

On the Definition of Manager

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What is in a word?

What are the practical and cultural implications of defining a term such as “manager” for the public service? There may be more to it than you think!

The term “manager” is currently used in various settings, with different intents. Depending on the circumstances, a simple term like “manager” will be used to refer to different groups of people, and its meaning will vary. Clearly, there is a serious need to define the word manager in accordance with the topic being discussed, or, at the very least, ensure that the context in which it is used is clear to everyone.

In this article, I will take a look at the definition of “manager” from the point of view of the Leadership Network and the managers’ communities in the public service. In each case, I will provide definitions and explore their impacts on managers’ perception of themselves. I will also discuss some of the broader implications these definitions hold for the public service and propose some solutions.

The Leadership Network definition of a manager

Let’s start by taking a look at the Leadership Network’s definition of a manager, as taken from their Web site (http://publiservice.hrma-agrh.gc.ca/leadership/mp-ps/documents/final_report/revised_definition_e.asp):

On October 26, 2004, members of the Deputy Minister Human Resources Management Advisory Committee (DMHRMAC) requested that a Manager (below the Executive level) be defined as follows:

A Manager is an employee who forms part of a management team and is accountable for exercising delegated authority over human and financial resources to accomplish the objectives of the organization in the Public Service of Canada. In addition to the functional responsibilities of their positions, Managers lead people, recognize and reward achievement, manage performance, manage change and promote the corporate values, ethics and culture of the organization.

Delegated financial authority means having Section 34 of the FAA (Spending Authority), and delegated human resources authorities means: making appointments; accepting resignations; and imposing disciplinary measures in conformity with the delegation conferred by the Deputy Head.

This definition has generated many discussions since its announcement, for two main reasons:

- The context and the intent of the definition were almost never clearly stated;

- Its effect on the people who no longer met the definition was never addressed.

From causes...

One aspect to generate a lot of confusion in the managers’ community is that the definition has often been presented out of context, with little explanation of its intent and almost no explanation as to the initiatives it was linked to. The provision of a clear definition of “manager” was intended to ensure that “the public service [have] a well-identified and well-equipped cadre of managers, who are supported and have the tools they require to carry out their responsibilities.” A concrete example may clarify things.

In order to meet his legal responsibilities, a manager *with* delegation of authority over human and financial resources requires specific knowledge that another manager *without* delegation of authority over human and financial resources does not need. The public service is responsible for providing the delegated manager with that knowledge so that he may properly perform his duties. An *official* definition of “manager” serves to precisely identify the population that meets the criteria, assess their needs, allocate resources, and thereby fulfill one of legal duties of the public service toward its employees.

This is just one example of what the Leadership Network’s definition of “manager” seeks to achieve.

...to consequences.

A second aspect was the choice of the term “manager.” Traditionally, it has been used to describe a fairly broad segment of the federal public service known as “middle managers.”

By applying a generic term to a relatively narrow concept based on a technicality (the delegation of authority over human and financial resources), we have excluded, *by default*, many individuals who previously self-identified as managers, but who no longer meet the technical criteria to officially qualify as such.

For many people, this led to a feeling of exclusion. If the Leadership Network's definition had used a label like "managers with delegation of authority over human and financial resources" to identify those who met the criteria, no such impression of exclusion would have remained with the managers who did not meet them. Had that been the case, these people would still qualify as managers; they would simply be "managers *without* delegation of authority over human and financial resources."

The managers' communities definition of a manager

Not surprisingly, the definition has quickly made its way through the departments and agencies and has reached other kinds of organizations for which the official definition of a manager was not necessarily intended: the regional and departmental managers' communities. Managers' communities are a different kind of organization than those we are accustomed to in the public service. They are, in most cases, *informal* organizations. A better label for these organizations is "communities of practice."

Communities of practice traditionally do not define their membership based on the title or credentials of their members. As their name suggests, communities of practice define their membership based on the "practice"—the work and field of

interest—of their members. Consequently, people are not included or excluded from the community; they are drawn to it, or not. In its strictest form, communities of practice are volunteer-based organizations where people are free to join, or not.

I began this article by hinting at the practical and cultural impacts of defining managers. As it turns out, the departmental and regional managers' communities provide a setting where these impacts can be felt. Let's first look at the practical implications.

From the bureaucratization of managers...

Because of their governmental and cultural heritage, communities of departmental and regional managers tend to define their membership based on the classification of their members (group and/or level). A given department may consider employees at the EX minus 1 and minus 2 levels as members of its managers' community, another department may choose to include EX minus 3, and yet another may include the EX level in its definition. Some organizations will also add exceptions to these rules based on criteria specific to them.

Just when you thought things could not possibly become more convoluted, the Leadership Network's definition of a manager is now beginning to inspire many departments to create a new membership category! We now have *primary* members, who meet the criteria of the official definition of a manager, and *secondary* members, who do not meet the criteria, but fit their department's own definition of manager, as described above.

In midst of all this, some people have recognized that the

definition of a manager, for the purpose of a community—and for the good of the federal public service—needs to be more *inclusive*, rather than be limited to technicalities like delegation of authority and classification. This, as I mentioned in the opening of the article, has a number of cultural implications.

...to the globalization of managers

I am about to make two statements about managers that may shock some readers:

- Being a manager has little, if anything, to do with delegation of authority. Delegation of authority is a subset of the role of an *administrator*, not a manager.
- Being a manager is not limited to a managing a functional or business unit where a person (the manager) has authority over other people. I assure you, there are *other kinds of managers*.

A report produced by the Conference Board of Canada for the National Managers' Community identifies four relationship interfaces for managers (http://www.managers-gestionnaires.gc.ca/reading_room/reports/leading_from_middle/menu_f.shtml):

1. First level supervisors and front-line employees
2. Senior management
3. Customers, suppliers and others
4. Horizontal (cross functional relationships)

Based on the above, it would only be fair to include, as managers, the people who manage functional units, projects, files, horizontal initiatives, people and

relationships. Take the example of a project manager who works in a matrix organization. Does the fact he has no functional authority over the people working on his project makes him less of a manager? What about the person who manages horizontal initiatives where the team is not even composed of people from the same department? Arguably, having all the responsibilities with none of the authority may even challenge someone to become a better manager, if not a leader.

True, this definition encompasses many people, and it is also true that not all of them carry the word “manager” in their title. That is why we must be more inclusive.

Thinking beyond the definition

Relatively few public servants actually join the government in a managerial positions. Most become managers along the way, either by accident or by choice. Yet, I would assume that most people first begin to show interest in management before accepting a role as manager.

If you think back to a time before you became a manager, how did you develop your management skills and knowledge? How did you gain exposure to management before you got to work on that special file or project, or took on a small management role, or accepted the assignment that would eventually mark a career shift? If a managers’ community had existed back then, how would you have felt if you had been told that you could not join it because you didn’t meet their membership criteria?

Why discriminate on the basis of delegation, classification, work or even experience, when, in fact, there is no need to? Are we

not still talking about building a **community**?

There are essentially three reasons why we, as a community, should be as inclusive as possible and welcome anyone who has an interest in management: sustainability, changing demographics and interdependency.

Sustainability is a no-brainer. Simply put, the non-managers of today are going to be the managers of tomorrow. Think of how this will affect knowledge transfer, capacity issues, and more. It has been identified in a number of ways and under different labels, but the fact remains that it is a government priority.

Secondly, there is the issue of changing demographics in the public service. The *new professionals* who are joining the workforce bring with them new values that will shape the future of our public service. This generation of new professionals has grown up with television and the internet; they witnessed the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the creation of the European Union, communist countries opening their borders and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The new professionals naturally think *beyond boundaries* and may not share the *silos mentality* of some of their colleagues. Their reasoning is simple: “if it is public good, there is no need to build a fence”.

What surprises me the most, however, is our failure to recognize the importance of “interdependency.” The idea is that the better an employee understands what management is about (the issues, culture, etc.), the better he can respond to the needs of his manager and organization. An employee who shows interest in management (whether it is because he has a

vested interest in his career progression or simply because he is seeking a better understanding of management) must be strongly supported by his manager. The employee’s sensitization to management issues will better equip him to ease his manager’s workload (or the very least prevent him from needlessly increasing it). Furthermore, the employee can act as an agent of change and influence his peers. **In the most basic way, managers and non-managers are mutually dependent.**

I started this article with a question: “What is in a word?” I think I have made my case by showing that when it comes to defining a generic term like “manager,” the implications can be inversely proportional to the simplicity of the word. Moreover, these implications transcend systems and structures to affect the culture of the public service as well. That is precisely why we must make an extra effort to ensure that our managers’ communities are inclusive environments that foster close relationships between all stakeholders. There is no need to build a fence!

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What did you think of this article? The author would love to hear from you. Please send him your comments, feedback, ideas for future articles and your own personal thoughts on management: Laliberte.Etienne@hrma-agrh.gc.ca.