

DISCUSSION OF REINSTEDT AND GIBSON-NOLAN PAPERS

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Program Chairman Ashford Stalnaker has clearly delineated the role of discussant as entirely up to the discussant of the moment. Research into CPR's history has suggested that the discussant ought to include

something old,
something new,
something borrowed,
and something provocative.

Such is in line with our meeting month.

I shall comment on each paper separately and then point to a surprisingly common theme found in two such apparently diverse efforts.

Bob Reinstedt's paper is delightfully written for oral presentation and contains his usual humor and apt illustrations. Critically, I feel he opened and closed with unnecessary modesty. While many of us are familiar with his distaste for "data-free debates" (and I have personally learned from having been the deserved recipient of his remarks in that direction), I believe that Bob Reinstedt is well qualified by line experience and research contribution to our industry to comment on research directions in the next decade. For example, his contribution to our group alone spans more than the eleven continuous years of annual meetings. Of course, I suppose that record might be more one of survival than erudition.

A reference was made to the necessity of studying the changes of job content and the shifting of roles, numbers of people required, and their needs. I agree. In addition, we should look into the change of work ethic, and life styles, probably on a basis much broader than that implied by "computer personnel." In the same vein, we have barely begun the job of full integration of minorities into our work forces, including management. My observation -- on a not quite data-free basis -- is that our industry will have far more difficulty with the new emphasis on affirmative action programs for women than we have had on the continuing AAP's for racial minorities.

Mr. Reinstedt referred a number of times to the manager or management. I believe the manager is an appropriate and useful starting point for research discussions. Not only are we failing to use existing research, but we have been very weak in identifying the development needs of managers as a class of workers in the organization. The core difficulty is the lack of explicit and consistent behavior (and result) expectations for managers. If we do not know what we are trying to develop, and for what purpose, then it is little wonder that we have made little progress in 13 years, as Bob noted.

It might just be that a successful research attack on the manager role, perceived of value to the organization, would magically produce the research dollars needed in that area, and others. A hypothesis-based effort here could easily change the operating climate of an organization in a self-fulfilling way.

The Gibson and Nolan paper is especially well structured in that the reader (or listener) is told what to expect, what has been finished, what is next, and so on. Such writing clarity is important in a presentation of its length.

I believe the authors succeed in their announced purpose of bringing some research findings logically to bear on three MIS management issues such as they have arbitrarily defined them. The discussion presents the issues fairly, and the issue interfaces are correctly softened to reflect the continuous and integrated nature of managing.

Let me first note one quibble. You do not allow for the possibility of unionized work groups in your discussion. Other speakers than myself at these meetings have noted the increasing probability of third party influence in the computer organization, including professionals.

On a broader basis, I would be concerned that you have underestimated (or at least understated) the enormous influence that the manager as a person has on the subordinate organization. Managers are not normally perceived on a daily basis as planning, organizing, controlling, selecting, etc.; rather, they are seen as people: shy, dishonest, relaxed, helpful, and so on. Therefore, the article in the hands of some MIS managers might be seen as behavior prescriptive, even though you explicitly note otherwise. At issue is the styles discussion. I have been down the adopted styles training route and have been bloodied, and I know others have.

I would have preferred to see an emphasis on self-awareness training, both in the sense of perceptions by

others and of self needs. With such insight, the manager is better prepared to operate within the style/needs of the managers above, of the subordinates, and of that undefined but pervasive element called institution climate.

Finally, the paper leaves an unresolved dilemma. If the MIS manager must personally possess and keep abreast of so much "technology," then how can the manager become identified with operation of the business as a whole, grow the requisite general management skills, and thus be realistically considered for advancement? The Donald Kaye paper on MIS Career Paths, delivered a year ago at this meeting in Toronto, makes clear the statistically bleak outlook for MIS manager advancement, at least up to now. As Mr. Nolan noted in his recent HBR article, "Plight of the EDP Manager," "It is important to recognize that the EDP manager is a manager, not a technician, and that his particular job challenges and attracts a growing number of bright, young, aggressive managers." Maybe we would do better to emphasize the MIS manager as the business manager, who does not know the technology, who therefore must select technically knowledgeable subordinate supervisors and learn how to lead and control by indirect methods and judgments.

My role as discussant draws mercifully to a close. The common theme in these two diverse papers, in my view, is the focus on manager judgment. Mr. Reinstedt emphasized it in two ways; first, that research results are to enhance the manager's judgment, not replace it; and second, by implication, results should be useful to the industry (apart from their research excellence, per se). Messrs. Gibson and Nolan emphasized the MIS manager's judgment requirements in many instances, including the detailing of options normally available on just three key issues of the job. If I am correct in perceiving this common theme, then our Program Chairman deserves praise for his uncommon wisdom-- and perhaps good luck -- in placing the papers contiguously in the program.

I trust you have heard something old, something new, and something provocative. If our Session Chairman deems that we have time, I would urge that the authors be given first rebuttal, and then we may open the floor to general comment on the papers -- or on the discussant.