

# *Narratives About the Need to Develop the Sense of Cooperation of Managers*

Kim Vu, CNAM, France

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## **Abstract**

By considering that being able to nurture a sense of cooperation is one of the most important soft skills of the managers nowadays; our work aims to describe the process by which the managers develop this soft skill. The question is: When, where and how certain daily-life situations are linked to the soft skill learning?

Our theoretical framework for this research is inspired by the work of Schugurensky (2007) on informal learning with intentionality and consciousness as key indicators. The purpose of this article is to present the data collected from the Application files of the candidates to the CNAM MBA<sup>1</sup>, which are the narratives of the candidates and the recommendations of the third-party professional(s).

Keywords: informal learning, skill, needs, sense of cooperation, manager

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<sup>1</sup> The program : Master of Business Administration of the CNAM

## Context

In 2014, the results of the survey conducted by ICM Research over 4000 adults including 900 managers for Brathay Trust (<http://www.brathay.org.uk>) revealed that 38% of them want job seekers and young people to give more importance to personal achievements and experiences in their job application. 37% of employers believe that job seekers are not aware of the importance that employers place on “soft skills”. 26% of managers involved in the survey believe that the “soft skills” should be presented before listing other qualifications.

The results of the survey also show that a high capacity for work, ethics, commitment, communication and especially the ability to work in team are the qualities, which employers look for most in the applicants. The survey results revealed that refresh the soft skills can be useful for senior employees as well as for newly recruited people. 30% of managers believe that employees who proactively improve their “soft skills” are more likely to be promoted. 24% believe that “soft skills” of employees help to distinguish their company from the competitors.

In France, according to the observation of APEC<sup>2</sup> during the same period, in the current uncertain economic climate, the management job markets in the regions are strongly influenced by their sector-based focus. In Ile-de-France and PACAC<sup>3</sup> three over four expected hires have been realized by service sector companies. In Auvergne, Centre, Champagne-Ardenne, Franche-Comté, Haute-Normandie, Picardie Poitou-Charentes, the industry sector companies should represent at least 30% of manager hires in 2014. Finally, companies in commerce could represent nearly a quarter of manager recruitments in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais. The job opportunities for commercial managers are spread over almost the entire territory, while the recruitments of IT managers concentrate primarily in Ile-de-France and Midi-Pyrenees. The R&D managers would be more sought after in the regions where companies from leading industries are well established, as in Ile-de-France, Midi-Pyrénées, Rhône-Alpes, but also Bretagne, Limousin and Picardie.

Given the intense competition in the sectors that recruit well and the explosion of the number of eligible candidates, it is normal for employers that only the best candidates win.

That may be the reason why today employers are increasingly looking for the personal qualities that candidates could bring to the company in the short and long term. How to define the ideal candidate profile for a manager position? According to APEC, companies are looking for professionals with outstanding achievements, keen business sense, high potentials, good relational capacity which would be able to bring real value to the business. They wish to recruit candidates with an open mind, good business acumen, who are not only able to identify the problems, but also to quickly find solutions ... *“We are looking for people, who are capable to communicate well, and are not afraid to get in contact with others, with whom we feel we can work effectively together”*. This is how a senior executive officer of a large group expressed about his vision on manager recruitment criteria. In this respect, as the first meaning of the word “cooperate” is to “work with someone for something,

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<sup>2</sup> L'Association Pour l'Emploi des Cadres

<sup>3</sup> Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur Corse

participate, contribute to a work or a joint action<sup>4</sup>”, it is clear that "cooperate" becomes a very important activity of those, who exercise the manager profession.

The points raised above might probably have given an overview of the business perspective on the importance of soft skills, but the picture is still incomplete, since it lacks a key element - the managers' perception of themselves. At what point in their life will they intend to change their normal behavior in order to be able to cooperate with others? Are they aware of this process of change? Within the limits of this document, we use the sense of cooperation or "to know how to cooperate" as an example to provide another perspective on these issues through the narratives of the candidates, applying to the CNAM MBA program.

## **Subjects**

First, it is useful to know the entry requirements set by the CNAM MBA program's founders to better understand the common typology of our research subjects.

As in the most of other similar programs, the CNAM MBA program requires candidates:

- A bachelor degree or equivalent degree
- A minimum of 3 years of work experiences
- A fluency in English

Let's examine each of these three criteria. Regarding the first condition, the program founders, particularly the academicians, who believe that the MBA is also a Master program, like any other (Master of science, Master in economics, etc.), set this condition in order to ensure the academic intelligence, or in other words the ability of the candidates to follow technically complex subjects in the field of management, which are included in the contents of the MBA program such as: accounting, statistics or finance. To enter some MBA programs, you must obtain a GMAT score of between 550 and 700 out of 800 points. The GMAT test has been designed to measure the analytical writing ability (AWA), quantitative material capacity (mathematics) and verbal ability (reading, understanding and argument). However, the GMAT test does not measure motivation or ability to cooperate of the candidates.

The second admission condition reflects the nature of the CNAM. Indeed, all of the CNAM MBA "students" have an average of 10 years or even more of professional experience, which is much above the average of other MBA programs in France and far higher than of the MBA programs in the US or in Asia. Why is the number of years of professional experience so important? The answer seems closely linked to the perception of many senior executives like Paul Dubrule and Gérard Pélisson, two founders and co-presidents of Accor group between 1983 and 1996. In the book "The Plus Management", they said:

"We are ready to create jobs for life [...]" (Hickman, 1991). Robert Sternberg - a contemporary American psychologist has defined the "practical intelligence as the set of skills and attitudes to solve everyday problems by utilizing knowledge gained [...]. One uses these skills to (a) manage oneself, (b) manage others, and (c) manage tasks" (Sternberg, 2007). According to this logic, CNAM MBA program's founders believe

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<sup>4</sup> Source: <http://www.cnrtl.fr/lexicographie/coop>

that enterprises need experienced managers. For them, the “signs” of management potentials could be reflected in managers’ a) "practical intelligence", including their knowledge of the culture and the history of the company; b) emotional intelligence and c) memory that retains the lessons learned from different situations experienced at work or in life.

The last requirement for good command of the English language continues to arouse great interest and provoke heated debate. The "defenders" of the French language were not convinced why a different language should be used, whereas instructors and learners all speak French. On the other hand, apart from the fact that the origin of this condition has come from the conformity of MBA programs, which were firstly established in the United States and then spread worldwide as a "quintessential American brand", the accreditation organizations such as AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS... impose this condition to all their members. Besides, for the "defenders" of the English language, the main reason is that the use of this language is more favorable to a very open international atmosphere.

Regarding the "fundamental purpose" of the CNAM MBA, according to the statement of the program's founders, the original purpose of the CNAM MBA program was to accompany and lead engineers and scientists, with solid professional experience to the higher positions with managerial responsibilities. Therefore, in order to develop a double competence i.e. a combination of technical skills and managerial skills for the future managers, the founders of CNAM MBA program had based the curriculum building process on the lack of managerial courses such as marketing, law, accounting, finance, human resource management ... in the traditional engineering curricula. Even though, the curriculum of the CNAM MBA program at the time still contained no course focusing on the development of managers' soft skills.

Since 2003, to respond to the growing demand for high-level managers in different countries and in different sectors of the economy, the program CNAM MBA is no longer limited to just accompanying and providing management training to French engineers and scientists. Sixteen years after its creation (1987), the CNAM MBA program has opened it up to a wider, more international and much more heterogeneous population. Naturally, it has increased the number of classes and lectures taught totally in English. In the meantime, it has also introduced new elements beyond traditional management subjects in the curriculum, for example, the business game (simulation of running a virtual business), the role-play in communication and negotiation courses and several study trips abroad. And above all, during class time, instructors have begun to pay more attention to the development of soft skills such as team spirit, sense of responsibility and sense of cooperation etc.

Our observation for ten years has shown that not only the soft skills are gaining more and more importance, but they also become inseparable from knowledge and other hard skills. Thus, the need for acquiring a combination of different elements beyond the knowledge and hard skills has become a general trend in many enterprises and individuals. By adopting the idea of Jean-Marie Barbier which defines, without separating soft skills from hard skills that:

“skill as a property given to an individual is constructed by the inference from the involvement of the individual in situated activities...” (p. 37)”, we consider the potentials to cooperate with the others efficiently as one of the most important

properties of managers at work and we will focus on the process of acquiring this skill as a form of learning without going further in defining the soft skill itself.

## **Data**

One of our hypotheses is that managers learn while conducting critical reflections on certain memories of their daily-life situations. Thus, in order to examine different forms of expression of critical reflections of managers, we were digging in more than 30 application files of CNAM MBA's students.

CNAM MBA selection procedure requires applicants to answer four open questions:

1) What is your career goal after MBA and what role will a MBA program play in achieving your goal; 2) Describe one of your achievement experiences; 3) Describe one of your failure experiences; 4) Describe one of your leadership experiences.

Moreover, the application also contains two forms completed by a third-party professional, who usually are applicant's employer or business partner. The forms ask these third-party professionals to answer the following questions:

1) In what conditions did you know the candidate and since when; 2) What are the main qualities of the candidate? 3) What are the areas in which the candidate will have to improve? 4) Are there any factors that may compromise the ability of the candidate to integrate the MBA program?

To illustrate our analysis we will describe below five cases. It is interesting to note that when some candidates have expressed a desire to take advantage of MBA to reach a position in the executive level, our curiosity was triggered by those who wish to change their profession, for example from a pilot or an engineer or a designer ... to a manager.

We'll see if the narratives of these individuals will confirm or prove the contrary of our hypotheses.

1) In the first case, the candidate stated that she would acquire good knowledge in management to access a high level management position. She wrote that the program shall give her confidence and help her to consolidate the long experience gained over the past twenty-five years. She was also aware of the achievements resulting from her efforts and personal abilities. Especially, in the third essay about her experience of failure, the word "incompatibility" has emerged as the key word. The situations used to illustrate the incompatibility included the conflicts between the number of work hours and family responsibilities, between her passion and her health, her sense of responsibility and technical defects of the companies she worked for.

Accepting the incompatibility between her job as a pilot and her family life is a "failure", remembering the days and nights without the possibility to attend family events, she even has once decided to refuse to carry out a mission received from the company, which, she said, did not meet the security conditions in order to illustrate her leadership experience. We've found that memories triggered, during this period, her intention to change the way of working with the others. As stated in the last sentence of her essay:

*"The new phase of my professional life begins,"* which reflects the level of her consciousness of the learning process.

Besides, it is worth to note that both remarks made by the third-party professionals also focused on candidate's way of reacting towards the others:

*"she should disregard the judgment of the others" and "a greater assertiveness would be necessary".* (File no. 1).

2) In the second case, the candidate is a computer engineer and a self-taught individual. He described his learning as follows:

*"My steps were successively instinctive, theoretical and pragmatic. I initially concentrated on the tasks, using only my thoughts, and then sought to justify my thoughts by theories. Finally, working on projects increasingly brought me the pragmatism required. Besides, I especially discovered the pleasure of leading a team, both in the context of a project and in the context of a business [...] I expect this MBA will give me a 360° view of what a business is, not only by a concrete and practical approach, but also by a scientific approach that could remove the doubts that never fail to attack me because of my unusual development path".* (File No. 2). His motivation for a MBA seemed not to have any link with the sense of cooperation. However, the words that came to our attention were "doubts" and "atypical". According to him, "self-taught" means atypical. Succeeding in acquiring knowledge and skills by himself, he felt that he had always plenty of doubts.

In his second essay about the success, he wrote:

*"I was not really aware of my success. I did what I had to do to make sure all went well. And finally I have realized the results of my works through the eyes of others".* Working and learning without passing academic evaluation, he needed to hear the opinions of others to gain the feeling of success and to reduce the feeling of doubts. Though he said that he found the pleasure in leading a team, he did express neither intention, nor consciousness on learning to work jointly with others.

In his third essay about the failure, he wrote that *"Another mistake that I often made was to stay hidden behind modesty waiting for someone smart enough to recognize my quality and my performance"*. He hid actually his intention to position himself among the others. His consciousness had been however triggered by the feeling of making mistake. We were surprised seeing the last line of his third essay, which was not about a professional experience, but it somehow revealed his feeling of regret on lacking *"not having spent more time with your loved one before his disappearing"*.

Contrary to the first case, the situations selected by the candidate in the second case are related more to his needs for the opinions of others and for being their protector.

In his last essay about leadership, he emphasized:

*"Although the pressure became more and more important, I kept my team immune from it."*

3) In the third case, the candidate is a young person, who had less than 4 years of work experience as a marketing coordinator. She expressed her intention to take advantage of the MBA, firstly to enter a large company and assume greater responsibilities and secondly, to earn high financial rewards. She noted:

*"My goal, if I can get into this company after graduation will be to redesign the marketing and commercial activity to help the company achieve the success it deserves. It is clear that the MBA would be a passport to help me get into the business at a high level and add more value to the company with the skills I will learn".*

In the second essay, she said:

*"The daily communication with the customer is the key to this project. I realized that during the designing process, good understanding of customers and a good cooperation with customers would lead to the best solutions".* Her sense of cooperation seemed to be generated in the early years of her career thanks to the experience she got by working with the customers. However, we have detected some "ironies" in another dimension of the cooperation, when the candidate revealed:

*"I was hired as a designer. I was given responsibility for all decisions relating to the form, the style and even the decision to finalize the project. I was also given freedom to run the market launch. However, I was always positioned in the company just as a designer. At the same time, I began to realize that a designer had been actually considered just as an artist. This means that such serious tasks as marketing or management was out of the realm of my proven ability. [...] What was my failure in all this? Why none of the executives of this company were willing to recognize that a designer could also be an executive? Her initial intention was to obtain a passport, which will allow her to change her image towards the employer.*

However, her real intention was also to cooperate with the company she will work for. She wrote

*"By positioning myself right from the beginning at the management level, I could avoid such a situation while making the best use of my design capabilities."*

In the last essay, the candidate shown that she was conscious of her learning to cooperate with customers by understand the behavior of customers or to make different teams work together. She wrote:

*"Understanding the buying patterns of international customers has been a great challenge. Another challenge was to ensure that the teams work effectively together."*

In the meantime, her consciousness about learning was still not completed. The third-party professionals wrote:

*"She needs to learn to relax more, do not expect too much from others as she is a perfectionist. She should understand that everyone is not as talented and hard working as she is. By doing this, she could show more understanding towards the others."*

*"She has strong managerial skills but her relative young age sometimes will necessitate her to learn diplomacy rules. She must also learn to allocate her energy and desire to do things well in order to optimize her time and resources." (File no. 3).*

4) The motivation of the fourth candidate was described as follows:

*"After working in a financial department for six years, I have acquired a very good knowledge of accounting, auditing, budgeting and reporting. Then, I have had the opportunity to take the challenge of creating a new department for a group of hundreds employees. Today I would like to continue my career by integrating, in the future, a general management position. The MBA will allow me to realize more easily the desire to discover other areas and other activities in my future career. I want to*

*change my position today to become a General Director. This change will allow me to broaden my skills. I want to have the opportunity to get a job in a foreign country. I want to develop my network and relationships through professional training."* His intention to learn a new way of cooperation appeared only after gaining good knowledge and experience in the functional departments. It was expressed through the desire to discover other areas of activities, to broaden his skills and to work abroad.

His successful experience was presented as follows:

*"A significant successful experience of my career has been managing a project of re-engineering the manufacturing process in a factory. This 3-year project has taught me to undertake the following activities: review the project plan, manage the project team, meet the employees, follow the developers, perform the test and monitor the operations, encourage people to join a business plan, ensure change management and write procedures."*

His experience of failure was:

*"I want to modernize the way information is transferred between the accounting and procurement services. I think I failed in my communication for this project. I was the only person who believed in the usefulness of the project. »"*

It has shown us a high level of consciousness of his learning process through involving people in different activities and communicating his ideas.

Regarding his leadership experience he noted:

*"In my group, I managed to impose the choice of new technologies that have never been used in France and in my area. To carry out my work as a purchasing manager, it was essential to understand the innovation and to understand the new technology. I gained leadership in the group because my understanding of the technical aspects allowed me to develop new products."* (File no. 4). The repetition of words "to understand" or "understanding" has shown us that, according to him, having knowledge were a must before going further in cooperation.

5) Very similar to the previous one, the candidate in the fifth case wrote that:

*"Now, as I have acquired a good technical knowledge and a lot of experience in coordinating multicultural project team, I would like to broaden my skills by acquiring more general responsibilities and therefore be able to occupy a new position such as Business Unit Manager ... And I'm planning to start my own business. In addition, the acquisition of new skills will bring me the confidence, which is also an important factor in running a successful business."*

In her second essay about the achievement, she wrote:

*"With a good teamwork with R & D and deployment departments, the product could be developed and deployed within an acceptable time for all customers. Involving R & D department and program managers in the product definition phase and proposing a new scope to customers instead of trying to follow their fixed tight schedule are the key factors."*



Again, in the selected situations to illustrate her professional achievements there was a lot of “teamwork” with the involvement of multiple departments and of customers. This shows her full consciousness about the activities which allowed her to cooperate with the others.

However, the chosen situation to illustrate her failure was related to another dimension of the cooperation:

*"Following a corporate reorganization, I was transferred to the department of products and marketing as product line manager without any specific experience in product management. I decided to follow a MBA to acquire and strengthen some skills I needed. Unfortunately, my funding request was denied by the company and by the funding agency. Looking back made me realize that I was missing a clear career path and I was taken by surprise by the reorganization."* This time, her consciousness had been triggered by the negative reaction of her company and of the funding agency towards her training request.

In her last essay about leadership, she wrote:

*"To be able to meet the tight schedule already engaged with the client, I decided to convince the R & D team to start with an existing prototype instead of working from scratch as they intended to do. It was not easy to realize this idea, because the company was very R & D oriented, so I started the discussion with the deployment team and technical project managers, outlining the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. Once we agreed, I submitted the idea to the R & D manager by developing the two alternatives and showing why the proposed solution was the best for all parties. I naturally develop leadership when I feel strong and confident in my role. It is still hard for me to show leadership in limbo or in unstable situations. It's something that I continue to work on."* Her intention reached a new stage to develop the sense of cooperation even in a more complex and difficult situation, beyond her comfort zone.

According to the reference of the third-party professional, the areas she needs to improve are indeed leadership, self-management, self-confidence and intellectual wingspan. (File no. 5)

## **Discussion**

During our research, the narratives of individuals confirm that the sense of cooperation is a very important element for the transformation of a worker to a manager. The intention to learn how to work with someone for something or with the others differently can be triggered by a variety of specific situations. The starting point may also be found in some critical condition in connection with the conflict between what the individual likes to do for himself and what he must do for others, with doubts about one's own ideas, or with the high complexity level of a project requiring the involvement of other etc.

Now it becomes clear from these narratives that individuals presented in our research share a common point: the intention to learn a new way of working with others. After accumulating enough experience and expertise, instead of continuing to act alone and directly on the object of their work, the intention to learn from these individuals turned to a more sophisticated level. Now they want to learn how to influence others

and to do things through the others, to assume responsibility for the work of the others and therefore to maintain much more complex interdependent relationships with people.

According to the classification of Schugurensky (2007), there are three forms of informal learning: self-directed learning (conscious and intentional), incidental learning (unintentional but conscious) and socialization (unintentional, unconscious). Regarding the last form, he said:

"socialization (or tacit learning) refers to an almost natural assimilation of the values, attitudes, behavior, skills and knowledge that occurs in everyday life. Not only the learner shows no prior intention to learn, but he is absolutely not aware that a learning activity has occurred" (ibid, p.16). Within this research, the narratives of the individuals helped us to see that learning by reflexive thinking could be an intentional but unconscious process. Through the essays of the managers, we could realize that despite the intention to learn to cooperate with others, the individual were unaware of their learning activities. While facing the incompatibility or the conflicts, while having doubts or making mistakes, while feeling refused or failing, the individuals were actually conducting a very active learning process, which should lead them to the realization of their intention.

Finally, our argument is that the need to acquire a sense of cooperation plays a key role in the learning process of managers. Moreover, most of their narratives confirm the findings of previous studies, which demonstrate the influence of key people in the surroundings such as the family, colleagues, leaders or subordinates on the managers, because the sense of cooperation can not be taught in isolated conditions, without interaction with others.

## **Conclusion**

Henry Mintzberg stated that manager's job is not limited to planning, organizing, coordinating and controlling. The narratives collected for our research confirm that the roles of a manager can be reversed if the tasks, the situations and the expectations change. Also according to Mintzberg, "The manager's job is not ordered, continuous, sequential; it is neither uniform nor homogenous. It is extremely fragmented, irregular, changing and variable..." (p.71). While our observations show that manager's job does not always contain purely professional activities like other professions. Besides, their job consists of many fragments of different activities that are sometimes difficult to be named. These activities seem to be connected to each other by rather indirect and very complex relations. If direct relations only link several activities in a specific time sequence or in a specific place, indirect relations can involve all the activities of a manager around the meaning of his profession, through time, space and moreover through different cultures. In this light, it is a key element for our research that learning process of a manager cannot be considered as an isolated action, but a combination of changing activities depending on the situations.

Finally, we can add that the narratives of these individuals have allowed us to confirm the relevance of our hypotheses about learning through reflective thinking about the memories of the daily life of managers. We can also, at this stage, invite other researchers to use and test these terms, which we believe are appropriate for further research in the future.

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