

# INTERVIEW MIT HENRY MINTZBERG

## The role of management in healthcare organizations

Henry Mintzberg war im September 2019 Gast unserer Distinguished Management Scholar Series. Im Rahmen eines Interviews sprachen Johannes Rüegg-Stürm, Harald Tuckermann und Matthias Mitterlechner mit ihm über einige seiner zentralen Themen und Anliegen. Das Interview fand während einer viertägigen Forschungsklausur auf der Mettmenalp statt. Die Klausur war ein intensives Gespräch zwischen Henry Mintzberg und unserem Team über seine und unsere Forschungen und Erkenntnisse zu Management, Organisation und Strategie insbesondere im Gesundheitswesen, über Kernthemen des St. Galler Management-Modells und über die Konsequenzen für eine wirksame Executive Education (Interview in Originalsprache).

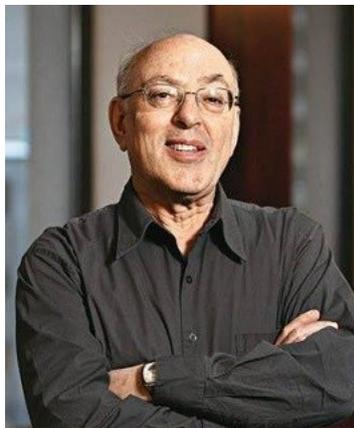
*Healthcare services are becoming more and more important in an aging society. What makes healthcare special?*

Healthcare is not a business – whatever people say. There are businesses that work in healthcare like pharmaceutical companies or the companies that make the gloves or whatever. There are businesses in the healthcare field. But healthcare is not a business. It's a calling. People don't come to a business program for the sake of capitalism. Only a few do, I guess. But people come to a healthcare program, in our case, often with a deep belief in healthcare as a calling, as a noble practice, selfless in some ways (nothing is selfless, but rather selfless).

*If healthcare is not a business, what distinguishes a healthcare organization like a hospital from other organizations?*

Well, it's a special case. It's category I call professional organizations where the professionals play a major role. The professionals don't need to be managed very extensively. They need certain activities ... like in the operating room they can't just operate. There has got to be a schedule as to who operates when. There has to be equipment. But people are hardened in professional organizations because they are trained. So they don't need managers either to train them or to tell them what to do. If managers have to tell people what to do, they shouldn't be there. Now that doesn't mean there are times when you say, "You'd better stop doing that, because you're killing too

many patients." It's hard to do, but it has to be done. But for the most part, you're not managing people closely. You're supporting them. You're bringing in funds, you're raising money, you're setting up an administrative staff to support them, and so on.



Henry Mintzberg,  
Professor für Management Studien  
an der McGill University in Montreal

*You have dealt extensively with different types of organizations, including the professional organizations. Where do organization and management intersect?*

It's like a potter with different kinds of clay. If you're starting with porcelain, you're going to make one kind of pot. And if you're starting with stoneware, you're going to make another kind of pot. Management doesn't exist without organization.

Management is about organization. It's about dealing with organizations and helping to direct them and helping to build them, helping to establish their cultures or reinforce their cultures or change their cultures. And so you can't separate management from organization. It's like a horse and a carriage. You can separate a horse from a carriage, but you can't separate management from organization. They're intricately tied together. So we have to understand organizations to understand management. Good managers understand their own organizations intimately.

*What characterizes management as a practice?*

Naturalness. It is a natural practice. There is nothing natural about slicing people open and taking out their appendix in an operating room. Nor is there anything natural about technologies

and computers. All of these things were developed and changed the world rather significantly.

Management is simply a practice that relates organizations to environments. And that ensures that organizations function effectively and serve the environment in the broad sense. People were practicing management long before anybody ever used the word. Whether it is King David or whoever. I am not sure the nature of effective managers has changed that much. I didn't study King David, but it would be interesting to compare him with Steve Jobs. But you don't need the word management, you don't need management schools, to recognize that practice.

*What are the prerequisites of an effective and responsible management practice?*

Following on from the previous question, management is a natural practice that is made unnatural by misunderstanding it and by formalizing it and by developing training programs that are antithetical to how it functions naturally and normally. So the management that I am so critical of is the management that places managers on a pedestal, above what they are managing, and disconnects them as if they can manage by remote control. Remote control means you hit a button and something happens somewhere else. Too much management is disconnected in that way, whether through financial reports or managing through the Internet or whatever it is. And all these things get in the way of the natural practice of management, which is a social activity. It is not a technical activity. It is not an analytic activity, except in part. It is a social activity. And that means that the craft, based on experience, and the art of looking for innovation are more important than the science and the analysis. But the analysis matters too, though not in excess. You have got to be in touch to know what is going on. The managers we revere or we respect are the ones that are on the ground, who know what is going on, and know how to make something out of that.

*What is the role of management in healthcare organizations?*

The part that intrigues me is that in our healthcare program it's surprising how many people are there

for healthcare as a calling. That's quite a big difference in how you manage it because you can build on that ... as an opportunity to enhance, to encourage your staff by recognizing that, and by building on it instead of creating political turmoil or excess control. So you do a lot of that in healthcare. And that's quite different from business in a way. People may be very devoted to the business. That's good. And if there's good management, they'll be more devoted, but never quite as much as healthcare. So the negative side is you've got a bunch of cats. There's the old story of herding cats. You can herd cows, but it's not easy to herd cats. In a mass production company, you're herding cows. In a hospital, you're herding cats. Everybody wants to go their own way. Or at least the way of their profession. That's the hard part. The easy part is that if you can build on that sense of calling, you can create a great place.

*Your understanding of management, the importance of understanding organizations, and your differentiated view of strategy, have implications for management education. How do people learn management?*

A good way to be dysfunctional is to pretend that people learn management by doing case study after case study after case study. Which is a perfect way to teach disconnection because it says, "Give me 10 or 20 pages and I'll give you a decision." You have got these kids, literally kids, making decisions about what the chief executive could do because they have read 10 or 20 pages in some case that I prepared last night in an hour and a half. This is how we are training people. It's ridiculous. So we set out to say, you can't create a manager in a classroom. Forget it. What we can do is take people who are managers and enhance their practice by giving them a chance to reflect on their experience, share it with each other, and learn from that experience to become more reflective and to understand their practice and enhance it. It's a very, very powerful way of educating. We are not creating managers. We are enhancing the practice of people who are managers. And that works very well.

*What you emphasize very much is the importance of reflecting on managerial practice. What does that mean? How does that work?*

There are two quotes we use. One is from [Saul] Alinsky, the famous community organizer in America. The other is from F. Scott Fitzgerald. I can't remember which is which. But basically what they both said is that you don't have experiences. You have happenings. And happenings become experiences when you reflect on them and learn from them. I think that answers the question. Reflection is about learning from your experience. And if you can do it with other people sharing it, then it is much more powerful. This is my experience, that is your experience, and the outcome was different. That's very powerful pedagogy. You can't do that with 25-year-olds who haven't managed. You can teach them marketing and finance and accounting. You can teach them organization theory. But you can't teach them how to manage. Because they have nothing to reflect on. They have some things to reflect on. They work in teams, they play sports, so you can connect to their personal experience. But it's not quite managerial experience.

*What are the implications of this tight connection between management and organizations for science and for research?*

You can't study management without the context of the organization. It's like describing mountain

climbing without bothering to describe the mountain. It's like saying, "It doesn't really matter if it's a hill, if it's jagged, if it's the Matterhorn, or some hill somewhere in Montreal." There is a difference. If you want to describe hiking or mountain climbing, you had better acknowledge those differences. I think it's the same thing here. Without falling into the other trap, that management is done only by managers. The advantage of understanding different kinds of organizations is that in some types of organizations that's largely true and in other types of organization it's not false, but it's a blend of all kinds of people engaging in managerial activity. Innovation, new projects, and new ideas are important in every organization. In a professional organization, that is done largely by the professionals. So all kinds of people can be managers in one way or another, but it varies by the organization. You can no more talk about management devoid of organization than you can talk about marriage and focus on an individual or even focus on two individuals individually.

*Dear Henry Mintzberg, thank you so much for this interview.*