

Management Theory and Its Inter-Activeness with Management Model and Management Practice: An Overview

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Abstract

The Paper is essentially a discourse on Management Theory and Management Practice, and the interconnection between them. The paper argues that management practice is the continuous process of taking actions that enable organizations to achieve its set goals. It views management practice as the practical application of management theory and therefore the effectiveness of management practice largely depends on the validity of the theory applied. The paper presents three models to illustrate the process of the development of a valid theory; the tripartite interactive relationship between management theory, management practice and the managerial environment; and the interactive relationship between management theory, management practice, management model and the managerial environment.

Keywords: Management, Theory, Practice, Explanatory commentary, African context.

Introduction

The need for theory and principles of management has remained a major concern throughout the history of management. This is because of the recognition of the value of theory and principles to the practice of management. It is believed that knowledge of the underlying theory and basic principles and techniques of management can have a tremendous impact upon its practice (Ogundele, 2005).

The need for a clear concept of management and for a framework of related theory and principles was recognized many years ago by early scholars of management (Ogundele, 2005). This need has been increasingly recognized by intelligent managers in subsequent years. However, the fact also is that many managers are yet to imbibe the culture of management practice based on fundamental principles and theory, leaving them with the risk of trial and error. This paper presents an explanation on management theory and its relationship with practical activity in management as a way to further encourage management practitioners to develop greater interest in the adoption and use of management theories in management process in organizations. The objective is essentially to serve as a simplified tutorial for management students and practitioners who have no prior formal training in management. Thus, as in a conventional class session, our task is to provide explanations or answers to matters or questions that are likely to agitate the inquisitive minds of such persons, in a systematic approach. Our starting point is to answer the question which follows.

What is a Theory?

To a lot of people, a theory is synonymous with something that is not practicable in real world, i.e. something that can only be said but cannot be made to work or cannot work out in real situation. A major reason for this common belief is that many theories had been found unworkable in the past or not have yielded the desired result upon application, therefore society has become suspicious of the potential utility of theories (Woolf, 1965). However the concept of theory is far outside this view of frustrated layman. The concept of theory in real sense is presented in the literature by several authors both in the physical sciences and social sciences, with similar descriptors and characteristics.

Parsons (1964) defined theory as “a body of logically inter-dependent generalized concepts of empirical reference”. This definition shows that concepts are the building blocks by which theories are developed, and also, generalization is reached through empiricism. In the view of Gill and Johnson (2002) “theory is a formulation regarding the cause and effect relationships between two or more variables which may or may not have been tested”. Nalzarro (2012) defined a theory as an explanation of a phenomenon or an abstract generalization that systematically explains the relationship among given phenomena, for purposes of explaining, predicting and controlling such phenomena. It permits the prediction of the occurrence of the phenomena of interest and enables one to postulate and discover unknown and unobserved phenomena as it explains why specific patterns are expected to be observed in a given situation. Ogunbameru (2003) states that a theory is a proposition or a set of interrelated propositions that attempts to explain a given phenomenon.

In simple language, we can say that a theory is an (scientific) explanation of why something happens, and sometimes, how something happens as well as a statement of what happens (Woolf, 1965). A theory is based on a set of propositions consisting of defined and related variables. In addition, “a theory sets out the interrelationships among a set of variables and in the process presents a systematic view of the phenomena described by the variables” (Ogundele, 2005). It specifies what variables are related and how they are related. Therefore, according to Kelinger, (1983), a theory is a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and

propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting phenomena.

In a nutshell, a theory is a coherent group of assumptions put forth to explain the relationship between two or more observable facts and to provide a sound basis for predicting future events. In other words, it is a conscious contemplation and design aimed at explaining the dependent relationship between two or more variables. It is formulated to explain, predict and understand phenomena and in many cases to challenge and extend existing knowledge, within the limits of a set of assumptions. Thus, a good theory provides a reasonably reliable basis for decisions and actions.

Concept of Management Theory

Standing on the platform of the general concept of theory, it is easier now to explore what a theory in management is. The concept of theory in management is not far removed from the general concept. In management a theory is simply a statement predicting which actions will lead to what results and why. In this context, management theory serves as a means of classifying pertinent management knowledge. (Inyang, 2008). Management theory is a systematic grouping of interrelated principles which attempts to present in a concerted manner, loose facts about human behavior in organizations (Stoner, Freeman and Gilbert, 2001). According to Nwachukwu (1992) cited in Inyang (2008) management theory is a synthesis of the concepts and principles of management. It attempts to present in a coherent manner facts about human behaviour in organization. Essentially management theory provides logical reasoning in the form of a set of broad principles that provide a general frame of reference by which management practice can be evaluated and guide the development of new practices and procedures. Management theory may also be used to explain existing practices to obtain a better understanding of them. But the most important goal of management theory is to provide a coherent set of logical principles that form the general frame of reference for the evaluation and development of sound management practices. From these goals of management theory, we can perhaps say that management theory is a coherent set of hypothetical, conceptual and programmatic principles which form the frame of reference for practical management. It is instructive to note that every action that managers take and every plan they formulate, is based on some theory at the back of their minds that makes them expect the actions they contemplate will lead to the results they envision (Christensen and Raynor, 2003). Theories exist in different aspects of management or the field of management. Therefore, the term “management theory” is generic to all aspects of the field of management.

Distinguishing features of Management Theory

The concept of management theory is greatly similar to that in the physical sciences. In both cases, theory is used to explain phenomena and to extend the frontiers of knowledge about our world. However, the nature of management theory is different from that of the physical science theory. This difference is a result of the differences in the nature (features) of the sciences (social and physical) which underlie their formulation.

The physical sciences have the feature of being “exact” and hence they are referred to as “exact” sciences. This is in the sense that interrelationships between variables could be predicted very accurately (with a near 100% accuracy). On the other hand, management as a derivative of the social sciences, is an inexact science as compared to the physical sciences. Social science is a behavioural science, it deals with human behavior. Human behaviour is a complex phenomenon about which too little is known. Besides being complex human behaviour is unstable and therefore quite an unpredictable phenomenon.

Deriving from individual behaviour, the structure and behaviour of groups of people are far more complex, than that of atoms in the physical sciences. Consequently, it is relatively more difficult to have an exact explanation of the occurrence of a phenomenon in management. Because of the feature of dynamic and unstable nature of human behaviour it is very difficult to develop an enduring theory that can serve to explain, predict exactly and influence the behaviour of people within group setting/organizations or to develop principles that can apply with exact result in management situations.

The point of instruction in a nutshell, is that, theories in the physical sciences are much well developed than in the social sciences. The theories in the physical sciences have greater utility in explaining, predicting and influencing the future occurrence of a phenomenon. Even in the physical sciences, as one moves from the inanimate areas of physics into the biological sciences, we find that areas of exactness tend to diminish. In specific terms, a theory of management is characterized by the following features:

1. Explanation and prediction are the goals of management theory.
2. Management theory employs abstract deductive reasoning whereby conclusions are drawn from sets of initial assumptions.
3. Management theory contains three sets of elements: data, which plays the role of parameters; variables; and behaviour assumptions upon which the values of the variables are determined.
4. The conclusion of a management theoretical argument is always of a “what would happen if” nature.

5. Management theory represents simplification and generalization of reality and therefore do not completely describe particular situations. In other words, the data-variable distinctions and behaviour assumptions are hardly completely satisfied in actual situations.
6. Management theory is based on and subject to value judgment influenced by one's environment and habits of thought.
7. The data for management theory are social data and are sourced or generated from social or human interactions.
8. Management theory is based on data that are observable, measurable, communicable and reproducible.
9. Management theory is both descriptive and prescriptive (normative). In other words, it explains both what is, and what should be.
10. In management theory, the level of phenomenon ranges from one unit to very large groups and entire system.
11. Management theory follows a process of logical reasoning and inductions which consists of drawing generalized conclusions from detailed observations and measurements.

Functions and Importance of Management Theory

Indeed, management theory performs a great function in organization in three broad ways:

- a. It explains observed organizational behaviour. Although this may not lead to any direct benefits to the practitioner, it nevertheless offers him the satisfaction of knowing why the observed events occurred. It also makes him aware of aspects of the events he would otherwise not have considered.
- b. They help in prediction of future organizational behaviour and therefore help to guide the future actions of the practitioner. Thus, they provide an opportunity for the practitioner/researcher to test his ideas/beliefs and theories about organisation and modify them or further improve upon them.
- c. They serve to influence future organizational behaviour. It is the practitioner's interest in learning about organizational behaviour. The knowledge to influence the behaviour of people in organization and the consequences of that behaviour are of obvious importance to the success of the manager's job.

Christensen and Raynor, (2003) summarized the value of theories in management in two points: They help in interpreting the present, to understand what is happening and why; and they help in making predictions. In other words "theories help to sort the signals that portend important changes in the future from the noise that has no strategic meaning". From this general view of the functions of management theory, it is without gain to say that management theory is an important tool in the practice of management. It is a means to an end. In other words management theory serves as a tool to increase the effectiveness of managers. Managers who are up to date in management theories are more likely to be up to date in practice, if and only if they would, and are able to apply the knowledge gained from the theories.

Management theory is useful to the manager by helping him to explain the dynamics of organization and shedding light on the problems often faced by him in practice, such as those related to motivation, productivity, satisfaction etc. In specific terms, management theory is important for the following reasons:

- i. **It increases efficiency.** As a manager you become more effective and efficient by using established guidelines to help solve problems. You do not have to go through unnecessary intuition and risky practices of trial and error.
- ii. **It improves training and development.** This is possible because management theory has already provided you that established structural framework of knowledge, which would appear to be useful. As Ogundele (2005) points out, in all forms of organizations, there exist a body of theory and principles which managers fall back on to crystallize the nature and process of management and to simplify the process of learning by managers.
"Without theories and principles training of managers depends upon haphazard trial and error" (Ogundele, 2005).
- iii. As a management practitioner, you will find management theory valuable because it would help you in predicting employee behaviour and provide a guide for action now and the future.

However, it is instructive to note that there is yet, no verified, generally acceptable theory of management which can be applied to all situations. Thus some theories are more effective for some problems under certain situations than others. As such the knowledge of, and the familiarity with various management theories provides the manager with a working synthesis of the various theories. This enables him to look at, and understand organisation, its activities, responsibilities and satisfaction of the workers in various ways. Such a manager will be more flexible in his actions because he is able to adapt various theories to various organizational problems, under various situations. This is one characteristic of an efficient and effective manager.

The development process of management theory

As in the physical sciences, the development of a management theory follows a defined process. The process

consists of five stages. It begins with the observation of a relevant phenomenon in organization, enters into the formulation of an hypothesis about the phenomenon, test the hypothesis to prove its validity and then enters the development of principles, and ultimately ends with a theory.

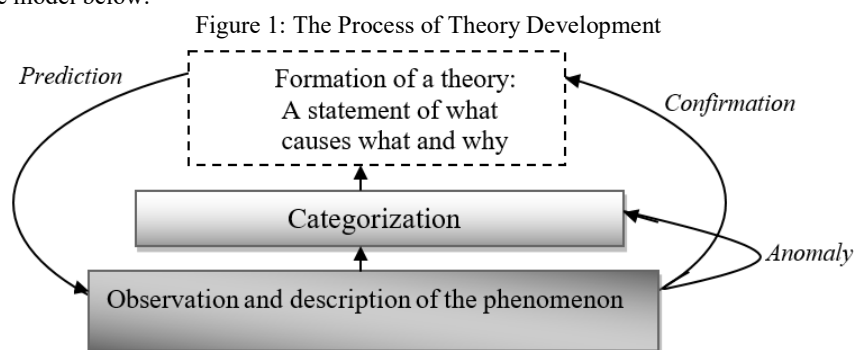
By ‘observation’, we mean, ‘to notice the occurrence or presence of some phenomenon or situation’. Observation leads to the acknowledgement of facts. Facts are realities which have become known. Acknowledgement of facts leads to conceptualization. “Concepts are abstractions from reality and are designed by words and phrases” (Emory, 1976). Simply stated, a concept is a mental image of reality (Asika, 2004). Thus, to conceptualize is to build a mental image of reality. From concepts, propositions are made in the form of statements about reality which could be judged to be true or false.

However, when propositions are made with the sole purpose of testing them empirically to confirm their truth or falsity, they become hypotheses. Therefore an hypothesis is a clear and specific declarative statement of a tentative or conjectural nature whose validity is to be established by recourse to empirical findings (Eheduru, 1990). Simply stated, an hypothesis is a conjectural statement about reality or phenomenon; or a tentative proposition about the relationship between two or more variables. Essentially, hypotheses are developed from concepts and propositions and are based on assumptions which may be true or false.

The next stage in the process of developing a theory of management is the development of principles. Principles are developed from tested hypotheses that are found to have been confirmed by empirical results. Principles are thus fundamental truth, or what are believed to be truth at a given time, explaining relationships between two or more sets of variables (Koontz and O’Donnell, 1976). In its simplest form, a principle embodies an independent and a dependent variable. The fifth stage is the ultimate stage in the process of theory development. At this stage, a group of interrelated principles is put together to state an invariant relationship among certain variables with the purpose of explaining and predicting certain phenomenon. Thus, a theory is formed when principles are developed from the level of merely establishing relationship between variables to a higher level of not only establishing relationship but also being able to explain and predict the properties of the phenomenon.

This process of five stages in the development of management theories can be compressed into a three critical stage process consisting of (i) the description of the phenomenon that is under study (i.e. the phenomenon that we wish to understand) (ii) the classification of the aspects of the phenomenon into categories, to allow us to organize complex and confusing aspects of the phenomenon in ways that highlight their most meaningful differences (iii) The formulation of the hypothesis of what causes the phenomenon to happen and why (Christensen and Raynor, 2003). The hypothesis is the preliminary stage of the theory. Indeed, it is the theory in a rudimentary or primitive form which can further be refined. The classification stage requires that the most visible attributes of the phenomenon in question that appear to be correlated with a particular outcome are identified, isolated and used as the basis for categorization. As Christensen and Raynor, (2003) point out, the task of categorization can be demanding if valid categories that capture a deep understanding of what causes the outcome, must be developed.

The three stage process of theory development in management by Christensen and Raynor, (2003) is depicted in the model below:



Source: Christensen and Raynor (2003: 69)

The preliminary theory (hypothesis) formulation is represented by the upward loop in the model; while the process of improvement is depicted by the downward loop. The model indicates the theory is used to predict what would be seen if examples of the phenomenon in the various categories defined in the categorization stage are observed. If the theory accurately predicts what is being observed, then it can be used confidently to make predictions in similar circumstances (Karl, 1968). However, in observing further examples certain anomalous behaviour may be seen that the theory is not able to explain. Such anomaly suggests that some other attributes exist or something else is going on which the theory cannot predict. In other words, the categorization is problematic and therefore requires that the categorization stage must be revisited (cycle back) to add or

eliminate categories or rethink them entirely (Woolf, 1965; Karl, 1968; Christensen and Raynor, 2003). An improved theory is then built on the new categorization scheme. The new theory can now predict more accurately how the phenomenon should work in a wider range of circumstances, since it is now able to explain both the previous observations as well as those that had seemed anomalous.

The development process of Management theory reveals that management theory is scientific in nature relying on observation of events, and analysis of facts to generate hypotheses, which represent statement of logical or systematic relationship embracing a set of observations. When such hypotheses are tested and validated they are called principles (Inyang, 2008).

Forms /Levels of Management theory

Functionally, a theory of management can be classified into five levels, viz, exploratory, explanatory, deductive, predictive and prescriptive levels with each level representing a form of theory respectively.

Exploratory Theory:

At this level, the theory seeks to discover new relationships in given situation (Ogunde, 2005). For example, a theory for which new relationships have been established but which has not gained wide acceptability in a given field will be treated as exploration theory. For example, educational incubation theory of entrepreneurial emergence which posits that entrepreneurial emergence is a function of educational development of individuals, and therefore holds that societies with high level of education would produce more entrepreneurs than societies with less educated people. Examples have been given with advanced countries to support the theory. This theory however, is yet to be widely accepted, in view of the argument that, the bulk of entrepreneurs fall within the small and medium scale business owners, majority of whom, are at best, holders of only school certificates.

Explanatory Theory:

This is also known as descriptive theory. At this level, the main purpose of the theory is to explain or describe observed phenomena. For example, explaining the reason behind fall in workers' productivity in spite of increase in salaries, or describing the relationship between workers productivity and job satisfaction.

Deductive Theory:

This is the level of deductive reasoning. Here the theorist deduces the consequences of the hypothesis he has formulated based on deductive reasoning. At this level, experience, knowledge and judgment of the situation are important. Indeed, this is the most important contribution to the analysis of reflective thinking.

Predictive Theory:

This is the level at which a theory is used to predict future occurrence. At this level, the theorist is not so much concerned with explanation and understanding but views that only prediction and control are necessary, believing that the relevant and adequacy of a theory is its predictive power (Lipsey, 1975). If we can predict reliably, we can control, because control is deductible from prediction. When from simple propositions of theory we deduce more complex ones, we are in essence "predicting". Thus, theoretical explanation implies prediction. Indeed, predictive theory is the highest level of theoretical formulation.

Prescriptive or Normative Theory:

At this level the theory indicates what a person should do. It prescribes what management ought to do and how it ought to do it. That is, it explains what should be, rather than what is. It may be used to evaluate current practice or to develop new procedures (Hendriksen, 1970). When theories are applied against some scales of values, they are referred to as prescribing action, or as being prescriptive or normative. Normative theory is used more frequently when dealing with business ethics (Ogunde, 2005).

Relationship between Management theory and Management model

To understand the link between management model and management theory, there is need to begin by understanding what a management model is. The concept of management theory has previously been discussed. In general, a model is a system or object that stands in place of another, which usually is more complicated, system or object. It is a simplified representation of some complex phenomenon or situation, which exists in real life.

Models and theories are interwoven, each provides inputs for the development of the other and helps the other to be effective. On the part of a model, it gives an intuitive understanding about the situations or system under study and about which a theory is to be built. It simplifies the situation and enables the user (theorist) to grasp the important structure (interacting variables or components of the system or situation i.e. the structural relationship among the variables of the system) of the management problem about which a theory is being developed in a simple and efficient way. In other words, models provide clear understanding of reality i.e. the existing situation and allow useful suggestions for inclusion in theoretical system, and therefore makes easy the task of theorizing (theory building). We model either to elucidate behaviour or to predict behaviour as basis for taking decisions and acting about the situation or theorizing about the situation.

Management theories as we have noted are used to explain or predict relationships among variables of

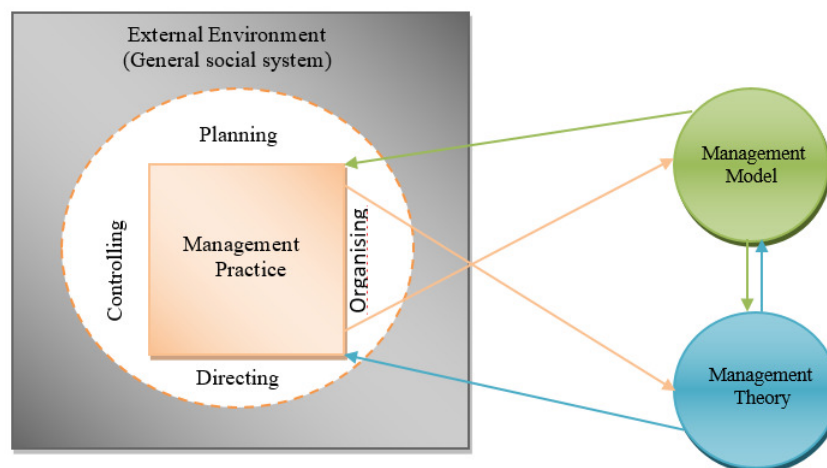
interest. Models help in understanding such relationship and therefore help in enhancing the quality of theory that can be made. Thus although management models are not theories, they contribute to theory building by providing the interconnections between elements in organizations, in terms of cause and effect relationship. They help to anticipate the functioning of a particular theory, or to explain better, the findings of research activities relating to such theory. On the part of management theories, they provide a source from which models are built. That is, from a theory a model can be developed to represent the important elements of the situation about which the theory is built. In general, the central link between management theory and model is that they are mutually reinforcing. They could be used interdependently to explain given or observed managerial phenomenon. Both a theory and a model use premises and deduce conclusions about given phenomenon.

In spite of the link between management theory and model, there is nevertheless a difference between them. Essentially, a management theory is a systematic grouping of interrelated principles which attempts to present in a concerted manner loose facts about human behavior in a social system. It consists of a set of statements that describes and explains human behavior in ways that help one to understand, predict and control the actions of people within an organizational system. While management models are descriptive representatives of realities which interpret the statements presented by the theories in a graphical or diagrammatic form.

Models are often very useful in influencing organizational behavior and may frequently be adapted to questions of explanation or prediction. However, many of them cannot properly be considered theory in strict sense of the word (Rubenstein & Haberstroh, 1966). The logical structure of a theory is that the conclusions derived from it can be placed into correspondence with (interpreted as) empirical hypotheses and confirmed or refuted by experiments. The logical structure of a model is such that its premises are interpreted and its conclusions are logical consequences of these.

As Rubenstein & Haberstroh, (1966) pointed out a single contrary empirical finding can refute a theory: a model is not exposed to refutation, but is used as long as any benefit can be derived from it. "A model can continue to be useful even though it yields many conclusions, which are clearly wrong, provided only that it yields some conclusions that are correct (i.e. useful). A theory is expected to yield only true conclusions." Technically, a model doesn't have to specify the reasoning behind the situation it is representing. It may only need to simplify what is happening. But a theory generally explains the "why" of the model (or situation).

Figure 2: Interdependence between Management theory and Management model



Source: Author

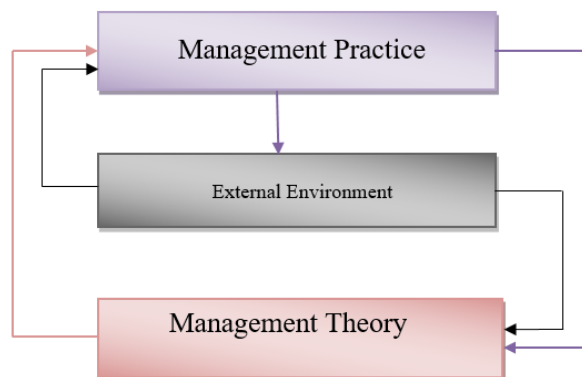
Interdependence between Management theory and Management practice

The relationship between management theory and practice is better appreciated by revisiting the role and function of management theory in organization. These have been presented in preceding sections. Management theory provides explanations for existing management situations and develops principles and guidelines for solving problems associated with such situations. Management is taking action to move organization towards its set objectives or taking action which enables organization to achieve its set goals. It entails identifying problem situations and the best alternative action to solving the problems in the manner that engenders efficient use of resources. Management practice is the continuous process of managerial decision making and taking visible action to achieve the purposes and set goals of the organization. It involves a continuous process of problem solving through the practical application of management principles and guidelines which theory provides. It also entails establishing and implementing policies, procedures and guidelines for achieving the goals of the enterprise. Essentially, management theory provides the basis for the principles and guidelines which are utilized

in management practice in solving organizations problems and thereby enhancing the achievement of set objectives. Thus, theories provide the background information on which effective practice is based.

On the other hand, management theories are formed based on experiences and knowledge gathered from management practices in the past, by managers. Every theory is a reflection of what happened in the past in a given organizational circumstance. In a nutshell, we can say that, the link between them is that, theory provides the science of management while practice provides the art i.e. the skillful application of the theory of management. The external environment provides the input knowledge through observation of facts, and receives the output knowledge through the application of the theory in management practice. Essentially, management theory is interested in facts and sound principles, which prescribe what to do to achieve desired outcome in an organization (Daft, 1986). Management theory is therefore to management practice. As Inyang (2008) pointed out Management theory provides the basis for management practice, and the practice in turn helps to reinforce the development of management theory. Management practice involves the translation of existing management knowledge and theories into action that result in the achievement of the dual goals of the organization: efficiency and effectiveness (Inyang, 2008).

Figure 3: Relationship between Management theory and Management practice



Source: Author

Management practice as a test of good Management theory

The link between management theory and management practice indicates that management theory provides the basis for management practice. In other words, managerial conducts and actions are derived from or based on the provisions of management theory. Thus, the effectiveness of management practice i.e. being able to achieve organizational objective, would depend on the effectiveness of the theory underlying it.

A good theory must not only explain the causal relationship between dependent and independent variables (i.e. the causal mechanism that ties actions to results) but also describe the circumstances in which that mechanism does not or does not result in success. This enables the developer to discover whether and how managers should adjust the way they manage their organizations in these different circumstances. A good theory, in other words, must be circumstance contingent (Christensen and Raynor, 2003). It should define not just what causes what and why, but also how the causal mechanism will produce different outcomes in different situations.

As Christensen and Raynor (2003) explains when the set of different situations in which managers might find themselves relative to the phenomenon are defined and a circumstance contingent theory is articulated, individuals will have greater confidence to follow their recommendation, that they will be on the right path for their situation. "Circumstance – contingent theories enable managers to understand what it is about their present situation that has enabled their strategies and tactics to succeed. And they help managers to recognize when important circumstances in their competitive environment are shifting so they can begin 'piloting their plane' differently to sustain their success in the circumstance (Karl, 1968). Circumstance –contingent theories make success not only possible and predictable but sustainable. The goodness of a theory is defined by how well the theory is able to capture the relationships and make an understanding of the situation in question. A good theory is that which is able to explain accurately the relationship among the interacting variables consisting the situation for which the theory is intended. A theory would be incorrect, faulty or incomplete if it fails to capture accurately the variables in the given situation, their relationship and dependence. If a theory is inadequate by any of these ways or factors, then any management practice based on its provisions, would follow same.

Thus, whether good or bad, management practice is a function of the underlying management theory. A good management theory is that which leads to or result in good and effective management practice. If management practice fails to achieve organizational goals, it implies that the theory underlying such practice is incorrect, faulty or incomplete. Thus the test of good management theory is the effectiveness of its resulting

management practice.

Management practice provides evidence of the extent of the effectiveness of theories and the need for reviewing existing management theories and to develop new ones. Management theorists and practitioners, in continuous process of interaction, work hand in hand to provide useful knowledge that helps to improve management of organization

Conclusion

Management is taking action to move organization towards its set objectives or taking action which enables organization to achieve its set goals. It entails identifying problem situations and the best alternative actions to solving the problems in the manner that engenders efficient use of resources. The explanation on what to do, how to do it, and why, is provided by management theory. Fundamentally, management theory provides the frame of reference for practical management. The most important goal of management theory is to provide a coherent set of logical principles that form the general frame of reference for the evaluation and development of sound management practices.

Essentially, management theory provides explanations for existing management problems and develops principles and guidelines for solving such problems. The effectiveness of management practice would largely depend on the validity of the theory about each problem situation. Thus, management practice requires good management theories, to be effective. A good management theory is that which leads to or result in good and effective management practice. If management practice fails to achieve organizational goals, it implies that the theory underlying such practice is incorrect, faulty or incomplete. Therefore, the test of good management theory is the effectiveness of its resulting management practice.

The formulation of management theory derives input from management practice. In other words, management theories are formed from experiences and knowledge from management practice. Management theories usually reflect given organizational circumstances in the past. Furthermore, the effectiveness of management theories requires the creativity of management practitioners in applying such theories and principles in relevant problem situations. In a nutshell, both management theory and management practice are mutually dependent.

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