
The oath of management

M.L. Emiliani

Lean Behaviors, LLC, Wethersfield, CT, USA and
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Lally School of Management and Technology,
Hartford, CT, USA

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Abstract

Compares the management profession with the medical profession, in particular examining the Hippocratic oath. Suggests that as managers are the physicians of business, they should also abide by an oath, which is then proposed by the author.

Introduction

Industrial management has become a much analyzed and discussed subject over the last 100 years. From Taylor (1911) to Drucker (1999), volumes have been written to elucidate the various management practices deemed to be most effective. Despite the tremendous amount of scholarly activity, the art and science of management is typically applied in a haphazard fashion by practitioners. Too often, situation-specific needs drive behaviors that negatively impact key stakeholders such as employees, suppliers, and customers (Stainer *et al.*, 1999). The primary focus is usually shareholder value, irrespective of its affect upon the life and health of people that contribute directly to the organization. Is there anything that can be done to improve this remarkably impoverished situation?

The medical profession

Physicians are the healers of people. Simply put, they are health managers. Their great responsibility is recognized by the administration of an oath upon graduation from most medical schools. The medical oath, named after Hippocrates – a very influential Greek physician living around the fifth century BC – has had a great impact on the ethics of medical practice for the last 2,500 years. Without doubt, there have been many corrupt physicians who have failed to honor the Hippocratic oath. But the majority of physicians appear to have honored it in recognition of their profound responsibility.

There are only a few professions that can have a great impact on the life and well being

of large numbers of people. Management is one of them.

The management profession

Managers are the physicians of business. But are they the healers of business? They too have a great responsibility – the effective management of organizations. However, they graduate from business school without any oath of ethical practice for the management of people and organizations that make up the extended enterprise. This is truly amazing. Witness the layoffs and many other forms of organizational dysfunction of the 1980s and 1990s (Argyris, 1991; Kets de Vries, 1993). We all know that something is terribly wrong. There is abundant talk yet little meaningful or creative action.

I propose “The oath of management”, based upon the modern representation of the Hippocratic oath for the medical profession (see Table I). Business schools would administer “The oath of management”, to students, primarily MBAs, upon graduation in order to clarify and strongly reinforce the importance of ethical management behavior. The deans and faculties of business schools have a responsibility to ensure that their graduates work with stakeholders to create more elegant solutions to business problems. Layoffs, after all, are the simplest solution that any dolt can implement. There is no leadership in authorizing massive layoffs. What is the root cause of such situations (Ohno, 1988)? Should not the highest paid managers be challenged by key stakeholders to think of more creative solutions (Emiliani, 1998a, 1998b, 2000)?

Can an “oath of management” make life better for the stakeholders of a business? The answer is surely yes, if, over time, managers take “The oath of management” and their significant responsibilities as seriously as most physicians have done over the last 2,500 years.

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Table 1

The oath of management

Modern Hippocratic oath	The oath of management
At the time of being admitted a member of the medical profession:	At the time of being admitted a member of the management profession:
I solemnly pledge myself to consecrate my life to the service of humanity	I solemnly pledge myself to consecrate my life to the service of humanity
I will give my teachers the respect and gratitude which is their due	I will give my teachers the respect and gratitude which is their due
I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity	I will practice my profession with conscience and dignity
The health of my patient will be my first consideration	The well being of my primary stakeholders – employees, suppliers, customers and investors – will be my first consideration
I will respect the secrets which are confided in me, even after the patient has died	I will respect the secrets which are confided in me, even after business relationships have ceased
I will maintain, by all means in my power, the honor and the noble traditions of the medical profession	I will maintain, by all means in my power, the honor and the noble traditions of the management profession
My colleagues will be my brothers	My colleagues will be my resources
I will not permit considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics, or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient	I will not permit considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics, or social standing to intervene between my duty and my primary stakeholders
I will maintain the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception; even under threat I will not use my medical knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity	I will maintain the utmost respect for human beings; even under threat I will not use my management knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity
I make these promises solemnly, freely and upon my honor	I make these promises solemnly, freely and upon my honor
Source: World Medical Association, Geneva, 1948	

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Application questions

- 1 Do you agree with the author that "managers are the physicians of business"?
- 2 Can you think of a time when the oath of management would have helped you in a business situation?