

Harvesting a Philosophy of Personal Development through a Popular Business Classic Who Moved My Cheese?

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Abstract

Philosophy of Management is a relatively new term compared to the tradition of Philosophy itself. If Management as a university discipline is barely a century old, Philosophy of Management has a history of only a few decades. As Management broadly concerns conducting the affairs of a corporation or a business enterprise effectively, writers on management hesitate to adorn the title Philosophy to the issues they deal in their discourse. Management Department in universities and colleges invariably project their fields as a science with tools, techniques and methods of their own. Increasingly University dons in Management and successful executives of top business corporations began sounding about Philosophy of Management. A century after the first MBAs graduated from the US universities, Philosophy of Management has emerged as an academic discipline of its own. Personal Development of corporate executives, frontline business personnel and lowly staff members of business houses has been an important sub-field of Philosophy of Management. Dr. Spencer Johnson's Who Moved My Cheese? (1998) has been a popular business classic that is a unique source of constructing a philosophy of personal development. This paper explores the concept of change as a critical element in the life of individuals and business organizations for successfully navigating the constantly changing world which can expand the basis of Philosophy of Management. Ability to perceive change that occurs in a small degree, to anticipate changes in the world of things, to prepare oneself for the changes that arrive and not to fear to confront changes and to understand that changes can bring better options are some of the philosophical lessons in the parable of Johnson's book.

Key Words: *management as tools, science and method; philosophy of management; parable of personal development; four characters and four perspectives in personal development; change and how to use it for personal growth.*

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Management as an academic discipline has a short history compared to traditional subjects like art, literature, science, law, philosophy and divinity. It was in the New World and in the new emerging power the United States that Business Studies began taking roots in the early 1900. As the United States developed into a giant of economic and industrial power house following the successful adoption of the Industrial Revolution, its focus shifted to channelize human resources that can harness everything that nature contained in its farm land, mines, forests, rivers and oceanic fields. On the one hand engineers and technologists were trained in technical institutes, self-trained business managers, financiers, bankers and investors scoured the cities and metropolises of the new nation for opportunities to enrich themselves and the nation. Time came when the president of the country Calvin Coolidge in 1925 took pride in declaring that ‘The chief business of the American people is business’. He also added that civilization and profit go hand in hand.

As businesses and industries flourished, business houses and giant corporations mobilized huge army of personnel to produce goods in factories, to supply them to the markets, to plan and expand businesses and industries, to organize sales and distribution and confront the vast operations involving money, capital, materials and of course the life and livelihoods of millions of people in the country. When a business house run as family enterprise with few helping hands grew into a business corporation or gigantic industrial operation with hundreds and even thousands of workers, gradation of personnel at various levels took shape. Businesses and industries spawned various other supporting fields such as banking, finance, insurance, training, recruiting professionals at various levels. Thus emerged a managerial class, business executives and all powerful Board of Directors and top level executives, their advisors and consultants.

Management: Dawn of a New Science

Early writings on how to run a large business or a huge corporation focused on organization, investment, finance, production, marketing, hiring, training and motivating staff and beating competitors. The main focus was to continue attaining higher growth for every quarter of financial reporting and keeping the shareholders happy and enriched. Business Management gradually took shape as a series of methods, techniques, approaches developed in various businesses and corporation. When Standard Oil, IBM, General Motors, Citicorp, Western Pacific and dozens of business corporations rose to prominence with financial power and

industrial base greater than any state or federal government, America had entered into an era in which the ideas, concepts and practices of running a business needed to be given an aura of respectability and prestige. As a result, many business corporations supported various universities and colleges to offer courses in business studies, business finance, accounting, skill development and effective business administration.

Tomes were written with titles like Principles of Management, Business Management for the New Era, Business Practices for the Business Executive, Business Leadership for Our Time, Trade and Prosperity for All. Thousands of graduate students and hundreds of management faculty spent their time discussing the best practices to reap more and more returns to their investment of capital, intelligence and time. One would not be ridiculed for thinking that America has gained a new religion in business and its churches are Business Schools of major cities. In recent decades, US alone produces 100, 000 MBAs, of which 1200 graduate from Harvard Business School (Broughton, 2013).

Harvard University became the first institution of higher learning to introduce Business Studies at the undergraduate and graduate levels under Harvard Business School which is still the top school of business and management in the world. As people rushed to get business and management degrees in order to land jobs and positions in business corporations, universities across the United States opened BBA/BBS/MBA/ MBS and similar related programs. Along with Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Colombia and New York Universities in east coast opened business and management studies. Soon universities all over America and Europe opened business and management schools and today management and business studies remain the single largest area of higher education.

In Nepal too business and management studies have attracted the largest body of student population. Having a degree in business, finance and management seems a sure way of getting a good start in one's career. A curious thing happening in Nepal's education system is that business and management courses are introduced at the school level itself which supersedes students' chances of studying other foundational subjects. As such students move to undergraduate levels, they seem not to have gained sufficient grounding in math, science, history and languages. This makes them less able to deal intellectually with the increasingly complex world of today.

Towards Philosophy of Management

Management as a university discipline came out during the last one hundred years. It developed as part of business studies to help business houses run their businesses smoothly. As businesses expanded with the growth of Industrial Revolution, limited perspective of business studies had to give way to larger issues of management comprising a whole lot of areas beyond business organization, finance, accounting, marketing. While business and management studies focused on solving immediate practical problems and looking into concrete aspects of business and management, bringing philosophy into it would mean to discuss and speculate on the nature of problem itself. American business and corporate houses are often criticized for only looking for how to secure big growth in their quarterly financial report, not for long term consequences of short sighted growth. Philosophical discussion of growth and success takes up an entirely different approach (McCormack, 1998). Paul Griseri proposes some of the issues to be covered in the philosophy of management include: business ethics, consequentialism, ethical theories and positivism (2013).

Along with these concerns, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a recent development in management and business studies circle which concerns philosophical issues. Business and corporate establishments are now increasingly goaded by public opinion to support and provide for public service functions. One of the first corporate captains to broach this philosophical concern is the founder of the Virgin Atlantic Richard Branson. He writes in his Autobiography: “Man created the problem. Man should solve the problem. There must be somebody out there who can sort it out. There are a lot of good brains out there”. It is people with exposure to the philosophical bend of thinking who connect business success with enriching of civilization.

This lack of philosophical approach in business and management studies has led to various successful MBA graduates to write books with titles such as *What They Don't Teach you at Harvard Business School* (McCormack, 1986). To lead a successful business or corporate house, executives need to be enlightened and imaginative. It applies to business leaders as well as private individuals. We need to be aware of our

world and immediate circumstances and watch carefully what must be done and how quickly it has to be executed. It is here I would like to discuss the modern business classic which forms the title of this paper.

Who Moved My Cheese? A Parable for Personal Development

Much of business and management writing concerns with facts, figures, graphs, projections of profits and losses. Case Studies purport to present human angles to reflect the conditions in the real world. But the case studies are so tied to the actual world conditions and restricted to remain within the boundary of verifiability that creative imaginative touches go missing in them.

Spencer Johnson's book *Who Moved My Cheese?* (1998) is a parable for personal development, understanding change that confronts us every moment and every day of our existence and adapting to change to avoid personal loss and even disaster. Most people living a comfortable life expect their life to go on as usual. What has continued as normal would appear to remain so for the future as well. A roaring business and industry would seem to continue flourishing and expand in the years ahead. It is a human weakness that we expect better days to come, and do not have the forethought to imagine what is comfortable may collapse without as much a warning. We often hear change is the rule of life. Things go on changing slowly which we do not notice; when we face an abrupt change in our circumstances we are overwhelmed.

The book's sub-title is: *An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life*. Change is taking place in our life, in the work we do and the world we live in. This is a philosophical reflection. All the four characters in the story fail to perceive or imagine change. If they had thought how the cheese was placed there, whether the Maze also had other chambers with better supply of cheese they would not have faced the shock of their life. They would not have faced starvation if they had thought about inevitable changes coming to their life.

The parable *Who Moved My Cheese?* presents two sets of characters: Sniff and Scurry are two mice and Hem and Haw are two little people. They move near the Maze and

find stack of cheese in a corner they like to call Cheese Station C. They feel great to have the cheese all the time when they go to the Cheese Station. Cheese stands for what is valuable to them. It is a source of food, a source of comfort, and it makes their life fulfilled. They do not try to explore other corners of the Maze. They are happy with what they have got without much effort. Most importantly, they never pause to think that their supply of cheese may stop being there at the station. One day when they appear to the Station C there is no cheese waiting for them.

First Sniff and Scurry find their favorite cheese stack was empty. Then two little people Hem and Haw arrive to the Cheese Station C. They are shocked to find the cheese stack empty. Now what can they do? They had no idea of the many chambers around the Maze which offered various options to make their life comfortable. Both the mice and little people had been too smug about their comfortable life eating cheese as much as they wanted. They never tried to find out how the cheese arrived there, what was the condition of cheese, whether it was developing mold because it was there for a long time.

Sniff had felt the cheese was not tasting as fresh as before for some time. But he did not act on that knowledge. Scurry would have acted had he learned the cheese losing its freshness. Learning about a danger is one thing, to act swiftly on the knowledge is more important. Many of us do not see the danger coming; others fail to act even when they felt danger clearly. Sniff can sense the danger around him, but failed to act on that knowledge. Scurry would have acted swiftly, but he got no knowledge of the impending danger. Upon learning the loss of the supply of their cheese Hem and Haw complained to their fate. They grumbled it was unfair. It is a terrible mistake to go on complaining, rather than taking quick action to deal with the situation at hand. Haw wanted to move around the Maze to see if there are other chambers which may have fresh supply of cheese. He follows the change that befell on him and enjoys a new beginning in his life. Hem did not like to try right away if they can find cheese in some other chambers.

Over 28 Million Copies Sold Worldwide

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Cheese?



Celebrating
20 years of the
International
Classic

DR SPENCER JOHNSON

A Summing Up

Spencer Johnson's little book has sold over 30million copies. It is certainly one of the most successful business books ever. The beauty of the text is it can be read under one hour. It has appeal for all age groups, gender and races, and nationalities. It tells a simple story with profound meaning for life of individuals and institutions. It is now a classic text in understanding the issues around personal development at individual level or corporate levels. Are you like one of the four characters in the parable who does not try even to explore the different compartments of the Maze they live in? The Maze stands for our world where countless opportunities present themselves. Having a supply of cheese whenever one wished to get it made the characters lose initiative and action. An individual or a business must expect change in their circumstances. If one is aware of change coming their way they can better prepare to avoid shocks and life threatening disaster faced by the four figures in the story.

The management and business practitioners can deduct various philosophical conclusions from this tale. It is like harvesting or gleaning grains from a rich farm field at the end of farming season. One needs to go on building upon what is discovered. The format of the text follows dialogue, narration and discussion. It is reminiscent of Plato's writing that uses simple dialogue among people in the city square to thresh out serious issues of life. What is a more important issue in life than anticipating change and prepare to live with the inevitable change? How to deal with change in our life and work has been a philosophical question of all time.

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