

HOW CYBERNETICS PROVIDES A GENERAL THEORY OF MANAGEMENT

Stuart A. Umpleby

George Washington University

Washington, DC

The various fields of management – finance, accounting, marketing, operations research, organizational behavior, etc. – have each developed descriptions of some aspects of management. In each case the variables chosen are different. Students are asked to integrate the different perspectives in a capstone course at the end of their degree program. Alternatively, cybernetics provides a way of integrating the different perspectives in management by offering a more general theory.

The more general theory focuses on the regulation of variety in the interests of viability. Rather than searching for linear causal relationships among variables in a particular subfield of management, cybernetics emphasizes the circular causal activities involved in management. As an example, Stafford Beer's Viable System Model describes a successful organization as an adaptive system that is able both to deliver the current product or service and to develop the next product or service. As a second example, focusing on the need to match the variety in a regulator with the variety in the system being regulated leads to several strategies for amplifying management capability. Cybernetics offers a way of integrating the subfields of management with a common language and a shared frame of reference.