Responsible managers?*

"It's not just the letter of the law. The letter of the law is too low a standard."

To just keep to the letter of the law as Friedman (1970) said could be fundamentally immoral because the letter of the law is not very precise about things. If Cambridge Analytica did not break the law, does that make it moral when they have complete and utter contempt for

democracy? Maybe they didn't break the law. Maybe they did. I think they belong in jail no matter what because of that contempt. They should have been charged with treason. It's utter contempt for democracy. So, it's not just the letter of the law. The letter of the law is too low a standard.

A trend is that there is more and more irresponsibility, because corporations have so much power. They can get away with anything. I use a quote in my current blog, about Uber (Mintzberg & Breitner, 2017) somebody saying, there are some people who think that flaunting the rules should be looked at. What, are you kidding me? You think that flaunting the rules should be looked at? It's okay to flaunt the rules. Maybe we should reconsider? Why didn't you deal with it, when they first did it: They broke the rules! They're breaking the taxi drivers, and maybe some of them deserve it and a lot don't. Uber basically is a model which is significantly related to paying the drivers less and getting away with it.

"More and more irresponsibility, because corporations have so much power. They can get with anything."

"Eight positions around the horseshoe ranging from nationalize it, to regulate it, to trust it, to ignore ... incentivize it and then there's the Friedman point."

In my Power in and around Organizations book (Mintzberg, 1983b), there is a whole section on who should control the corporation. Also, there's a section called "trust it", which is about social responsibility. In it, there's about 8 positions around the horseshoe ranging from nationalize it; to regulate it; to trust it; to ignore it because it pays to be good, which I don't agree with all the way; there's incentivize it; and then there's

the Friedman point. That one I guess is ignore it, basically the point that business people have no responsibility doing anything, but attending to the letter of the law.

Henry's words are a stern warning of the dangers of considering managerial actions and practices that either are 'just compliant' or even against the law as responsible. This reflection connects back to notions of responsibility that consider legal responsibilities as the very lowest form of responsibility (Carroll, 1991). Others, for instance, the well-accepted European Union definition considers only voluntary actions as responsible, implying that actions that are motivated exclusively by legal pressures do not even fall in the realm of responsible management (European Union, 2006). Painter-Morland (2011) goes even one step further by discussing how legal frameworks, such the ones granting corporations personhood, may even legalize profoundly irresponsible management, particularly when harming stakeholders for the benefit of the

corporation. Henry's 'horseshoe' provides a cognitive-visual device providing alternative views that go beyond legal compliance. It may support both researchers' and managers' reflexive responsabilization practices (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2013; Laasch & Gherardi, 2019) of figuring out our own and others' perspectives on responsibility.

Processes of Managing Responsibly

On responsible management puzzles. What kind of puzzles (Mintzberg, 2017) should responsible managers be concerned with? What puzzles should they go live with?

"You can get caught up in the two sides of this argument.... So, managers face puzzles all the time."

They're loaded with puzzles, but their puzzles are both markets, and customers, and where things are going, and so on. I guess corporate social responsibility is a puzzle when you get stuck in both ends: There's a big fight in Canada now over a pipeline. Here the American company is building that pipeline. As the arguments are going, you can argue that we're creating employment, we're bringing energy to the world, those kinds of things. And some of the aboriginal peoples on the route are saying you're not gonna do this in our backyard. That's irresponsible. They're saying: "Creating employment is responsible". Some of the aboriginal tribes are saying, "Yeah. We want it because we want the employment." So, you can get caught up in the two sides of this argument. Are you being decent? You find justifications for self-interest, some of which are valid, maybe creating employment, but you're creating employment with some of the dirtiest energy in the world. And you're risking an oil spill in a very, very delicate part of the country. So, managers face puzzles all the time.

Henry's description of the puzzles reminds us of the pluralistic logic of responsible management (Radoynovska et al., 2020), due to which puzzles related to tensions and paradoxes are not only commonplace in the responsible management process (Van der Byl et al., 2020), but can even be understood as its very starting point (Wesselink & Osagie, 2020).

On responsibility to the ones closest to us. You wrote this intriguing blog post around managing with, respectively, without soul (Mintzberg, 2015b). Can you make a connection and if so, how does the idea of managing with(out) soul relate to the (ir)responsible manager?

"The most irresponsible thing you can do directly is to mistreat your own people so they go home crying miserable. God, the number of people who can't stand their bosses is so high and getting higher all the time."

Well, the most irresponsible thing you can do directly is mistreat your own people so they go home crying miserably. God, the number of people who can't stand their bosses is so high and getting higher all the time. I can't believe it. Just mean management there is. We had a dean years ago. He was just such a mean person. People like that have no business running any organizations. They're irresponsible first of all to their own employees. There's so much of that going on. This thing with Comey on the news today. I can't believe that somebody from Trump's office would get up and say that Comey is a self-serving, egocentric. I don't know Comey, but everything I've seen of the guy is exactly the opposite. For Trump people to be saying that... It's just the kind of Nazi reversal that

Goebbels did— Just take that whole distortion back to where it was. What this guy [Donald Trump] gets away with is amazing. He'll end up in jail. I have no doubt about it. He'll end up being charged with treason, because he is taking his orders from Putin. I am convinced of that. Putin has something on him and it's not hard to imagine what. They'll bankrupt his companies. His loans are from Russia. There's so much of that going on.

Henry's emphasis of managers' responsibilities towards the ones closest, here the ones 'being managed' highlights an interesting facet of the distinction between responsible management and cognates like corporate responsibility management or sustainability management. Responsible management is centered on the responsibility of 'mainstream' (Laasch & Conaway, 2015) 'normal' managers of all types (Laasch, 2018b). The nature of their responsibility differs from that of specialized corporate responsibility managers, ethics officers, or corporate sustainability managers, whose main emphasis is on managing an organization's responsibility (Wesselink & Osagie, 2020), with an emphasis on organizational stakeholders, not their own (Carroll et al., 2020). From this distinction emerges responsible management's emphasis on the stakeholders close to the manager, 'your own people', including direct subordinates, and the managers' families (Prahalad, 2010), responsibility that reaches over into managers' private lives (Carroll et al., 2020; Freeman & Laasch, 2020).

On the responsible action plane. Going back to some of your early work, related to the idea of rounding out the manager's job (Mintzberg, 1994) and managerial roles (Mintzberg, 1973), could you make a connection to the different things that managers do, to the different context that a manager conducts their job in, and how responsibility might play out differently in different managerial roles?

"If you're not on the action plain,... it's harder to be responsible because you're not plugged in the consequences of what's going on, if you are always on information plain."

In a recent book I talk about managing on an information plane, a people plane, and an action plane (Mintzberg, 2013). If you're not on the action plain, then it's harder to be responsible, because you're not plugged into the consequences of what's going on, if you are always on information plain. Robert McNamara² supposedly was a very sort of caring man, but he was a monster. His behaviors were monstrous. I don't care how much he

claims to have been concerned. He was a numbers nut, so body counts became body counts. They weren't women and children, they were Vietnamese bodies, Việt Cộng bodies. So management on an information plain, without getting to the action plain does not breed responsible behavior. That's one connection. You can carry out all the rules, more or less responsibly or irresponsibly. On the people level you can exercise the kind of leadership that is phony or you can access the kind of leadership that's authentic.

The type of monstrous actions and dehumanization (e.g. Việt Cộng bodies) described by Henry, that makes living beings an unproblematic indicator of managerial success or failure is a well-known phenomenon. Usually it is explained as a type of irresponsibility arising from a systemic

² Robert McNamara was a US-American business executive, briefly serving as Ford's president, and then as Secretary of Defense. He played a major role in escalating the United States' involvement in the Vietnam war.

over-rationalization (Suddaby & Laasch, 2020). Such rationalization results in the dehumanization of the manager herself as well as others. The result are psychopathic managerial personalities (Lawrence & Pirson, 2015; Pirson, 2020), ‘monsters’ in Henry’s words. However, Henry suggests an additional processual explanation for such ‘monstrously’ irresponsible management. His explanation is rooted in managerial activities and practices that are skewed towards the information plain and disconnected from the action plain where social consequences of managerial decisions and actions can be experienced first-hand. Therefore, for a responsible manager, being ‘plugged in’ is crucial. Future research that further explore this crucial aspect of the responsible management process could, for instance, bring together social practices perspective on responsible management (Laasch & Gherardi, 2019) with discussions related to the dehumanization and instrumentalization of humans and the natural environment (Gond et al., 2009; Melé, 2014). Such research could also be positioned against an anthropocentric human exceptionalism (Purser et al., 1995; Starik, 1995), and draw from research centered on reconnecting to place, time, people, oneself and the planet, for instance, through managerial mindfulness practices (Blomme et al., 2018; Jacob et al., 2009; Kernochan et al., 2007).

On face-to-face responsibility. You have written about an indigenous model of economic development (Mintzberg, 2015a). Do you see the possibility of a native, indigenous type of management paradigm for responsible management.

“You’re always tentatively more responsible when your constituency is face to face and you have to face them.”

Well, you’re always tentatively more responsible when your constituency is face to face and you have to face them. I like to show two views of markets. One is a food market in Brazil and the other is the New York Stock Exchange. It’s a lot easier to be responsible... I spent my share of time in markets in France especially in villages

where I lived. That’s the center of community. Talk about responsibility: A person who is selling you turkey will take 10 minutes to explain how to cook your turkey not because they’re getting paid for it, but because there’s a kind of communal relationship. It’s not a mercenary. It doesn’t feel mercenary. The booths that are mercenary, just people— You can see them lined up behind one cheese thing and not behind another. Anybody who cheats their customers or doesn’t even treat them nicely is not going to get revisited. Whereas in tourist trap places like in the Left Bank [‘La Rive Gauche’] in Paris where nobody goes back to those restaurants. They’re awful. I remember one posting a menu and they didn’t even offer that menu inside. They were selling water for about ten times the price that they paid for it. They were completely irresponsible. Nobody would ever come back. So, that communal relationship certainly breeds more responsibility. Part of the problem now is that globalization is inconsistent with community. It undermines community. It undermines national sovereignty and it undermines community.

Henry’s answer has interesting implications for reconsidering the salience of responsible management on different levels of managerial hierarchy. On the research side there has been an over-emphasis on higher-level managers’ responsibility (Laasch, 2018b). However, both Henry’s recent writing and the responsible management discussion have emphasized the importance of ‘bottom management’ (Mintzberg, 2015d), and of ‘frontline managers’ responsibility (Laasch & Conaway, 2015), the very managers who are most strongly engaged in

face-to-face enactment of responsibility. Henry's comment therefore, resonates with responsible management's emphasis on the 'normal' manager (Laasch, 2018b) and on the, at times, mundane responsibilities of managerial working life (Ennals, 2014), their 'daily work routine' (Prahalad, 2010, p. 36). This focus of the responsible management discussion affords ample opportunity for future research on responsible management practices (Laasch & Gherardi, 2019; Mintzberg, 2004) at bottom of the managerial hierarchy pyramid.

On judging managers by their (ir)responsibilities. *You're talking about judging managers by their flaws (Mintzberg, 2016), not only by their virtues; not only by their competences, but also by the things they might not do the best job on. Do you think you can recognize responsible, respectively irresponsible managers by their flaws?*

"In fact, you can almost argue too much responsibility can be a flaw sometimes"

Flaws can be anything from bad breath to being killers. I mean, flaws can be anything. Obviously, irresponsibility is a flaw. For some companies, they don't mind. You read about Wells Fargo and they just seem to go from one

crisis to another, or Uber under the previous guy. There's a blog on Uber you could look at that I did with a colleague where she's in favor and I'm opposed. It's called Uber Uber Über Alles (Mintzberg & Breitner, 2017). Too much responsibility can also be a flaw sometimes. That's what happened with the chief executive of General Electric. He was so concerned with national issues and being on the business roundtable and all of these things that people are asking who is running the company. That was a flaw. He was too responsible. He was a statesman. The chief executive was out doing all kinds of wonderful deeds and not looking up to the story.

The responsible management discussion typically starts from the point that managers, on average, are not responsible enough. This is echoed in Henry's focus on the field's old-established theme of managerial irresponsibilities (Armstrong, 1977), both in this response and throughout other sections of this publication. Accordingly, Henry's idea that managers might overdo responsibility is a thought-provoking one. Further research could, as an example, identify and explore cases like the one Henry presents, and to further delve into questions like how much is too much responsibility? There also is an intriguing tension between Henry's attack on Milton Friedman's (1970) argument that managers' business is business, not social responsibility.

Conclusions

We have seen in the first part of this chapter that there is, and why there is a strong case for responsibility in management (Mintzberg, 1983a). However, in the second part of the chapter focusing on process of managing responsibly, we have also learnt that it 'isn't a piece of cake' (Marques & Mintzberg, 2015). The reason are varieties of processual complexities from paradoxical responsible management puzzles, to management that is skewed towards the information plain, and on to the effects of face-to-face responsibility.

It is these very close-up processual aspects that also have important implications for researching responsible management. It implies the need for engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) that not only helps us to learn more about responsible management practices and responsible managers, but also further supports, improves, and disseminates such practices. Henry's own

work is an excellent example with his immersed early studies, shadowing managers to study their job, roles, management processes, and ‘minds’ (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003; Mintzberg, 1973, 1994), but also with his concern for helping practicing managers to improve their craft (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004). Similarly, also the methods section of *The Research Handbook of Responsible Management* is centered on getting closer to managers and their practices (Price et al., 2020), on having a performative impact (Langmead & King, 2020), to become a constructively critical partner who helps to ‘responsibilize’ managerial realities (Parker & Racz, 2020), often doing so in a closely engaged way (Beveridge et al., 2020; Ren & Bartunek, 2020; Stutz & Schrempf-Stirling, 2020).

Readers interested in Henry’s focus on practicing managers’ learning will find toehold for future research in this volume’s chapters centered on responsible management learning by practicing managers on the job and over time. Chapters include, for instance, on the job learning (Andrianova & Antonacopoulou, 2020), and unlearning (Padan & Nguyen, 2020), the facilitation of ethical voice (Tams & Gentile, 2020), the strengthening of professional moral courage (Sekerka, 2020), and the dynamics of such learning and personal development over the course of a responsible career (Tams, 2020).

It is this very focus of the responsible management field on active engagement for more responsible management, which also lends itself to a closing statement from Henry’s recent blog post; a call for action directed at both academic and management practitioners. There is not enough time left to be “concerned but confused about the state of the world”. Now is the time to “coalesce and correct” (Mintzberg, 2019):

“If you are concerned but confused about the state of the world, forget about finding the answer at some top—nothing doing there these days—and skip the staged events. Find some motley crew in some open field and coalesce to create your own event, on the ground. Target some morally intolerable outrage—there is no shortage of them these days—and correct it: cleverly, decisively, morally, almost legally. Stop dreaming and start acting.”

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