

Responsible managing as educational practice

Responsible
managing

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to theoretically introduce the notion of responsible managing as educational practice (RMEP).

Design/methodology/approach – The study is an essay. Traditionally assumed as individual-driven, rational, neutral and unproblematic, the author alternatively considers management not as managerialism but as a social practice that needs to be responsible.

Findings – The author posits that responsible management involves educational experiences enacted through practical wisdom. In this context, education herein is understood not as a scholastic practice taught in business schools or offered within professional training, but that may occur in informal contexts such as managing.

Originality/value – RMEP may contribute to a better comprehension of responsible management in practice. The author draws on the epistemology of practices and the notion of phronesis to support his thesis – that managing can be responsible when assumed as an educative practice performed through practical wisdom and people's mutual education.

Keywords Responsible managing as educational practice, Responsible managing, Education, Management education, Phronesis, Practical wisdom, Practice theory, Practice-based studies, Managing

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Introduction

The ways of doing business reveal limitations in dealing with the challenges that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century (Ghoshal, 2005; Dunne, Harvey, & Parker, 2008). The financial crisis of 2008, the immigration problem in many developed countries, climate change and the current COVID-19 pandemic indicate the need for a new relationship between the business world and society (Fleming & Oswick, 2014; Zanoni, Contu, Healy, & Mir, 2017; Bapuji et al., 2020; Rhodes & Fleming, 2020; Saad-Filho, 2020).

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This essay introduces the notion of responsible managing as educational practice (RMEP) through two perspectives. The first explores the idea of managing instead of management as managerialism – the belief of management techniques are the best way to organize society (Locke & Spender, 2011; Klikaueer, 2013; Clegg, 2003) focusing on what organizations and society do together as a social practice (Schatzki, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002; Gherardi, 2019).

I am steering away from the traditional perspectives of management as individual-driven, rational (Cabantous & Gond, 2011), neutral and unproblematic (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) to another of managing as a collaborative (Raelin, 2016) and educational agency (Thomas & Anthony, 1996). The second contends that managing should involve more than efficiency (Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, & Rowlinson, 2017) and profit maximization (Barnett, 2019; Rhodes & Fleming, 2020) if it intends to be a responsible practice (Price, Gherardi, & Manidis, 2020; Gherardi & Laasch, 2021).

By acting responsibly, I draw on the notion of phronesis (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Statler, 2014), initially proposed by Aristotle (1999). Phronesis, also known as practical wisdom, “is the ability to see the common good and put it in practice” (Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997, p. 665). It also requires people to adopt a critical, reflexive and emancipatory position to act responsibly (Freire, 1985; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015).

My thesis is that managing may only be a responsible practice if it also comprises an educational experience (Dewey, 1963). Education herein is not viewed merely as a scholastic practice – inside business schools – or only professional training but as a way to emancipate and improve society (Freire, 1985; Kemmis et al., 2014; Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, & Choy, 2017). Education is “a development within, by, and for experience” that involves continuity and interaction (Dewey, 1963, p. 28).

Although formal management education has presented many contributions to responsible management (Forray & Leigh, 2012; Khurana & Spender, 2012; Maloni, Smith, & Napshin, 2012; Rousseau, 2012; Dyllick, 2015), the connection between the formal education agendas of business schools, especially regarding ethical issues, and organizational practice remains problematic (Vaara & Fäy, 2012; Statler, 2014; Cornuel & Hommel, 2015; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015). In other words, despite the importance of formal management education for management practice, the capacity of business schools to educate responsible/ethical practitioners is limited (Fleming & Oswick, 2014; Millar & Price, 2018).

Educative managing is an effort to move away from traditional management that is disembodied and disembedded (Townley, 2002; Pio & Waddock, 2020; Rhodes & Fleming, 2020) to responsible managing that is educative to both shareholders and stakeholders, enabling them to deal with competing priorities wisely to achieve a common good (Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997; Aristotle, 1999; Flyvbjerg et al., 2012; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Antonacopoulou, 2015). The notion of RMEP intends to shift responsible management (Forray & Leigh, 2012; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Laasch, Suddaby, Freeman, & Jamali, 2020) from a discourse practice to a reflexive, engaged and embodied one (Cunliffe, 2002; Antonacopoulou, 2015; Price et al., 2020) resulting from educative experiences (Dewey, 1963).

The contribution of my proposal involves the development of a new concept that may help to comprehend responsible management (Forray & Leigh, 2012; Costas & Kärreman, 2013; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Laasch et al., 2020) in practice through a reassessment of the roles of management and management education practices (Fleming & Oswick, 2014). The notion of RMEP links the theoretical efforts of business schools in teaching practitioners to

be more responsible (Dyllick, 2015; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Cunliffe, 2020) to the practical aspects involving competing priorities between the business world and societal demands (Fleming & Oswick, 2014; Zanoni et al., 2017).

The traditional notion of management

Management is commonly understood as a rational practice and a key concept in controlling and driving an organization's staff, resources and processes (March & Simon, 1958; Weber, 1992; Cabantous, Gond, & Johnson-Cramer, 2010; Cabantous & Gond, 2011). Townley (2002) noted that the role of management is taken for granted, as it can be used in any context and situation owing to its technicity and "neutral" values that offer standard methods to produce standard results. This management perspective is also known as managerialism (Locke & Spender, 2011; Klikauer, 2013; Clegg, 2003). According to Murphy (2007, p. 3):

This order [managerialism] is the product of three dynamics: the seepage of managerial approaches into all facets of life; the gradual, worldwide homogenization of human organization; and the emergence of a global managerial elite straddling the public and private sectors.

This phenomenon led to the managerialization of society, establishing a new socioeconomic age of managerialism (Shatil, 2020). Managerialism is influenced by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a reasoning (Dardot & Laval, 2013) driven by individualism, high competition among individuals and the prevalence of the market over the State and Civil Society through the financialization of the world (Foucault, 2003; Fleming & Oswick, 2014; Zanoni et al., 2017). The focus on managerialism under the neoliberal reasoning (Foucault, 2003; Dardot & Laval, 2013) has been steering business and society to a financialization process that made room for critical problems regarding business ethics (Zanoni et al., 2017). Some examples are questionable leadership ethics, corporate scandals and environmental disasters (Blanc, Cho, Sopt, & Branco, 2019; Pertiwi & Ainsworth, 2020) caused by bad organizational practices (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Cunliffe, 2020).

This scenario shows that traditional management cannot offer appropriate solutions to (re)concile economic development with social and environmental demands (Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development, 2019). As a way to overcome these problems, many terms, such as sustainability and corporate social responsibility, became a part of management scholars' and practitioners' jargon over the past decade under the umbrella of "responsible management" (Forray & Leigh, 2012; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015; Laasch et al., 2020). However, turning responsible management into reality is still challenging due to competing priorities involving maximizing profits and focusing on monetary/financial wealth (Pio & Waddock, 2020) and societal problems such as poverty, racism, sexism and food insecurity (Ray, 2019; Food & Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2020; Rhodes & Fleming, 2020; Prasad, 2022).

Attention to moral judgments and ethical issues is central to produce socially responsible practitioners. However, it is necessary to go beyond bureaucratic ethical setups in organizations to have responsible practitioners inside and outside corporations (Costas & Kärreman, 2013). Responsible managing requires more than stating what needs to be done, and it is a matter of practice that represents collective knowledgeable doings (Gherardi, 2019), in which people (inside and outside organizations) learn collaboratively (Raelin, 2016) through educative experiences (Dewey, 1963). As such, I assume that management and education are both social practices (Schatzki, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002) that overlap through collective accomplishments that create connections-in-action of bodies, materialities, discourses and knowledges (Gherardi, 2019) and can promote responsible managing (Gherardi & Laasch, 2021).

Responsible managing as educational practice

Responsible managing is a continuous effort of mutual education of people to embody certain values and ideas regarding what is socially enacted as good, important and worthy. A responsible person here draws on the notion of a practical wisdom (Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997; Aristotle, 1999). Practical wisdom is significantly related to the governance of human affairs (Flyvbjerg et al., 2012), as it involves acting upon wise judgments when faced with competing priorities (Antonacopoulou, 2015; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014). Responsible managing requires an educative process that goes beyond formal education from business schools. Diverse educational experiences can encourage responsible habits. Dewey (1963) emphasized that habits come from what has gone before and alter the feature of what comes after owing to its capacity to be educative.

The educational and driving capacity of experience (Dewey, 1963) may be the basis to think managing as a means to educate people enabling them to read society toward emancipatory and responsible practices (Freire, 1970, 1985). Traditional ways of management that consider organizations as an entity separated from society create a dualism between “inside and outside” and make management disengaged from society and an autonomous space (Townley, 2002). This dualism complicates the balance between traditional organizational goals (profit maximization through the notion of “efficiency”) with societal demands, and the enactment of alternative economies (Zanoni et al., 2017). Managing responsibly takes another route by practicing phronetic judgments (Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997; Aristotle, 1999; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014) stemming from good and emancipatory educational experiences (Freire, 1970, 1985) among all people and organizations in a society.

The quality of any experience has two aspects. There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences [...] Hence the central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences (Dewey, 1963, pp. 27–28).

The core idea is that responsible managing may be a space for mutual education wherein people are “able to function well in the world, possessing certain kinds of qualities and being self-evidently a bearer of virtue” (Barnett, 2012, p. 242). Education here is a comprehensive process that involves not only a scholastic environment and professional training but also the embodiment of socially constructed moral values that can change human practices toward emancipation (Freire, 1970, 1985) and responsibility (Barnett, 2012).

Education is the process by which children, young people and adults are initiated into forms of understanding, modes of action, and ways of relating to one another and the world, that foster (respectively) individual and collective self-expression, individual and collective self-development and individual and collective self-determination, and that are, in these senses, oriented toward the good for each person and the good for humankind (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 26).

Grootenboer et al. (2017, p. 266) considered that “[t]o speak about education, is to speak about sociality and practices.” Education goes beyond schooling and includes a range of contexts in which managing may be considered as one of them. For Grootenboer et al. (2017, p. 11), “education is seen as serving a dual purpose – the development of individuals and the betterment of societies and community.”

The traditional notion of management education usually focuses on managers’ technical and professional skills (similar to training) taught in business schools (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Vaara & Fåy, 2012; Cornuel & Hommel, 2015). However, it is possible and necessary to enlarge this traditional view beyond formal settings and consider other spaces and practices

outside of business schools that may offer educational managing experiences. A comprehensive education concept as an experiential continuum (Dewey, 1963) for understanding managing itself as an educational practice enabling people inside and outside organizations to enact responsible social practices (Price et al., 2020; Gherardi & Laasch, 2021).

Many authors have agreed that business schools (formal education) are a space to educate people to act ethically and responsibly (Forray & Leigh, 2012; Maloni, Smith, & Napshin, 2012; Dyllick, 2015). However, I am affiliated with those scholars who advocate that business schools are limited in their effectiveness to tackle these responsible issues, owing to their distance from daily organizational practices (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Fleming & Oswick, 2014; Cornuel & Hommel, 2015; Millar & Price, 2018).

RMEP refers to the capacity that managing has to embody responsible values in people’s ways of being inside and outside organizations through collaborative and educative agency. These responsible managing experiences can mutually educate people toward judgments and actions in professional and private lives. The effectiveness of RMEP is noticeable when people enact their educational experiences and phronetic judgments with other people inside organizations and in their daily lives. It does not represent an individual managerial action, but a collective knowledgeable practice, in which people educate each other by experiencing managing responsibly as a group.

As a way to summarize and illustrate the dynamics of RMEP, I developed Figure 1.

The dashed lines represent the blurred boundaries and the dynamics involved in RMEP. This concept involves society’s continuous interactions, experiences and changes – especially regarding the situations formed by the relationship between organizations, business schools and societal demands. By societal demands, I am referring to the aspects related to responsible managing (Laasch et al., 2020). RMEP is dynamic, moving and shaping society’s competing priorities through practical wisdom and mutual education. The phronetic judgments mediate these competing priorities.

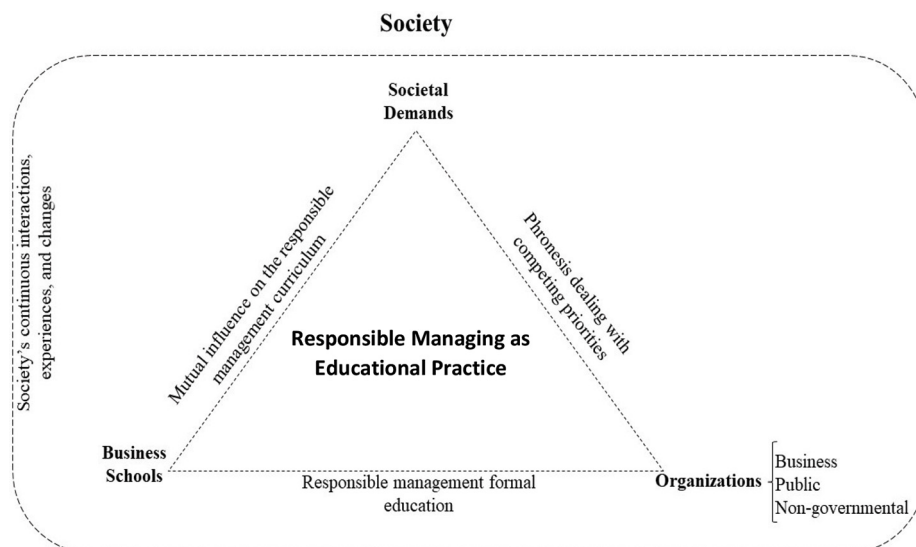


Figure 1.
Responsible
managing as
educational practice –
RMEP

Source: Author

Examples to reflect on responsible managing as educational practice

As a way to display how educative managing works, I will present three examples:

- (1) hotels exploring sustainability;
- (2) drivers' insurance application; and
- (3) the trainee black people program from a big Brazilian company.

Hotels that explore the flag of sustainability

Hotels that adopt the sustainability flag have a high potential to be responsible and educative through their managing. However, they usually use sustainability not as a concrete social engagement but as an advertisement campaign to maximize profits (Withiam, 2011). These hotels resort to many strategies, such as avoiding changing towels and linens every day, using economic lamps, recycling garbage and reusing water (Hard, 2019; Suri, 2019; Legrand, 2020). All these actions relevantly support environmental sustainability; however, do these activities really aim at environmental protection? Are these actions based on implementing a "social good?" Although these actions help to decrease the consumption of natural resources, they also reduce hotels' operation costs, and here lies an important discussion.

When a hotel asks guests to avoid changing towels and linens every day, claiming a spirit of sustainability, concurrently, they are reducing their costs. Some hotel chains claim that they plant trees, for example. However, it is difficult to verify their actions concretely. Other hotels do not report any activities whatsoever. This illustrates how two common values (sustainability and transparency), usually espoused by organizations, are not well performed. Avoiding changing towels and linens every day is a worthwhile action; but when hotels only state, "we do not change the towels/linens to save the planet," they are offering a low impact experience to people (employees and guests). It appears as more of a marketing ploy than a concrete responsible action, mainly due to the lack of transparency regarding how the hotel uses the savings with this kind of strategy. For instance, Barros-Silva (2017) researched a hotel self-denominated as sustainable and realized that many of the sustainable practices declared on their website were not encompassed in their daily activities. He also noted that sustainability was generally not an embodied value for the employees and guests.

For the sustainability management of hotels to be educational, it must shed light on key social problems and offer good educational experiences for people (employees and guests) to feel the need to change their behaviors (Dewey, 1963). The savings achieved with guests' collaboration (e.g. by not changing their towels and linens) should be converted into contributions to society, such as donations or the creation of free courses on sustainability for a broad audience, and not into profits for the hotel. This broadly communicated counterpart action is a way of offering an educational experience to practitioners, educating them to embody sustainable values at work and at home. Otherwise, the experience of not changing towels and linens may become a noneducational or diseducational experience (Dewey, 1963) because practitioners may see it as only advantaging the hotel by boosting its profits.

The hotel case offers a reflection of how managing can be responsible and educative, depending on people's engagement within a sustainable practice. However, many hotels focus only on profit maximization with their sustainability actions (Withiam, 2011), limiting the quality of people's (staff and guests) responsible and educational experience (Dewey, 1963), as they may only see advantages for the hotel. It can be perceived that just one side is trying to "save the planet." This situation illustrates the problem noted by Costas and Kärreman (2013) –

idealized discourses and practices constructed under a false concern on corporate social responsibility. It also highlights how managerialism (Locke & Spender, 2011; Klikaue, 2013; Clegg, 2003) driven by neoliberal reasoning distorts the sense of what it means to be responsible (Rhodes & Fleming, 2020) in the light of phronesis.

Drivers' insurance application

Another case that can reflect educative managing is a Brazilian insurance company that created an application that drivers can install on their smartphones. Via the global positioning system, this application can verify if the drivers that purchased the company's car insurance are driving safely and following traffic rules, such as speed limits or traffic lights. The system also ranks drivers according to a points checklist. The more points drivers collect, the more discounts they receive when they renew their car insurance.

This managing initiative is not only good for the company because it decreases the number of claims, but it is also good for society and public urgency services, as it reduces the number of accidents. For drivers, it reduces their risk of getting involved in an accident and offers them discounts on their insurance policy. Unlike the hotels, the insurance company shares their savings with the clients and helps emergency public services by contributing to decreasing the number of accidents. Although the initial motivation of the insurance company and the driver is economical, the application is an example of an experience that might be educational in a nonformal setting, owing to its capacity to change drivers' behaviors. It represents a managing practice in which the process does not solely reflect the individual actions of the drivers or the company. Instead, it produces a collaborative agency (Raelin, 2016), represented by the insurance company actors along with the drivers, forming a collective knowledgeable practice of safe driving (Gherardi, 2019).

Using the application is a practice that involves many practitioners (company staff and drivers) and encourages both parties to simultaneously act responsibly even though they obtain different gains. Some people may perceive the application as a form of people control and not an educational experience. However, it is important to reinforce the fact that using the application is entirely optional. Thus, this feature offers drivers the possibility to engage in the managing practice. Owing to the application's optional usage, I believe that it represents an educative managing practice that encourages an educational experience (Dewey, 1963) rather than a resource for people control.

The insurance company's application is an initiative that people (shareholders and stakeholders) can take advantage of, as this educative managing practice invokes mutual responsibility from the insurance company and the drivers. It also offers benefits to both parties and society. Responsible drivers reduce the number of accidents, which is good for society, especially the health-care system. This example is closer to Barnett's (2019) claim that corporations may take advantage of being engaged with societal problems and assuming responsibility for them. The experience quality offered by the application usage may be useful to educate drivers to adopt safe driving and following transit rules. The car insurance application also gives the opportunity to be in touch with an example of how responsible managing enacts in practice.

The black people trainee program

An example illustrating responsible educative managing working is the black people trainee program from a big Brazilian retail company – Magazine Luiza (Mandl, 2020; Wierson, 2020; Fonseca, 2021). Concerning diversity among their employees, especially those in leadership positions, the company established a target to reach the same percentage of brown and

black people in Brazil (around 56%). The company's founder (Luiza Trajano) explained the reasons for creating the black trainee program:

“Slavery was in Brazil for 350 years, the majority (of its population) is black, the majority lives on the outskirts. This is the truth, so they don't apply (for trainee programs),” she said. “When I realized what structural racism is, I even cried” (Mandl, 2020).

The program's first edition was in 2021, and 2022 is occurring in the second edition. The company's chief executive officer (Frederico Trajano) explained the reason for creating the program and its continuity in 2022:

Last year's decision came from an anomaly, from our problem of lack of black leadership. [...] And we decided that a punctual year would not solve it, that the difference was still considerable (Fonseca, 2021).

The initiative had significant repercussions in Brazil (Silveira & Basilio, 2020; Fonseca, 2021) and abroad (Mandl, 2020; Wierson, 2020). Unfortunately, in Brazil, there were manifestations against the program by some judges, policymakers and other people advocating that the company's initiative was racist (Silveira & Basilio, 2020) because it is “privileging black people.” Fortunately, all judicial process opened against the program was in favor of the company.

The black people trainee program represents a concrete managing practice in which diversity reaches a responsible and strategic status in a company. After Magazine Luiza's initiative, other companies were influenced and are designing similar programs (Fonseca, 2021). This outcome represents managing educating people and companies and prioritizing diversity in a context of competing priorities. In this case, structural racism (Ray, 2019) should not be overlooked but fought due to the inequalities it enacts in society and business through racialized capitalism (Prasad, 2022). This situation unveils the necessity of managing practice abandoning its discourse of neutral and a-political toward reflecting on which social conditions and parameters organizations should make profits.

The initiative to tackle structural racism through a managerial policy opens room to think about how managing may be educational and provides ways to engage organizations with big societal challenges wherein profit maximization is not the most important thing or a value-end. The trainee program influences people (inside and outside Magazine Luiza) to reflect on their preconceptions in professional and personal practices. It forces people to be in a continuous effort of mutual education to rethink embodied values and ideas regarding what is socially enacted as good, meaningful and worthy.

Conclusion

The idea of proposing RMEP is a way to rethink management and management education practices. Traditional management (managerialism) is usually not associated with a possibility of educating and is frequently related to “a manager” that drives the organizational process, always aiming to maximize profits (Locke & Spender, 2011; Klikauer, 2013; Clegg, 2003). Specifically, management education is commonly associated with business schools and their responsibilities regarding student learning (Thomas & Anthony, 1996; Cornuel & Hommel, 2015). Scholars and professionals frequently overlook the possibility of educating people on managing outside business schools. However, events related to COVID-19, climate change and the ongoing economic crises causing increases in inequality and poverty around the globe engendered new educational and organizational challenges. Within this context, the traditional modes of management (Bapuji et al., 2020;

Rhodes & Fleming, 2020) and management education (Fleming & Oswick, 2014; Statler, 2014) are insufficient to address these new issues.

Based on these critiques, I decided to offer an alternative view of management responsible education beyond the scholastic perspective. Managing as responsible and educative practice may enable people (shareholders and stakeholders) to be more critical and reflective in the ways they attempt to solve competing priorities and adopt phronetic judgments to overcome these issues. The more educational experiences people can combine (mutual education in Freire's sense), the more phronesis is performed and refined (Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997; Antonacopoulou, 2010; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Statler, 2014).

The example of the hotel shows the importance of paying close attention to what organizations are calling "sustainability" and its ends. It is not desirable to be "sustainable" only if it means more profits forgetting social responsibility. On the other hand, the insurance car application and the trainee black people program exemplify how managing may be educative promoting responsibility when the focus is not on maximizing profits. RMEP is an opportunity for people to engage with global social problems and embody socially negotiated values in professional and personal settings.

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