

Book Review

Managing Inter@ctively

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Book Review of Managing Inter@ctively

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In a world of interactive technologies, new networked business models, and changed attitudes toward work and authority, effective management requires a radically different approach to communication. (p. vii).

This quote from Mary Boone's new and excellent book succinctly summarizes a fundamental problem faced by all levels of management today—communication. Now, communication has always been a critical and essential part of effective management, so what has changed? The answers are found in the quote: interactive technologies, new and networked business models, and attitudes toward work. The commodity Internet has afforded a huge and flexible infrastructure over which one can infuse various forms of interactivity and connectivity within a firm as well as between a firm and the value chains of its stakeholders.

In order to remain competitive, firms change. Firms change their structure and firms change their linkages with other firms. Firms change their processes to do things, and they do new things. Firms are born and firms are absorbed. Firms evolve and markets emerge. The competitive environment is as turbulent and as unpredictable as any in the history of market economies.

Information technologies (including standards) are materializing and mutating at a blistering pace, and neither our laws nor our education system can keep up. You are in charge of your company. You are in charge of your company's IT resources. You are in charge of corporate education. You are in charge of your small workgroup. Wherever you are in the

company, you have a stake in its future. What can you do? How can you survive?

Managing Inter@ctively is about leveraging and managing your (direct and indirect) assets, including (if not essentially) your intellectual assets, within a turbulent, uncertain, and time-constrained environment that may see many of your business processes altered, connected or outsourced. Substance matters. "Managing," means appreciating the complexities of today's decisions in the contexts of today's competitive environment, and managing "interactively" means embracing *communication* as the critical component of management. Communication matters. Communication is not viewed as a simple, unidirectional process of "persuasion and buy-in"; rather, it is viewed as purposeful bi-directional, interactive processes. Furthermore, everyone in the organization is expected to manage interactively. People matter. Form matters. It is about creating a self-informing organization.

Managing Inter@ctively is a well-written, in-depth report based on 85 interviews. It consists of thirteen chapters and two appendices, and is divided into three primary sections based on the underlying model of communication: connect, inform, and engage. The eleven chapters that comprise the first three sections address ten key communication competencies that underlie managing interactively. By crafting these as "competencies," the author makes a very strong

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statement about managing interactively—it involves behavioral changes and practices that can be acquired. This speaks to the very heart of business and corporate education.

A fourth section presents practical strategies and two appendices addressing large group approaches and interactive technologies. Each chapter contains a rich array of insightful ideas, heuristics, steps, models, stories, quotes, observations, and proposals.

In the remaining component of this review, I outline and illustrate some of the most interesting and salient points (well, from my perspective) of the book. Each reader, of course, will view *Managing Inter@ctively* from a slightly different perspective and will no doubt come up with a different set.

The first section is entitled “Connect: Breaking Down the Barriers Between People in Organizations” and discusses five competencies for connecting people. As Mary Boone phrases it, “connecting requires a lot more than a phone call.” It involves putting people in touch with each other, crafting the right environments, and improving your own communication capabilities for interactive management. In this section, you are asked to consider six trends that are impacting business today, and then consider the communication challenges that may arise from them. Phrased as questions below, think about whether any of these trends are relevant to your situation. Then think about how often you have deliberated on the associated communication challenges. Or have you?

1. Has there been a dramatic increase in organizational alliances and cross-departmental teamwork?
2. Do you find that you are expecting more autonomy on the part of employees?
3. Is there a general increased scarcity of organizational attention?
4. How often have you adopted new technology for communication?
5. Are the people with whom you wish to reach diverse and dispersed?
6. How important is your firm’s intellectual capital?

Now let’s explore the competencies relevant to connecting and communication. First, people (and their knowledge and ideas) must be made more accessible. This not only applies within a firm, but between a firm and *all* of its stakeholders. Accessibility refers not only to technologies, but also to the formal and informal structures in which that access may be defined (e.g., to access and develop expertise, to support various forms of communities).

Second, power (in the traditional sense) must be shared. Here, *power* refers to “the ability to make things happen, to initiate change.” It is the power of making decisions and implementing ideas, and it is derived from harnessing knowledge from the organization or its external stakeholders (e.g., customers, alliances). Information technology can greatly facilitate this sharing, but must be managed carefully and explicitly.

Third, both physical and on-line working environments should be designed to encourage collaboration and creativity. This is a particularly interesting point in which the concept of a “purposeful environment” is explored in the context of three spaces and their technologies: office space, meeting space, and virtual space. Several excellent examples and discussions are presented, including the knOwhere Store (www.knowherestore.com).

Fourth, rituals and shared experiences should be created to help develop connectivity. Rituals and shared experiences have long been known to establish “bonding” among members of the military, members of sororities and fraternities, religious organizations, and so forth. The challenge, for example, is how to create (or change) a *particular* effect, in a *particular* firm, for a *particular* purpose, at a *particular* time. How many of us have been forced to engage in a vacuous “group” exercise? The discussion in this section is illustrative and insightful.

In the final chapter, and in Mary Boone’s words, you have to “get over yourself.” This is perhaps one of the richest chapters on developing the specific personal communication skills relevant to interactive management, and how technology can impact the application of these skills. For example, consider one of the skills (and

goals): don't avoid conflict. Addressing conflict has always been a difficult burr in leadership, but consider how technology (such as e-mail) increases the communication connectivity and, consequently, increases the potential to avoid direct confrontation and, being optimistic, its resolution. What is the level of conflict in your organization? Are you sure?

The second section is entitled, "Inform: Enhance Knowledge Sharing by Getting the Right Information, in the Right Form, to the Right People, in the Right Context." First, Boone suggests that you must make information "available, useful, and enticing." This involves issues such as structuring, presentation, and access. I found this a useful and pragmatic chapter that related interesting anecdotes from companies such as General Electric, Lotus, and IBM. Now, remember this is not a book or a chapter on "knobs and dials"; it is a discussion on considering aspects of information and knowledge sharing in the context of interactive management and the technologies that can support it.

Second, she suggests the use stories to capture and share knowledge. Stories are a psychologically powerful vehicle for communication and this is a delightful little chapter that has significance beyond its length. The anecdotes (wait, or are they stories?) that explore the shaping of corporate culture and core values are especially interesting. Read the story of Jack Keenan. Keenan, initially appointed as chief executive of International Distillers and Vintners (makers of Smirnoff and J&B Whiskey), rather than spending time with headquarters staff, spent his first two weeks with salespeople. This is a strong statement about culture.

The third competency in the Inform section is the ability to resolve hidden conflicts between your actions and your words. Borrowing a quote from the book, Anthony Goodman, CEO of the consulting firm Smythe Dorward Lambert, Inc., argues that: "The most powerful communication in any organization consists of the decisions and behaviors of the leaders of the business. Everything else is noise" (p. 200). A strong statement, indeed. To achieve this competency, one must build a *unifying concept* that succinctly summarizes the essence of the firm's (or project's)

direction and purpose. Whether the concept is a brand, a vision, a value or a purpose, it is essential to align communications, actions, and rewards with that concept. This is especially difficult to achieve when firms are globally dispersed or as virtuality arises in business structures. In this chapter, consider Jack Welch's (CEO of GE) description of a "boundaryless organization" and admonition that "if you trust your processes, you don't need budgets." Could your organization work without budgets? An underlying and important theme in this chapter is the development of trust between interactive management participants.

The third section is entitled, "Engage: Inspire People to Create, Own and Act on Ideas." There are two competencies essential to this third and final communication process. First, you must "listen to your whole organization." The whole organization? Well, yes. The whole organization! This chapter presents several examples and methods for conducting large-scale interventions, mega-conversations, and other activities for interactive communication on a grand scale. In fact, there are nine generic rules for guiding such events.

The second competency addresses the cases in which you must engage people across organizational boundaries. I like the quote from Steve Behm of Cisco: "We employ 32,000 people. Seventeen thousand of them work for Cisco and the rest work for our suppliers" (p. 228). I wonder if Cisco's suppliers have the same perspective? This chapter is about alliances of many forms and how to build effective interactive relationship management and communication within alliances. It is here where we are faced with the thorny issues of sharing information across organizational boundaries, establishing roles and responsibilities, and incorporating technologies to help achieve trust and engagement in allied firms. I was struck by the assertions from Phil Harkins, CEO of Linkage, Inc., who argues that concerns about information sharing are dated, because the real value is in the ability to innovate *and* execute ideas. To repeatedly accomplish innovation and execution, one must manage interactively.

The competencies underlying the connect-inform-engage communication model are thus covered. What follows is a chapter that summarizes the relevant insights from four top executives on several aspects of the covered competencies. The final chapter speaks directly to the question, “What should you do tomorrow?” This chapter nicely summarizes many aspects of the book, but is not a substitute for reading it.

In conclusion, *Managing Inter@ctively* is not a book about technology. *Managing Inter@ctively* is a book about management in an age of technology and how technology can actually take a significant part in management. This presents at least four important and fundamental practice and research opportunities from the OSRA perspective.

First, to implement the concepts in *Managing Inter@ctively* requires specific educational processes to master the competencies.

Remember, it is about getting *all* of your people to manage interactively. Second, information technology could play a critical role in that educational process delivery. Third, the concepts in *Managing Inter@ctively* should be considered when designing and implementing new inter- and intra-organizational systems. Finally, information technology can be used in implementing many of the concepts discussed in *Managing Inter@ctively*.

I constantly found myself making notes in the margins of this book, as it gives you ideas. As the author states, “The book in your hand is only the beginning” (p. 279). It is up to you to connect, inform, and engage.

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