
Management Lessons from Star Wars Episode III

(Friday, 27 May 2005) - Written by Vincent Chia

It is a widely acknowledged fact that George Lucas decided to release Episodes 4, 5 and 6 first ahead of Episodes 1, 2 and 3 because the later episodes were more focused on action and less heavy on social and political messages. Do not get me wrong, I really enjoyed Episode 3. There was just the right balance of action, social and political messages as well as the right dose of tragedy. But if you look closely, you can also pick up some Management Lessons too. Here they are in rough chronological order.

Lesson 1

Context

Chancellor Palpatine has taken control of the Republic Senate, rising to power as Chancellor through a series of political plotting as well as charismatic speeches. He subsequently assumes full control of the Senate by asking them to grant him emergency powers during the Clone Wars. Eventually he dissolves the Republic and turns it into an Imperial Empire. Democracy has failed because of the bureaucratic processes that the Senate has been caught up with. And this has enabled Palpatine to exploit it through his political plotting.

Management Theory

A Bureaucracy derives its authority from Rational Authority rather than Charismatic Authority. Thus, in making decisions, there should be laws and precedents to aid the decision process rather than be swayed by emotions. And while a Bureaucracy should follow rules, the rules should be part of its process rather than be all and end all. When a Bureaucracy gets too caught up with its rules and forgets its function, then it has strayed from the ideals of Weberian Bureaucracy.

Lesson

A Bureaucracy begins to fail and break down when rational decision making is not practiced. This is further accentuated by its obsession and eventual engulfment in its rules and processes instead.

Lesson 2

Context

Anakin Skywalker is clearly a talented Jedi whose metaclorian count is higher than that of even Master Yoda himself. Still, it is not clear how Anakin is being managed as a Talent. But it is clear that the Jedi establishment will not bend one bit in its handling of Anakin. The suggestion is that he has been treated just like any other Jedi would be, even though he was the "Chosen One". He was even refused admission to the Jedi order in Episode I. Eventually Anakin betrays the Jedi and is turns over to the Dark Side of the Sith.

Management Theory

Talent Management is a fine process. The difficulty is usually in convincing an organization that the people they are nurturing are really the talents they seek. However when this is established beyond doubt, then these Talents need to be managed in a way for them to best benefit the company. Usually they require special nurturing that is beyond the bureaucratic setup of the organization. This is because if they do not receive this special nurturing, it is likely that they will

seek greener pastures where they will receive this special nurturing.

Lesson

To bring out the best in your Talents, they need to be specially managed and nurtured, and not left to the established rules and processes of the organization.

Lesson 3

Context

Anakin Skywalker is appointed to the Jedi Council but not promoted to the rank of Master. All members of the Jedi Council hold the rank of Master. And the speculative reason for this is because he is too young. In truth, even his own master Obi-Wan Kenobi has realized that Anakin is more powerful a Jedi than himself, having saved his life on nine occasions. The frustration experienced by Anakin eventually plays a part in his growing distrust and impatience with the Jedi Council.

Management Theory

When doing performance measurement and performance appraisal, it is important to have Key Performance Indicators. And these KPIs have to be clearly communicated to the people being evaluated. Without this, performance measurement becomes unclear and this promotion and promotion prospects become hazy. This haziness gives rise to frustration and distrust.

Lesson

Promotion criteria and KPIs for performance evaluation should be clearly and transparently communicated to the people being evaluated.

Lesson 4

Context

Anakin Skywalker's appointment to the Jedi Council was courtesy of Chancellor Palpatine. The Jedi Council make use of this closeness between Anakin and Palpatine to get Anakin to spy on Palpatine. However they do not trust Anakin fully with his mission and also limit his involvement in other future missions. This lack of trust culminates when Anakin tells Master Windu that Chancellor Palpatine is the Sith Lord. Windu clearly still refuses to trust Anakin and does not bring him along to deal with Palpatine.

Management Theory

The degree of trust between superior and subordinate is a case of whether you believe in Theory X or Theory Y management. There is no trust in the Theory X management style practiced by Master Windu and the Jedi Council. And clearly we see that this does not make for effective man-management as eventually Anakin, seduced by the dark side of the force intervenes and betrays Master Windu.

Lesson

A Theory Y management where a degree of trust exists between superior and subordinate is clearly a more effective management style than Theory X management, especially in times of crisis.

Lesson 5

Context

The Jedi Council is made up of a bunch of Master Jedi who have been on it since Episode 1. While most of the decisions are made by consensus, there does not appear to be much dissent or disagreement within the council members. So really whether or not the Council meets, the conclusion is likely to be the same. There are no devil's advocates to question the wisdom of the Council

Management Theory

While it is good to have consensus as a basis for decision making, it is important to have a fair bit of dissension and disagreement in the decision making body. This strengthens the quality of the decision that is made. And more importantly it prevents this phenomenon called "Group Think". Group Think is when a group of people have worked together so long that they begin to talk and think like each other. This may be good for corporate culture but it is not good for a decision making body which needs diversity of opinion to arrive at an optimal decision.

Lesson

Some dissension and disagreement is important in a decision making body or process, as it prevents "Group Think".

Lesson 6

Context

Led by Count Dooku, the Separatist movement starts to amass firepower to establish a military threat to the Galactic Republic. The Jedi Knights who are the traditional peacekeepers of the galaxy start to take on the role of Generals to lead the Republic's Clone Army against the Separatist. Eventually they find themselves spread too thinly and in a role that is not suited for their training. It is indeed tragic that most of the Jedi get gunned down by the Clone Army, while leading from the front. Only Master Yoda who has directed his Clone Army like a General survived.

Management Theory

Every company and every person has a core competence. If that company or person engages in their core competence then they will reap the maximum benefit from their time and effort. Conversely if they engage in activities outside their core competence then they will not be optimizing their return on their time and effort. Furthermore, they may even experience a negative return.

Lesson

Always stick to your core competence.

Lesson 7

Context

As the Separatist start to open more fronts of conflicts across the Galactic Republic, the Jedis find themselves spread thinner and thinner. Eventually there are insufficient Master Jedis to handle the various conflicts as Master Windu is left alone to confront Chancellor Palpatine on Coruscant. This lack of numbers is an important factor leading to the demise of the Jedi.

Management Theory

Succession Planning is something that current management always delay. Perhaps it is with fear that grooming the next generation of management to take their place would result in their own demise. However a more enlightened management will treat this as a chance to find themselves in a more elevated role or realize that having more capable managers will allow the company to expand in size.

Lesson

If you as current management fail to embrace succession planning, you will eventually find yourself continually short-handed and overwhelmed with issues.

Lesson 8

Context

Nearing the end of the dual between Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi on Mustafar, Anakin is on a raft in pool of lava and Obi-Wan is on the banks, uphill to Anakin. Obi-Wan tells Anakin that he has the higher ground and so he is clearly at an advantage as compared to Anakin. Anakin chooses to disregard this established wisdom and choose to believe in his personal powers instead. He executes a jump onto Obi-Wan and gets his legs and hands sliced off by Obi-Wan.

Management Theory

There are certain established wisdom in the field of business and finance. This includes Economics, Finance and Management Theories. Often these theories are pretty robust in their basis as they have been worked on and developed by some of the best human minds for the last hundred years. So it is usually not wise for people choose to depend on personal heuristics or personal judgement over these established wisdom. Put another way, there is real value in the established wisdom that has been accumulated in the form of Economics, Finance and Management Theories in the field of business and finance.

Lesson

It is wiser to depend on Theory than to depend on your personal heuristics and judgement.

Hope you enjoyed that. Basically Management is something that is all around us and is prevalent in all aspects of our lives, from the workplace to public places to homes to social occasions. Thus some of these basic management theories and concepts can be easily applied to any situation.

And if you have not already realised, I am a big big star wars fan and I enjoyed the show tremendously. If only we have 7, 8 and 9 to look forward to....

Any opinions or comments ?