

# Opinion Paper: Unifying Management Theory and Existential Thought: Insights from Mintzberg and Becker

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## Abstract

*This article examines the enduring influence of Henry Mintzberg's managerial roles framework by integrating it with Ernest Becker's exploration of existential themes, underscoring their relevance in today's business environments shaped by technological advancements and evolving organizational dynamics. The evolution of managerial practices in response to challenges like artificial intelligence and digital communication highlights the necessity of blending Mintzberg's principles with modern perspectives for effective adaptation. By connecting Mintzberg's focus on organizational structures with Becker's insights into human behavior, the paper emphasizes the importance of symbolism and holistic understanding in interpreting managerial actions and existential concerns. It considers Becker's view that confronting existential anxieties can drive personal growth and foster meaningful connections, offering valuable insights for navigating contemporary managerial complexities.*

**Keywords:** Managerial Roles, Technological Advancements, Existential Themes, Organizational Dynamics, Transformative Growth

## 1. Introduction

In his influential work "The Nature of Managerial Work," Mintzberg (1973) begins with a fundamental inquiry: "What do managers do?" He then undertakes a comprehensive exploration of this question, investigating the complexities of managerial tasks and their implications within organizational contexts: This is a simple question, posed to managers by their children, by the staff specialists who work for them, and by the university students who hope one day to replace them. Ask it and you are likely to be told, in Henry Fayol's words of 1916, that managers plan, organize, coordinate and control. "Fine," you may reply, "but what managers really do?" If you are intent on getting the answer, you may bury yourself in one of America's better management libraries for a good part of one year. After having read perhaps two hundred books and articles, you will emerge and be able to cite the more recent literature. (p. 1). Managers play a diverse role within organizations, encompassing the tasks of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling diverse resources to achieve organizational goals. They are instrumental in setting goals, establishing organizational structures, allocating resources, motivating employees, and making decisions to ensure the organization operates efficiently and effectively. Moreover, managers are key to fostering a positive work environment, addressing challenges, and adapting to

changes through strategic thinking and effective communication. As highlighted by Mintzberg and other scholars, these managerial functions - planning, organizing, motivating, directing, and controlling - form the foundation of managerial work, enhancing foresight, coherence, purpose, and the integration of collective efforts [1-3].

## Mintzberg (1973) Writes:

The manager is ostensibly trained in MBA and MPA programs through the world. He is written to in magazines such as Fortune and Business Week and written about in journals such as Administrative Science Quarterly and Journals of Management Studies. He is tempted via hundreds of courses supposedly designed to help him manage better and, if he works in any of the larger public or private organizations of America, he has probably been exposed to in-house management development programs as well. Furthermore, it is surrounded by teams of management scientists - the planners, information systems designers, operations researchers, and so on—who exist simply to make organizations and especially their managers more efficient in carrying out their work. All this and still we do not really know what managers do. (p. 2). Despite the widespread access to managerial training programs, extensive coverage in leading business publications, and the proliferation

of resources designed to improve managerial effectiveness, the true essence of managerial activities remains elusive. This paradox highlights the ongoing challenge in fully understanding the multifaceted role of managers, despite the abundance of resources available for their professional growth. Furthermore, the presence of dedicated teams of management scientists, tasked with optimizing organizational efficiency and supporting managerial endeavours, adds another layer of complexity to this inquiry.

## 2. Method

To explore the challenges in project management within an industrial context, this study employed a semi-structured questionnaire informed by the theoretical frameworks of Henry Mintzberg and Ernest Becker. Mintzberg's work on managerial roles and organizational structures highlights the influence of social contexts on management, while Becker's existential psychology emphasizes the symbolic dimensions of human behavior in response to existential concerns [4-8]. The questionnaire, designed to capture both organizational dynamics and existential motivations, was administered digitally via Google Forms and through interviews within the project management department of the PL P11 product line. This approach allowed for a comprehensive collection of data on managerial practices and challenges. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed using thematic analysis [9]. This process involved transcribing the responses, thoroughly familiarizing oneself with the content, coding the data to identify significant patterns, and synthesizing these patterns into key themes. This method provided insights into how symbolic and socially constructed elements, as articulated by Mintzberg and Becker, influence managerial practices and challenges. Applying these theoretical perspectives, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics in project management, demonstrating the impact of social and symbolic factors. This analysis contributes practical strategies for addressing real-world challenges in industrial project management, aiding project managers in navigating operational patterns, fostering team synergy, and optimizing project outcomes. Additionally, it is

important to note that this study forms part of a larger investigation within the framework of the author's dissertation.

## 3. What do I Have to do?

### 3.1. Quantity and Speed

Mintzberg's study on CEOs revealed a relentless pace of activity throughout the workday, with minimal breaks observed. The study highlighted that tasks such as managing correspondence (averaging 36 pieces daily), attending to telephone calls (averaging 5 per day), and participating in meetings (averaging 8) consumed nearly every available moment from the commencement to the conclusion of their workday. Breaks were rare, and even short respites often involved work-related discussions or tasks. Mintzberg observed that opportunities for diversions, such as observation tours or informal discussions before meetings, were rarely scheduled and typically remained focused on organizational concerns: The mail (average of 36 pieces a day), telephone calls (average of 5 per day), and meetings (average of 8) accounted for almost every minute from the moment these men entered their offices in the morning until they departed in the evenings. A true break seldom occurred. Coffee was taken during meetings, and lunchtime was almost always devoted to formal or informal meetings. When free time appeared, ever-present subordinates quickly usurped it. If these managers wished to have a change of pace, they had two means at their disposal – the observation tour and the light discussions that usually preceded scheduled meetings. But these were not regularly scheduled breaks, and they were seldom totally unrelated to the issue at hand – managing the organization. (p. 30). However, it is important to acknowledge that with the proliferation of information and communication technology (ICT) since Mintzberg's study in 1973, the volume and complexity of managerial tasks, including handling mail, calls, and meetings, have likely increased significantly [10]. Managers who participated in 2022/2023 surveys often echoed and elaborated upon these observations, recognizing the evolving landscape of managerial responsibilities amidst advancements in technology and organizational dynamics.

### Q1: Which Three Days of The Week Do You Find the Most Taxing?

|                  |        |           |          |   |
|------------------|--------|-----------|----------|---|
| <b>Manager A</b> | Monday | Tuesday   | Thursday | Remark: Responses were selected by (A, B, C) managers who took part of this survey. |
| <b>Manager B</b> | Monday | Tuesday   | Friday   |   |
| <b>Manager C</b> | Monday | Wednesday | Thursday |   |

**Table 1: Managers' responses regarding the amount of their daily work duties and the working pace (own research, 2022/2023).**

**Manager A:** "I experience each working day quite intensely, so I find practically every day of the working week challenging. I cannot provide information regarding a specific day of the week if you have any questions with anything related to a specific day."

**Manager B:** "I consider Monday a challenging day because I go back to work after the weekend. I see Wednesday as a "breakthrough day" because it's in the middle of the work week. On the other hand, Fridays are difficult for me because I try to get as much work done as possible before the weekend."

**Manager C:** "Recently, I have been responsible for several complex projects, so I experience every day intensely. However, I understand that other colleagues often find certain days more challenging or busy based on their work or personal schedules. The perception of which days are the most demanding varies for example among my colleagues and depends on their individual circumstances."

### 3.2. The Relationship Between Action and Reflection

Mintzberg's research suggests that managers tend to gravitate towards dynamic and immediate aspects of their work, favouring activities that are current, specific, and well-defined over routine tasks. This tendency towards active engagement within their managerial environment promotes a preference for hands-on problem-solving and adaptability, rather than contemplative planning, despite classical management theories advocating for a more reflective approach.

#### Mintzberg (1973) Writes:

To conclude, we have further indications that the manager adopts particular behaviour patterns as a result of the nature of his work.

The pressure of the managerial environment does not encourage the development of reflective planners, the classical literature notwithstanding. The job breeds adaptive information-manipulators who prefer the live, concrete situation. The manager works in an environment of stimulus-response, and he develops in his work a clear preference for live action. (p. 38). However, considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to remote work and virtual collaboration, it is important to explore how this crisis has affected the balance between action and reflection among project managers in contemporary post-pandemic contexts [11]. Insights from managers who participated in the survey provide valuable perspectives on the impact of this unprecedented disruption on their operational practices and decision-making processes.

#### Q2: What Three Activities in Your Work Can Be Described as Current, Specific, Well-Defined, And Non-Routine?

|                  |                                       |                       |   |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| <b>Manager A</b> | Customer meetings                     | Escalation management | Team coaching                               |
| <b>Manager B</b> | Participation in project meetings     | Project planning      | Implementation of new project methodologies |
| <b>Manager C</b> | New project management tools creation | Scripting             | Management of electronic applications       |

**Table 2: Managers' responses to the question of the relationship between action and reflection (own research, 2022/2023).**

**Manager A:** "I do not currently engage in activities that are 'current' or 'non-routine'. My current job consists of managing project escalations, team coaching and meetings with customers. As part of these activities, I try to understand the context of the project conversation and prepare solutions that are specific and relevant for colleagues and customers."

**Manager B:** "My work activities are formed on the basis of the organization's short- and medium-term technological development plans. This also means that I engage in activities that are current or specific to events or situations that occur on a certain project date. My activities are created on the basis of already existing project methodologies and mainly consist of routine tasks, which, however, can be adapted to specific project situations in real time."

**Manager C:** "Problem solving. Although not a routine in the traditional sense, I try to help colleagues by providing information and helping with various tasks. This also includes the creation of new project management tools, scripting, and electronic application management. Problem solving is one of my strengths. Whether it's a technical problem, a conceptual challenge, or anything else. Let me know the details and I'll try to help you find a solution!"

### 4. Discussion and Critical Reflexion

In critically reflecting on the research findings through the lens of Ernest Becker's existential psychology, it is important to examine how his exploration of the human struggle for autonomy and self-assertion relates to the behaviors and motivations observed in this study. Becker's concept of the individual who defies personal frailty and strives for self-deification resonates with the intense drive for control and achievement observed among project managers in industrial settings. These managers, akin to Becker's "self-created man," resist being mere instruments of organizational forces. Instead, they immerse themselves fully in their roles, often displaying a relentless pursuit of project goals that mirrors the existential rebellion Becker articulates.

#### As Becker (1973) Observes in *The Denial of Death*:

And this brings us to our final type of man: the one who asserts himself out of defiance of his own weakness, who tries to be a god unto himself, the master of his fate; a self-created man. He will not be merely the pawn of others, of society; he will not be a passive sufferer and secret dreamer, nursing his own inner flame in oblivion. On the contrary, he will plunge into life. And in the distraction of great initiatives, he will become a restless spirit [...] that leaves too clear a trace of his real presence, [...] a restless spirit that wants to forget. (p. 84).

While Becker's reflections illuminate the profound inner conflicts that drive these behaviors, the research findings indicate that the

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project managers' focus on control and self-assertion can sometimes come at the cost of deeper self-reflection and acknowledgment of their own limitations. This neglect of existential awareness risks leading to burnout and a disconnection from the broader social and symbolic context, which Becker argues is essential for true self-realization. Becker further elaborates on this existential dilemma: "But it is more than creature anxiety, it is also man's; anxiety, the anxiety that results from the human paradox that man is an animal who is conscious of his animal limitation" [12].

### He Continues:

Anxiety is the result of the perception of the truth of one's condition. What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression—and with all of it yet to die. It seems like a hoax, which is one type of cultural man who rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food? Cynical deities, said the Greeks, who use man's torment for their own amusement. (p. 87).

In contrast, Henry Mintzberg's insights into the socially constructed nature of managerial roles offer a complementary perspective. Mintzberg posits that effective management necessitates an understanding of the broader social and organizational context; a factor often overlooked in the intense focus on individual autonomy that Becker describes [13,14]. The research findings suggest that while project managers exhibit a strong drive for control, their effectiveness is frequently enhanced when they embrace the holistic and socially embedded nature of their roles, as emphasized by Mintzberg. This points to the necessity of balancing Becker's emphasis on existential autonomy with Mintzberg's focus on the social context of management. The research findings further highlight both the strengths and limitations of Becker's and Mintzberg's perspectives. While Becker's existential reflections underscore the intense personal drives that can motivate managers, Mintzberg's theories provide a crucial reminder of the significance of social context and the need for a more balanced approach to management. Addressing the challenges of project management in an industrial setting thus requires not only an understanding of the individual manager's existential struggles but also a recognition of the broader organizational dynamics that shape managerial roles.

### 5. Conclusion

This article synthesizes the significant contributions of Mintzberg on managerial roles with the existential themes explored by Becker, highlighting the lasting relevance of Mintzberg's framework in contemporary business environments influenced by technological advancements and organizational changes. It addresses the persistent challenge of comprehensively understanding the multifaceted role of managers despite the wealth of professional development resources, emphasizing

Mintzberg's empirical findings. By drawing connections between the insights of Mintzberg and Becker, the article underscores the importance of symbolism and a holistic understanding in grasping managerial activities and human behavior. It proposes that both scholars converge on the influence of social and symbolic factors. The conclusion ultimately emphasizes Becker's notion that facing existential anxieties can be transformative, promoting personal growth and genuine connections that transcend immediate understanding and challenge illusions of invincibility [15].

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