In contrast to the traditional description of managerial work as planning, organizing, coordinating, and controlling, this book depicts the manager as working in "calculated chaos," "controlled disorder" (to quote one newspaper review of it). The job is characterized by its unremitting pace; its brevity, variety, fragmentation, and interruption; the expansiveness of contact (especially of a peer and lateral nature); and its orientation to live action and oral communication. The content of the work combines interpersonal roles that feed on the strategy-making process (in fact, my lack of expertise at the Sloan School, Bill Pounds, did not turn him down (the new dean at the Sloan School, Bill Pounds, did not find the idea opportune!), and my lack of effort to find a more distant one (did I "know" something that I only "learned" later on?) left me groping for a thesis topic for about six months.

A short time earlier (in 1966, as I recall), James Webb, who was running NASA, had approached the faculty at the Sloan School about being studied himself as a manager. He felt that NASA had to justify its existence by its spin-offs and believed that its management processes were among those things worth copying. As the only student in this school of management interested in management at the time (as opposed to computers or mathematical modelling, T groups, or whatever), I was approached to do it. While benefiting from a wonderful tour of NASA with several MIT professors, I finally declined the offer as far too risky for a doctoral student in that bastion of science called MIT.

Sometime later a conference was held at the Sloan School to discuss what impact the computer would have on the senior manager. Here I found a distinguished group of people unable to come to grips with the issue because they had no conceptual basis to consider managerial work. They all knew what managers did—indeed a number of them were or had been successful managers—but they could not abstract that knowledge to consider issues such as the impact of the computer on managerial work. I realized there we needed something more than Gulick's old POSDCORB (planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordinating, and budgeting) to describe managerial work. So I ended up with that thesis after all.

Webb was no longer available, and I proposed to study five chief executives. Fairly early on I wrote to General James Gavin, who headed up Arthur D. Little (and who had become quite well known as a war hero who turned early against the Vietnam War). He agreed immediately, without even meeting me, which made a great difference when I approached others. And so I got to spend some delightful time with General Gavin; Bernard O'Keefe, who ran EG & G; Harry B. Henshel of the Bulova Watch Company; Charlie Brown of the Newton Public School System; and John Knowles, who headed the Massachusetts General Hospital. I guess I got at least some of it right because Knowles wrote to me a few years later about a colleague who put an article of mine about the study on his desk with the comment: "John, this sounds just like you!"


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