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# Managing Exceptionally

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## Abstract

This paper is about two managers of Red Cross refugee camps in Tanzania who manage by exception in rather exceptional circumstances. Using a model of managerial work that delineates roles carried out at the information, people, and action levels, inside and outside the unit, these managers' activities concentrate especially on communicating and controlling a chaotic situation in a steady state, at least temporarily. While many other managers appear to be moving away from conventional forms of managing—to more linking instead of leading and convincing instead of controlling, etc.—here are two managers who seem to be going the other way, precisely because their situation is so unconventionally risky. Ned Bowman's great contribution has been not just *about* risks and options per se, but *in* the risks that he himself took and the options that he himself exposed. In this spirit, the paper concludes with a plea for the opening up not simply of content, but of context.

(*Managing; NGO; Leadership; Management by Exception*)

This paper is about managers and the risks that some of them have to take in situations where there may be no real options—managers, risks, and options rarely encountered in the management literature. In the words of one review of this paper, these are “circumstances that few managers can imagine.”

This paper probes into managing by exception, on behalf of an exceptional organization that works in exceptional circumstances. The research took place on a visit to the Red Cross activities in N'gara, Tanzania, in October of 1996, where the organisation ran two refugee camps—Benaco, with 175,000 Rwandans, and Lukole, with 20,000 Burundians. There, the head of the sub-delegation, Abbas Gullet, was observed for one day, followed on the next day by the operating manager for the two camps, Stephen Omollo. As Karl Weick (1974) has pointed out, interesting things can be revealed by studying unusual organizations.

## The Model

This study forms part of a larger research project in which 29 managers in a wide variety of circumstances have been

observed for a day each—managers in health care, government, business, and various not-for-profit organizations—from the front country manager in a federal mountain park to the chief executive of Canada's largest bank. Such a short time of observation is not meant to provide definitive conclusions about each of these people and their jobs: the sample should be seen as one of 29 managerial days rather than 29 management jobs. The intention has been to uncover the variety of circumstances and styles exhibited in the conduct of managerial work. The circumstances and styles of the two managers in question here do, however, deserve to be singled out because of the unusual nature of the setting.

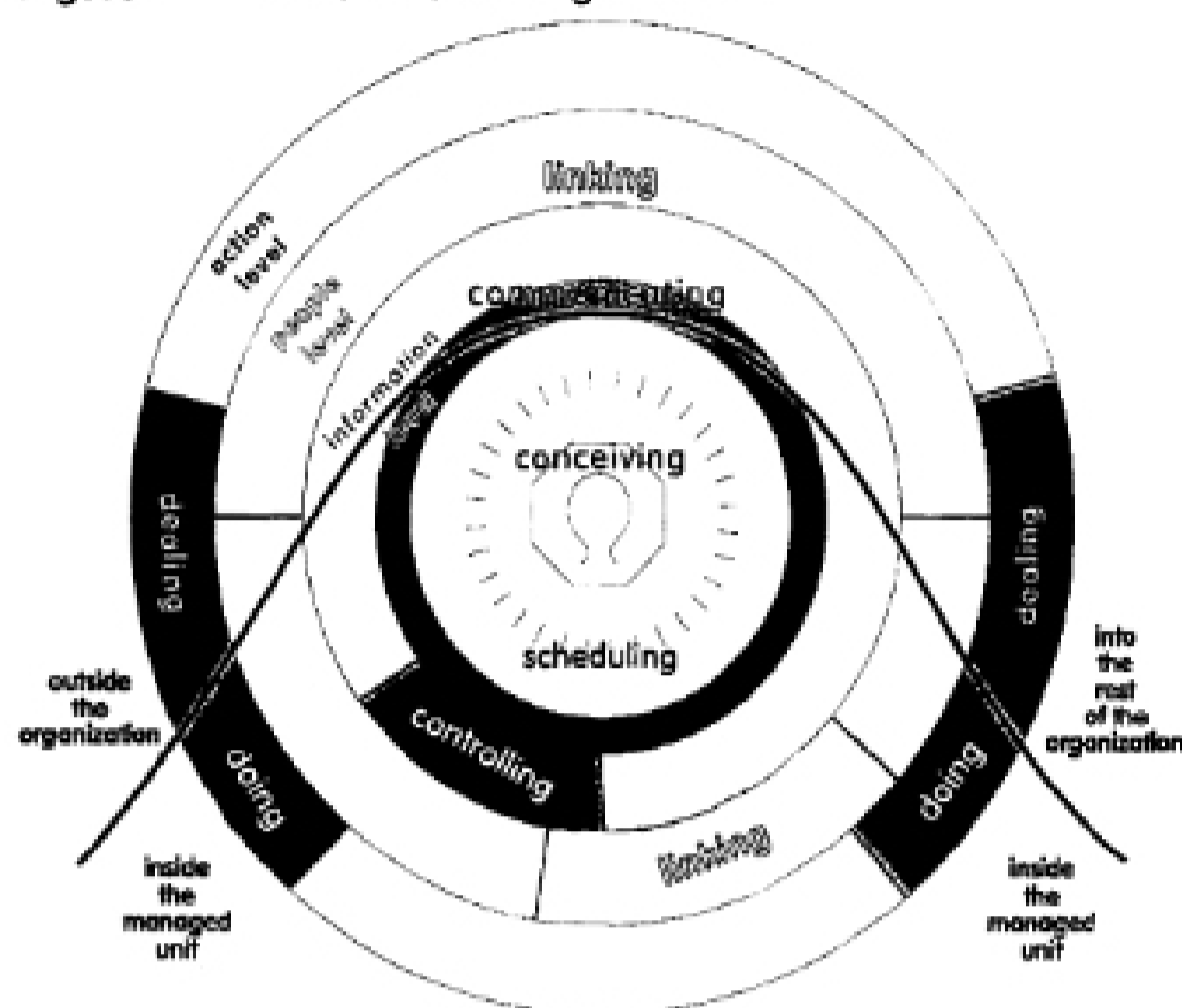
Articles in the research literature are appropriately judged by their contribution to our conceptual understanding. The contention here is that their contribution to our *contextual* understanding—such as the very particular circumstances described in this article—sometimes merits attention as well. In a literature that tends to be Western, and especially American, about business and especially about big business, we need to open up context alongside content.

This research program began with the assumption that we know what managers do but are less clear on the variety of ways in which they do it. So the literature delineating managerial roles was reviewed to weave these into an integrative framework. Almost all these publications (including those of the undersigned) were seen as lists rather than real models. The need was to integrate these into some sort of comprehensive model. The one used here is shown in Figure 1 (see Mintzberg 1994).

At the center sits the *person* who comes to the job, with his or her thoughts and feelings about the work, and specifically some sort of *frame* by which to carry it out. This in turn leads to an *agenda* of specific issues and work schedules. All this can be thought to constitute the basic *core* of the job of managing, as suggested by its placement in the center of the figure.

Surrounding the core are three concentric circles that represent three levels through which managerial work can take place: labelled information, people, and action. From the inside out, beginning with the most abstract level, a

Figure 1 A Model of Managerial Work



manager can process *information*, in the hope that this will drive people to take action. More tangibly, a manager can work with *people* to encourage them to take action. And at the most concrete level, a manager can manage *action* more or less directly. This is not to argue that managerial work is so partitioned. Especially when effectively executed, activities tend to blend together across these levels. But the distinctions appear to be useful for conceptual purposes, and so too in practice managers will often tilt in a given activity toward one level or another.

In each case, as shown, the managerial effort can be directed *inside* the unit being managed, or *outside* it, to the rest of the organization or to its external environment. This leads to six roles in the three circles: two at the information level, two at the people level, and two at the action level. They are as follows:

**Communicating:** Seeking and receiving information as well as sharing it with others, whether internally as disseminator or externally as spokesperson.

**Controlling:** Using information to control the work of insiders, whether by issuing directives, designing structures, or developing and applying systems and procedures.

**Leading:** Encouraging and enabling people within the unit managed to take effective action, whether by focusing on the individual (as in mentoring and rewarding), the group (as in team building and conflict resolving), or the entire unit (as in culture building).

**Linking:** Relating to people outside the unit by establishing a network of contacts and using it to represent the needs of the unit as well as to transmit its influence to people externally, also to receive influencing efforts transmitted to the unit from these people.

**Doing:** Supervising the taking of internal action more or less directly, including directing projects for change and handling disturbances and crises.

**Dealing:** Engaging in negotiations and executing agreements ("doing deals") with outsiders.

While virtually all managers can be described as engaging in all these roles, just as clearly will many favour one level (information, people, or action), one orientation (internal or external), even one role, or perhaps a particular blending of several. And how each of these roles is played, alone and in conjunction with the others, will vary from one manager to another.

To study this, the research here has proceeded in a rather simple way. A variety of managers have been observed from the time they began their work in the morning until they finished it at the end of the day. Notes were taken of all activities observed, alongside records of the time of starting and ending. Documents were also collected when appropriate. Lulls in the work—travel in automobiles, for example—as well as quiet time at the end of the day was used to ask questions, clarify activities confusing to the observer, and probe into the managers' feelings, attitudes, and conception of the work and the job. Time was also taken to discuss the job in its broader context, often including review of agendas over the course of the last month to compare the day with others and uncover a wider variety of scheduled activities performed. Later, the activities of the day were written up and then studied, particularly (but not only) in terms of the model, to draw conclusions. The full draft report was then checked for accuracy by the manager, who often included comments on the conceptual interpretation.

## The Setting

In total, 700,000 people populated the six refugee camps in the area of N'gara, Tanzania in October of 1996. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as it is officially titled, played a role in all these activities from the beginning in 1993, setting up two other camps besides the two it ran, and generally working closely with the other NGOs. (This stands for nongovernment organization, but these are as much NBOs—non-business organization—as they are nongovernment. They might better be called NOOs—nonowned organizations. See Mintzberg 1996.) There were at one point 150 NGOs on site; by October of 1996, they numbered 15. Running a camp means running a municipality and more, including food distribution, sanitation, road construction and maintenance, housing, and health care.

The Red Cross is the world's oldest and largest humanitarian aid organisation, with a worldwide budget of