Senior Management Standards, Management Development and Systems Thinking

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Abstract

This paper summarises the research work associated with the development and trialling of the standards of competence, personal competencies and knowledge and understanding for senior management published by the Management Charter Initiative in the UK in March 1995. The structure of the standards is described and system thinking archetypes are developed to examine the application of standards for conformance and development purposes.

The Development of Senior Management Standards

In 1993, Henley Management College, the Northern Regional Management Centre and David Mathews Associates were contracted to develop a set of Senior Management Standards, knowledge and understanding and competence models for the Management Charter Initiative under funding principally from the Department of Employment. This work was commissioned as a direct result of the investigatory report of Crawley and Reay (1992).

The research activity on the development of the standards by Henley Management College in 1993 involved collecting data at nine workshops involving about 200 senior managers. A senior manager was defined as being the chief executive or a member of the executive team or at the level reporting to that group in a large organization or operating subsidiary. Over half of the sample held director titles. The information gathered was further supplemented by expert consultation with business schools and others involved in senior management development.

Performance standards of senior management activity were developed and the underpinning knowledge and understanding required to achieve those outcomes and related personal competences were identified in accordance with the MCI Management Standards model (Fig.1)

The standards were broken down into greater behavioural detail firstly into units of competence and secondly into elements of competence. The definition of each element of competence was supplemented by performance criteria which offered; a means of measurement, the requisite knowledge and understanding and the range of contexts in which these outcomes may be observed. The analysis revealed four functional areas represented in a dynamic manner reflecting a cycle of senior management activity (fig 2).

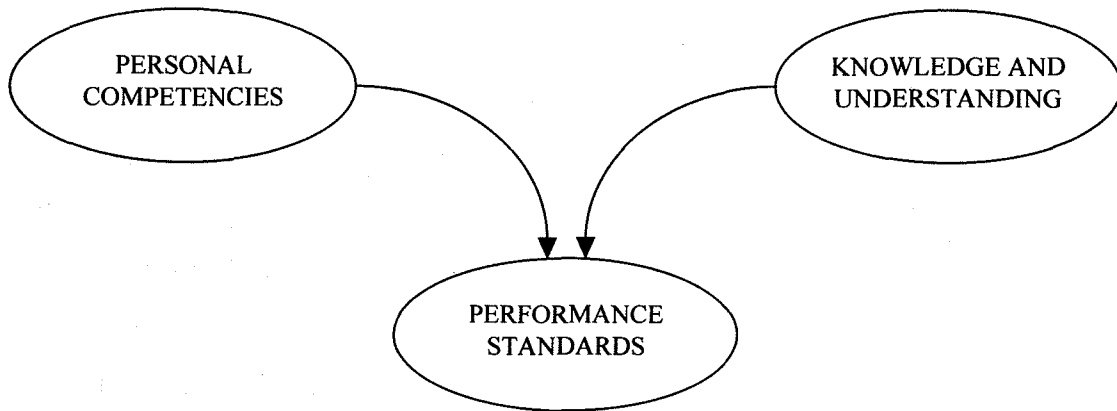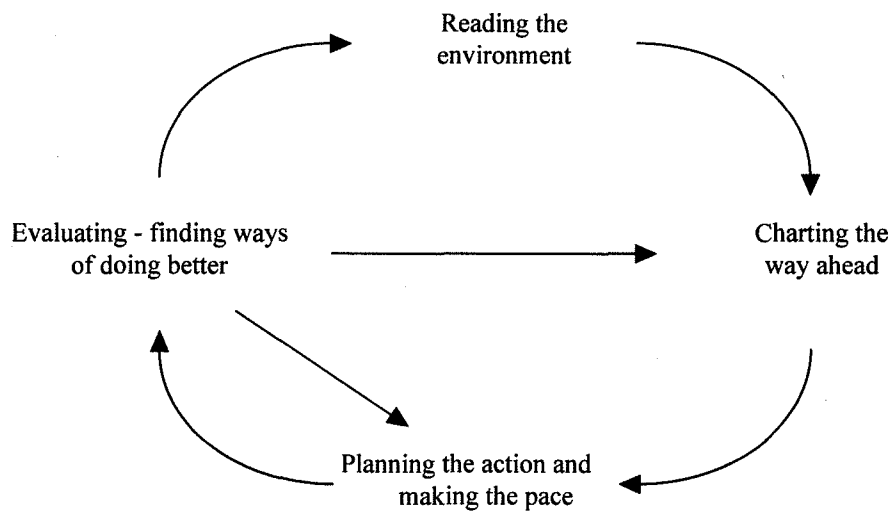## Fig 1 - Structure of the MCI Senior Management Standards

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   ┌─────────────┐                          ┌──────────────────┐
   │  PERSONAL   │                          │ KNOWLEDGE AND    │
   │ COMPETENCIES│                          │ UNDERSTANDING    │
   └─────────────┘                          └──────────────────┘
             ↘                            ↙
              ┌──────────────────┐
              │   PERFORMANCE    │
              │    STANDARDS     │
              └──────────────────┘
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Fig 2   The Functional Model of Senior Management

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                          Reading the
                          environment
                 ↗                        ↘
   Evaluating - finding ways    ──────→    Charting the
      of doing better                      way ahead
               ↑         ↘                      ↙
                      Planning the action and  ←
                        making the pace
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The Senior Management Standards were then tested on other senior managers by a consortium consisting of Durham University Business School, Leeds Business School in Leeds Metropolitan University, and Liz Wilson Consultancy.

The first stage of testing in 1993-4 focused upon small and medium sized organisations (SMOs). Over forty practising senior managers and experts took part in workshops to review the standards and over hundred others were asked for their comments through questionnaires and interviews. Following a language review the senior management standards were subsequently tested by senior managers within their workplace. The trials involved;

- supported trials with over one hundred senior managers in twelve organisations
- parallel trialling in seven National Health Service establishments
- independent group and individual triallists consisting of over 100 senior managers
- a postal survey sent to over 2,500 senior managers

The evidence from the trials suggested that the revised generic standards were applicable to:

- senior managers in all sizes of organisations
- across the functions within organisations
- directors and senior managers
- senior managers in both the public and private sectors

Fig 3 - *Overview of the MCI Senior Management performance standards*

Understanding and influencing the environment

A1 External Trends

A1.1 Review of the external operating environment
Develop systems to review the organization's external operating environments identify customer needs and spot opportunities for product and service development.

A1.2 The wider environment
Evaluate and respond appropriately to changes in the political, statutory or regulatory agencies and trading environment.

A1.3 Competitors and collaborators
Identify and evaluate existing and potential competitors and collaborators.

A2 Internal Strengths and Weaknesses

A2.1 **Product and service audit**
Identify problems and opportunities in products and services.

A2.2 **Organizational structures**
Review and improve the organization's structures and systems.

A2.3 **Management audit**
Identify and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the management team.

A2.4 **Management competence**
Plan how to develop the effectiveness of the management team.

A2.5 Financial resources
Develop systems to review the generation and allocation of financial structures.

A3 Stakeholders

A3.1 Stakeholders' interests
Identify the current and likely future interests of stakeholders

A3.2 Stakeholders' impact
Evaluate and influence stakeholders' capabilities to help or hinder the achievement of the organisation's objectives

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Setting The Strategy And Gaining Commitment

B1 Setting the Strategy and Gaining Commitment

B1.1 **Vision and Mission**
Create a shared vision and develop a mission to give purpose to the organization.

B1.2 **Objectives and strategies**
Formulate appropriate objectives and strategies to guide the organization.

B1.3 **Values and policies**
Develop values and policies to establish an appropriate organizational culture.

B1.4 **Gaining support**
Gain support for the organization's vision, mission, objectives, strategies, values and policies.

Planning, Implementing and Monitoring

C1 Programmes, Projects and Plans

C1.1 Preparing and submitting proposals
Prepare and submit proposals for programmes, projects and plans to meet the organization's objectives.

C1.2 Evaluating proposals
Evaluate and amend proposals in the light of the organization's objectives and its needs as a whole.

C1.3 Providing professional advice
Provide professional and technical advice on preparing and implementing programmes, projects and plans.

C1.4 Generating support and obtaining resources
Generate support and obtain resources for programmes, projects and plans.

C1.5 Obtaining agreement
Negotiate and obtain agreement for programmes, projects and plans.

C2 Delegation And Action

C2.1 Delegating, responsibility and authority
Delegate responsibility and authority for areas of action within the organization.

C2.2 Agreeing targets
Agree targets for people and units inside and outside the organization.

C2.3 Providing advice
Provide advice and support to staff, contractors and suppliers to solve problems, make improvements and maintain progress.

C2.4 Championing
Promote and protect planned work and those who carry it out.

C3 Culture

C3.1 Diversity
Encourage a diversity of working styles among teams and individuals consistent with the achievement of organizational objectives.

C3.2 Collaboration
Identify and set up collaborative and consultative working arrangements.

C3.3 Values in work
Consult and provide guidance on the ways in which values are to be expressed in work and working relationships

C4 Monitoring

C4.1 Utilising key indicators
Select and use key financial and other indicators to monitor programmes, projects and plans.

C4.2 Reviewing performance
Obtain and evaluate data on performance against key indicators and update plans and schedules.

C4.3 Managing future performance
Develop systems for managing future performance.

Evaluating And Improving Performance

D1   Evaluating and Improving Performance

D1.1 Developing measures and criteria
> Develop measures and criteria to evaluate the achievement of the organization's mission, objectives and policies.

D1.2   Evaluating organizational success and failure
> Evaluate the extent to which the organization's mission, objectives and policies are being achieved.

D1.3   Identifying operational causes
> Identify causes of success and failure in programmes, projects, plans and their implementation.

D1.4   Re-evaluating performance
> Identify possible strengths and weaknesses in the organization's mission, objectives and policies.

A model of personal competencies in behavioural terms was developed by the Northern Regional Management Centre comprising:

Judgement	Building teams
Self confidence	Information search
Strategic perspective	Communication
Influencing others	Achievement focus.

and the main aspects of knowledge and understanding were identified as being

Reading/analysing situations	People
Concepts/theory/cerebral	"Technical" managerial
Political	

The research undertaken for the MCI on the Senior Management Standards by the national trial consortium in 1994-5 revealed that many senior managers were concerned with using the standards for either developmental or conformance purposes. If the senior managers used the standards for conformance purposes they tended to be concerned with the assessment of their past performance and provided evidence of their competence as senior managers. This was in line with the usage of management standards by supervisory and middle managers. However it was noted that a significant group of senior managers expressed the very strong view that they were not interested in using the standards for assessment purposes but wished to use the standards for development purposes. This led the author to investigate the dichotomy further and it became apparent that the division between conformance and development was considerable.

The Conformance Paradigm
Many senior manager were very conscious of the fact that they felt that they could do their current job better if given access to information, concepts, tools, techniques. Their desire was clearly to do their existing job better through the "reduction of their ignorance". In many cases this view was associated with an awareness that mistakes were being made and that there were considerable areas of improvement anticipated from a "quick fix " from short training courses. The conformance paradigm can lead to balancing loop archetypes in systems thinking.

Fig 4 The Conformance / development dichotomy

I am most concerned about

| Conformance | | Development |
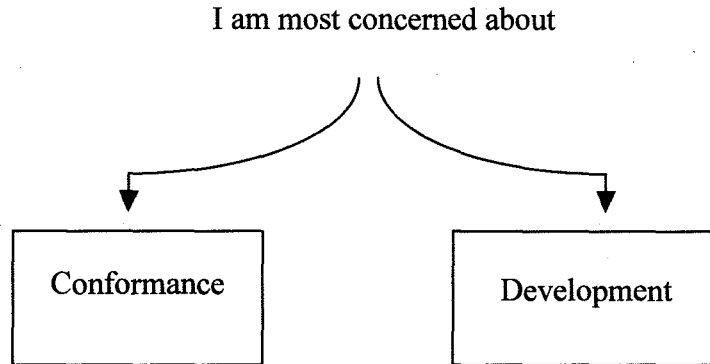
The archetypes associated with the conformance role

The successful "fix"

In some cases the individuals acquired the necessary skills, tools, techniques, and they perceived that their performance within their current position improved. However, in particular the counter intuitive effects of implementing the learning from a course and its impact upon activities across organisational boundaries was reported in many cases.

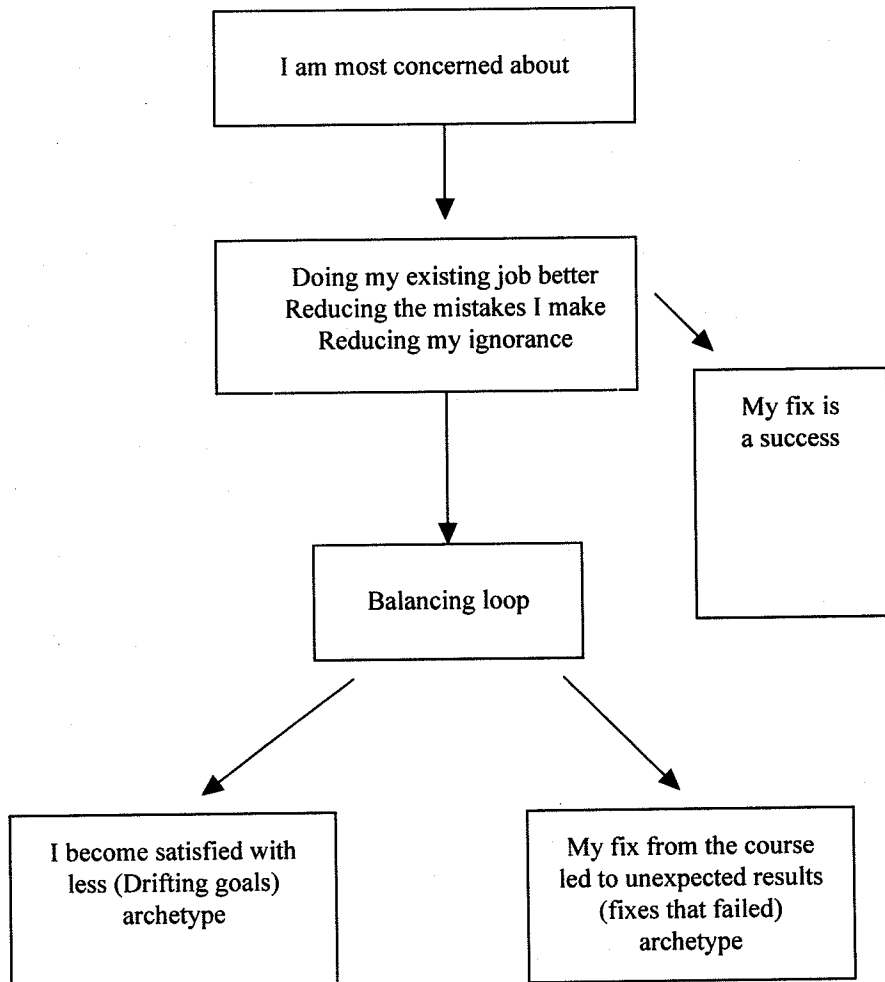### The satisfaction with less (drifting goals) archetype

In other cases the individuals realised that their expectations had been too high and that they had been in search of "a holy grail". Sharing experiences with other peers often provided delegates with the opportunity of realising that they were not alone in finding a particular business issue/problem very difficult to solve and these individuals typically modified their goals downwards and became satisfied with less.

Fixes that fail archetype

Some individuals attempted to put into practice what they had learnt from the training programme. The "quick fix " however was often seen to be associated with unexpected influences in other areas and the knock on effect of the impact of the fix on other parts of the system were seen to be considerable.

In addition senior managers often commented that different parts of the organisation became opposed to the changes that the senior manager wished to introduce as a result of the training programme that they had attended whilst other senior managers have reported that their colleagues felt that they were using "flavour of the month" business school theories and they experienced an "anti business school backlash" (accidental adversaries)

Fig 5 The training activity emphasising conformance to standards leading to balancing loop consequences.

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│     I am most concerned about   │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
                │
                ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│   Doing my existing job better  │ ──────────┐
│   Reducing the mistakes I make  │           ▼
│     Reducing my ignorance       │    ┌──────────────┐
└─────────────────────────────────┘    │   My fix is  │
                │                       │   a success  │
                ▼                       │              │
      ┌──────────────────┐             └──────────────┘
      │  Balancing loop  │
      └──────────────────┘
         ╱            ╲
        ▼              ▼
┌──────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────┐
│ I become satisfied│ │ My fix from the course│
│ with less (Drifting│ │ led to unexpected     │
│ goals) archetype  │ │ results (fixes that   │
│                  │ │ failed) archetype     │
└──────────────────┘  └──────────────────────┘
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The Developmental Paradigm

Senior Managers and directors possessing a more forward looking and self developmental viewpoint frequently expressed considerable discomfort with the concept of senior management standards solely being used for assessing past and current effectiveness. These senior managers were interested in using the standards for self development purposes. A typical response was:

> "If these standards are to be based in an assessment context of current and past performance my organisation wants nothing to do with them!"

Frequently these senior managers and directors had considerable skills in self diagnosis and could express their development needs in appropriate competence, competency or knowledge and understanding terminology.

The development paradigm can lead to reinforcing loop archetypes in systems thinking.

The Archetypes associated with the developmental paradigm

Eye off the ball

This archetype in Systems Thinking terminology is frequently referred to as the limits to growth archetype and tragedy of the commons archetype.

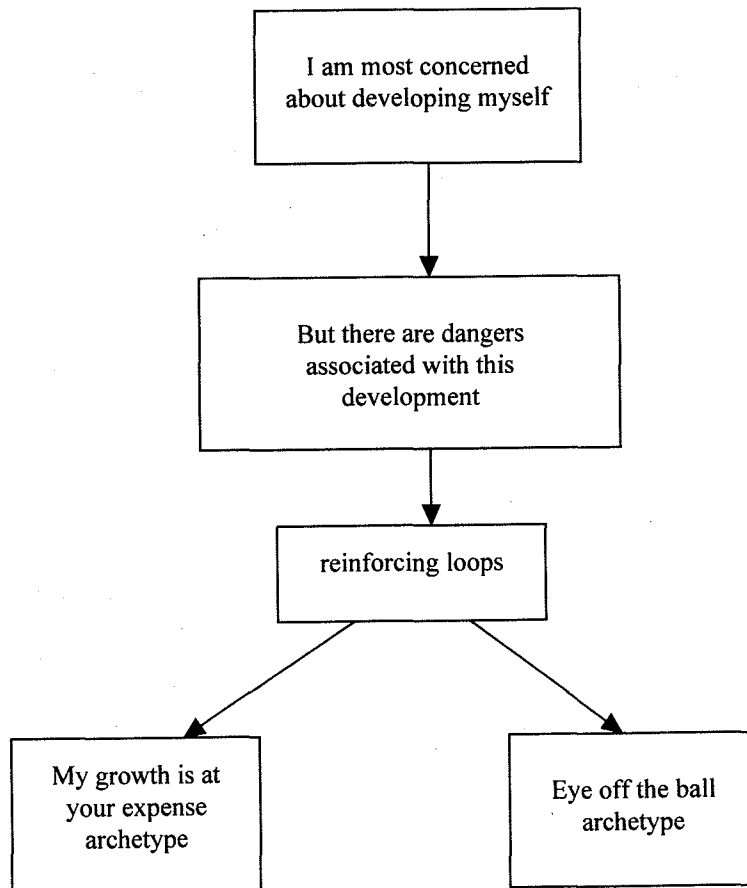The activity of "senior manager spending time on a training course can lead to a number of consequences":

> a perception by other managers that the manager is "distracted" and not concentrating on the business. For example, the Chairman of a large Chemical company recently stated that he felt very guilty at being present at a seminar since he felt that he should be focusing solely upon the management of the business and was concerned at the messages that his attendance might send out to his senior management team.
>
> an over emphasis on interesting,challenging and enjoyable learning at the expense of the important and urgent activities. This is particularly the case with directors who have considerably more discretion in the content of their work than other managers in the organisation.

My growth is at your expense archetype

> The more time that a senior manager spends on learning and development activities the less time is available for other activities eg work activities, home life etc

Fig 6 The development activity emphasising self development and leading to reinforcing loop consequences

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            ┌─────────────────────────┐
            │    I am most concerned   │
            │  about developing myself │
            └─────────────────────────┘
                         │
                         ▼
            ┌─────────────────────────┐
            │    But there are dangers │
            │    associated with this  │
            │       development        │
            └─────────────────────────┘
                         │
                         ▼
            ┌─────────────────────────┐
            │    reinforcing loops     │
            └─────────────────────────┘
                    ╱         ╲
                   ▼           ▼
      ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐
      │ My growth is at│    │Eye off the ball│
      │ your expense   │    │  archetype    │
      │ archetype      │    │               │
      └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘
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