

Book Reviews

The Art of Action: How Leaders Close the Gaps Between Plans, Actions and Results

By Stephen Bungay

Reviewed by Air Commodore Neville Parton

Introduction

Anyone who regularly scans the list of new publications in the business management area will have realised that this is an area where fads are rife, and the cynic would say that one of the main aims in this particular publishing domain is simply to find new ways of presenting old truths in a way that makes them attractive – and so of course sells. Over the last decade or so there has also been a steadily growing trend in a two-way traffic: the selling of business approaches to the military, and the selling of certain aspects of the military to business. It would be very easy to simply look at the title of *The Art of Action*, read the dust-jacket description and assume that this was another in that genre – however, that would be a mistake. Stephen Bungay's name is one that should be familiar to Air Power Review readers, as the author of the Battle of Britain tour de force *The Most Dangerous Enemy*, and the follow-on *Alamein*, and this book contains exactly the same qualities of great scholarship, detailed analysis, rigorous logic and insightful conclusions that have marked out his previous work.^{1,2} Bungay himself has an extremely broad background; initially as an academic, but then a business consultant, business director, military historian and lecturer.

So much for the writer – what about the book itself? Fundamentally it offers an analysis of a range of common problems within the business world, and then suggests a particular approach to dealing with them, however, Bungay's unusual background gives him a unique perspective which in turn provides the reader with a closely-linked set of historical examples,

detailed analysis and contemporary examples from the business world. Much of what is said is not hugely original, as the author states himself. After all, the concepts are built largely on a construct developed within the Prussian and then German armies over a 150 year period – but the way in which it is explained, and made relevant to the world that we now live in, is remarkable. The author's clear mastery of the differing worlds that he refers to is evident throughout, and the way in which significant tenets are extracted from history and then applied to the world of business strategy and delivery make it a genuinely compelling read.

The key insight is the drawing of a very clear analogy between the business of war, and the business of, well, business, and thus drawing out that the most important factor in both are those aspects which make up what Clausewitz referred to as friction. This begins with an examination of what Bungay sees as the problem, which are the difficulties that many organisations seem to have in actually getting anything done. He also identifies considerable similarities between the military environment and business, and looks at issues with a range of previous approaches from scientific management through to strategic planning before considering what the cause of the problem is - which is identified as the concept of 'friction', first introduced into the human domain by Clausewitz in the 1700s.³ Bungay identifies from this the idea of three particular gaps: the knowledge gap (which is the difference between what we would like to know and what we actually know), the alignment gap (the difference between what we want people to do and what they actually do) and finally the effects gap (the difference between what we expect our actions to achieve and what they actually do). The impact of these gaps is typically seen in organisations as more and more centralised control, greater use of detailed metrics and eventually paralysis by indecision.

Having identified the problem and cause by considering the environment of war, elements of a solution are found from the same source, this time by considering the approach of Helmuth von Moltke who identified the solution as being able to give a high degree of autonomy to individuals but at the same time also to get high alignment between their actions, resulting in what we now know as mission command. This approach deals with the three gap problem by closing each in turn: addressing the knowledge gap by limiting the direction given to defining and expressing only the essential intent, doing the same for the alignment gap by allowing each level to define what it has to do to achieve that intent, and finally for the effects gap by giving individuals the freedom to adjust their actions to deliver that intent. The overall approach is termed as 'business opportunism' by Bungay, who sees it as a theory that is very different from the scientific and engineering approaches that have been prevalent in management literature in recent years.

Particular consideration is given to the role of strategy, which is seen as fundamentally important as providing the 'aim' towards which the main effort will be deployed and against which all levels of a business can measure whether they are contributing or not. The importance of briefing and back-briefing is stressed, using a number of examples to illustrate that individuals at all levels will find themselves in situations where they have to

exercise independent thinking, for which they need to be prepared with information to enable

them to make decisions. Although Bungay does not use the term, the concept of the 'strategic corporal' is quite clearly in his mind here, and the concept of starting with a statement of intent which boils down the strategy to its fundamentals, and then briefing this down at each level to cover the higher intent two levels up, the tasks that this means for the organisation concerned and the main effort and freedoms and constraints will be familiar to most military readers. However, there are other enablers of course, and the need to train, develop and support people so that they feel 'empowered' to use their initiative, and in particular are encouraged to make decisions but not blamed if they get it wrong, is stressed. A cautionary note is also sounded with regard to the area of organisational processes such as budgeting and performance management, which can stifle any use of initiative, and of the dangers of metrics and scorecards, where achievement of the elements rather than the end becomes key.

The concept of 'commanding', and its importance is also explored, and a number of recent examples drawn from the author's recent experiences are used to illustrate the results obtained from applying this approach in the real world. The fact that commanders tend to use simple orders to guide actions is noted, with Napoleon's 'march towards the sound of the guns' given as a case in point, and the main tenets of the book are summed up in what Bungay terms GBOs (Glimpse of the Blindingly Obvious). There are ten of these, which are not repeated here - to get them you will need to read the book!

At a practical level, this can be read in a linear fashion, and every chapter usefully has a summary of the key points to aid understanding – but it can equally well be dipped into after reading the introduction to identify specific points that may be relevant to a particular issue. It is not written for the academic (although there is enough signposting of sources and evidence to satisfy those who might wish to look further) it is fundamentally written for those who are involved with the practice of leading organisations. Furthermore, the overall approach is most definitely stimulating to the mind, as it not only has a great deal to say about the way in which most large enterprises could be better led, but at the same time provides a good introduction to the military history that resulted in the doctrine that we now best know as mission command.

This is, at its heart, a book about the use of mission command in everyday life – but especially for those who are in a position of leadership and trying to effect change. Those who have been exposed to mission command, either theoretically or practically, may consider that they already know enough about the subject to employ it to good effect, and certainly do not need to be told how to apply it by a management consultant. But Bungay is much more than that, and so is his book. It offers genuine insights into the application of mission command in the day-to-day business of life, and does so in a manner that makes the reader think 'could I do that?' Who should read this book? Anyone, I would suggest, who has come up against

the very real problem of having to deliver and experiencing the gaps that are so logically identified. This is not a book which promises that if followed it will turn your life and career around, but it does provide a huge amount to think about, and packaged in a manner which is inherently understandable to those in the military – go read it!

Notes

¹ Bungay, S. (2000). *The Most Dangerous Enemy*. London, Aurum Press Ltd.

² Bungay, S. (2002). *Alamein*. London, Aurum Press Ltd.

³ Clausewitz, C. v., M. Howard, et al. (2007). *On war*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL