PART I Managerial life: managerial work and the managerial identity

1 Introduction

"Manager" is a term which covers a rather disparate collection of job holders. Sometimes it implies that the person who has this position is superior to and should manage other people, who, being non-managers, are co-workers or subordinates. However, the term is often also used for individuals who are responsible for a particular task. Many HR, information, sales and financial managers are mainly responsible for personnel administration, information leaflets, their own sales or accounting systems respectively. In this book, we are only interested in managers in the first sense, that is to say those who have a job where they are expected to lead subordinates in some way. What this actually implies is not always clear.

Managers are a popular topic of interest. Leaders – a common term for managers, and one which managers themselves like to use – are an even more popular topic of interest. However, we are not following fashion here, but are interested in those professionals who are managers in the sense we have just described. Whether they also practise leadership and can be seen as leaders is a question we will try to answer. The widespread interest in managers is partly linked to the general growing interest in how people experience expectations, challenges and demands in modern organizations. Naturally, everyone in an organization acts according to specific expectations and demands, but this is perhaps particularly true of managers. There is a large industry offering ideals and templates for managers and leaders. Managers cannot just "be themselves" as they please but are undoubtedly expected, more than others, to represent organizations, to be leaders, competent decision makers, strategic, knowledgeable and to be seen to be in charge (Watson 2008, p. 122). At the same time, they must make an effort to be human and empathetic – someone you can

trust – in order to establish and maintain good, and thereby productive, relations with their co-workers. Against this background, our aim in this book is to portray managerial work as it is experienced and understood by managers, with a particular focus on the importance they attach to different demands and activities in their work. We will therefore describe how a number of managers from different organizations form their managerial work. Why do they want to be managers and what expectations do they have of their work? What do they actually do as manager? What significance do they assign to different activities, and what do they hope to get out of their positions as managers? How do they see themselves and their personal development? What difficulties and dilemmas do they come up against? These are some of the questions we take up in this book, which thus address questions of managerial identity, experience and efforts to fill their work with meaning.

We approach this topic with some scepticism – which we believe is healthy – and hope thereby to avoid ideological overtones associated with reverence for "the superior" which can easily lead to confusion when studying typical fields of status such as leadership, professions, competence development, the knowledge society and more (Alvesson 2013a). In this book, we also take co-worker aspects seriously. Subordination is a central aspect of organizations and working life. Disregarding this in a managerial context is as unwise as attempting to understand men without taking into account women, or analysing parenthood without considering the children. Our main focus, however, is on the life of managers – although we do not ignore the relationship dimension or the fact that managers themselves are almost always subordinates, often more so than they are superiors.

Since managers are the object of a great deal of attention, there are, of course, numerous interpretations and images of what their managerial activities consist of. We therefore begin this chapter with a brief account of five common, if somewhat contradictory, images of managers and managerial life. These give us a background to how managerial work is often viewed in various contexts. This is followed

by a clarification of our aims and, specifically, a short section on the importance of identity. We end the chapter with an outline of the book's purpose, target group, structure and content.

IMAGES OF MANAGERS AND MANAGERIAL LIFE

There are undoubtedly images in the literature which show nuances of managerial life, but these are more often found at the top or bottom end of the scale of glamour. The former includes the idea that managerial work is something special and important, the latter that it is often disorganized and boring.

Managerial life is attractive

Managers are often described as being privileged in terms of status, titles, high salaries, bonuses and other symbolic and physical benefits which come with the role. Sometimes managerial life is even portrayed as a matter of glamour, luxury and abundance. Sometimes it is pointed out that managers have power and influence and opportunities to influence not only their own working situation but also organizations and society as a whole which other, "ordinary", people lack. In addition to the high standard of living, the emphasis is often on the attractive work tasks and, in general, a working life which includes things that anyone with the right qualities has reason to aim for.

The image of the privileged manager is at times complemented by images of managers as forceful and inventive – they stand for change and contribute to the development and welfare of organizations. In particular, the ability of managers to exercise leadership in many situations is held up as being especially necessary and important. School principals, for example, are expected to demonstrate "pedagogical leadership" in order to produce well-run schools and good academic results.

Becoming a manager is clearly an ambition for individuals who are talented and goal-oriented. This is traditionally true for men, at least. For women it has been – and to some extent still is – rather less

evident. But as the ideal of gender equality is increasingly embraced, and by a growing number of people, the ideal of becoming and remaining a manager is also becoming typical for the majority of talented women interested in making a career (the number of female managers has also increased, at least up to middle management levels).

When it comes to the view of management as a privilege, we tend to think of managers in slightly higher positions – although most people probably imagine that "normal managers" also have a richer and more interesting working life than the "normal co-worker". It is much more appealing to be seen as a leader than a follower, and without a managerial position, leadership is difficult and unless you have exceptional talents you are left to do followership instead. In addition to the benefits, what is seen as making managers special is perhaps that they have interesting tasks, a role and major opportunities to influence.

Managerial life is influential

It is sometimes easy to have the impression that the manager is responsible for everything that happens in and around organizations. In comparison with many other groups, managers do, of course, often have a somewhat more privileged situation. It is not unusual for them to have greater opportunities to influence the way resources are distributed and utilized in organizations than many other members. Managers are often surrounded by a certain authority which is based on formal requirements, traditions and norms. They influence the direction and development of the workplace. Managers formulate strategies and control organizational change. They are also expected to do leadership. It is the responsibility of the manager to ensure good working outcomes within the work unit and that the interfaces between units work well. Any disparities must be corrected so that productivity and quality are satisfactory. The manager is also expected to be a key player in many so-called soft questions, including developing organizational culture and personnel. These are questions

which involve recruitment, career development, promotion and motivation, as well as general employee care.

In much of the classic management literature, but perhaps even more so in pop-management literature, managers are portrayed as more or less omnipotent. An organization's or department's performance is seen as an effect of how well it is led. Managerial work and/or leadership is seen as the hub around which the co-worker wheel revolves.

Managerial life is (as a rule) complex

Most managers are part of complex contexts in which they are often subordinate to an overall hierarchy. Even more so for senior managers – a company manager can be kept on a tight leash by the executive committee and a CEO can be forced to limit his or her actions in line with the decisions and principles of the owner and board of directors. Middle managers may be regarded by their superiors as more of a subordinate than a leader and, in a strongly result-focused context, as a disposable commodity. Managers are also part of working processes where there is often considerable dependence on and pressure from other steps in the production chain. A unit manager in a factory must start with a given input of products to be processed according to stipulated demands and then achieve a specified output. A sales manager in a particular region in a larger group of companies is normally given a fixed product range and expected to reach a specified sales volume. A personnel manager is often forced to respond to all kinds of emergency calls and perform administrative tasks and meets little understanding for a request to "delegate" these in order to be free to work with personnel strategies and act as a consultant to senior management (Alvesson & Lundholm 2014). The majority of managers do what they are told to do, rather than developing goals and taking initiatives based on their own ideas. Nonetheless, it is the latter image which is often communicated: leaders lead others – and are not led to any great extent by more senior managers. In most leadership literature, the managerial

world appears to consist mainly of colonels and generals – and not of sergeants and lieutenants who are expected to put into effect what their superiors have decided within rather narrow limits (Laurent 1978).

Neither are the employees always particularly receptive to influence. Some strive for independence or may express counter dependence; that is to say, they are willing to fight against authority. Managers who believe they have good ideas sometimes come up against counterarguments or disinterest, and often have to back down or seek a compromise (Lundholm 2011). There are, of course, times when messages from the manager – suggestions, requests, instructions, talk of values – which are accepted in themselves have little effect because the employees are busy with other things and do not have time. Managers are not the only ones who try to influence: there are colleagues, customers, senior managers, unions, regulations, procedures, practical arrangements, temporary work problems (such as faulty deliveries, computer problems, illness) – all these mean that the manager's efforts to lead rarely go according to plan. Adapting and dealing with disruption are often just as central elements as leading. Doing what you have been instructed to do is central. The time pressure is often huge (Holmberg & Tyrstrup 2010).

Managers' influence is often limited by changes and developments in an organization's environment. Rather than managing by self-governing, goals and objectives, management becomes a question of adapting to the situation and various circumstances.

There are, however, those who say that this development has made the role of the manager even more important. Managers are expected to take responsibility for an organization's adaptation. Capturing trends and changes, along with making internal preparations for and implementing organizational change, is seen as distinguishing successful managers. Leading an organization, or at least a working group, in times of change is more often than not seen as a privilege. It is exciting, dynamic and demands real

leaders. In most organizations, describing change and uncertainty and other similar problems as challenges for managers is standard vocabulary. Yet this can be described in less euphemistic terms: dancing to your customers' tune, trying to keep up with the latest organizational trends, or, in public services, being forced to follow the decisions of politicians in order to demonstrate ability to take action. These are often portrayed as "change-oriented leadership" although there are times when "adaptive followership" might be a more appropriate label. There is no doubt that change can lead to positive development, but the impression is that changes, in practice, contribute to making managerial work more uncertain and fragmented. Not everyone enjoys working with reorganization and new administrative systems; it often results in the breaking down of systems and relationships which have been painstakingly built, and a great deal of time and energy goes into building something new. More often than not, change projects which are embarked upon come to nothing (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2015).

Managerial life is (very often) unclear

Even if it is possible to point, as we did earlier, to a number of areas which must be coordinated, it is often unclear and uncertain whether and how this is achieved in actual terms. We can certainly say that managerial work is, in a sense, about strategy and organizational change, but it is rarely clear what this means in real terms. There are, of course, many models and ideas for how to support this work, but managerial work is, nonetheless, often seen as vague and ambiguous by managers and other members of organizations. After interviewing numerous managers about what they do, we are left with a rather confused and contradictory impression of, for example, leadership (see e.g. Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003b). It frequently involves very broad, and imprecise, ambitions and interests ("have an open door", "make people think", "be open and honest"). Although this offers managers scope for action, it also leads to uncertainty and anxiety about what is actually to be done in addition to delivering

specific results. As it is often the subordinates who do the actual delivering, it is not obvious what the manager exactly contributes.

Managerial life is (sometimes) boring and tough

Organizations, particularly large ones, contain a great deal of administration. Managers are seldom exempt from spending a lot of time working with this. Sometimes it is impossible to maintain the distinction between being a manager and being an administrator. It is not self-evident for everyone that a promotion from an ordinary job to a managerial job provides a boost in terms of tasks and well-being. One manager of a construction company felt that promotion to a more senior managerial post in reality only meant more administrative hard work which "sucks you dry". Many professional organizations, such as universities, consulting firms, advertising agencies, law firms and hospitals sometimes find it difficult to recruit people to managerial positions. At universities and colleges, for example, there is no doubt that most people find research work and teaching a more attractive proposition than being the head of a department or faculty and working with administration. In most cases, the elected managers (as a rule) hold their posts for a limited period of time (an electoral period) and then return to their ordinary tasks. More often than not, they do so with a sigh of relief.

A number of other personnel issues, which are not about developing co-workers but about taking care of those who are ill, or have problems with some form of addiction, high levels of absence, poor performance, conflicts with other people, and so on, are also important managerial tasks which not everyone appreciates. One-off efforts rarely lead to any noticeable improvement in the work of underperformers or people with other kinds of problems. This also includes not giving people what they want or think makes them feel good. Not even the most co-worker-oriented manager can give everyone the salary they themselves think they deserve or offer expensive in-service training; more interesting tasks; fancier titles or less challenging pupils, patients or customers (in schools, hospitals and companies respectively) as