

An interview with Victor H. Vroom

Interview by Alistair Craven



Victor H. Vroom, the John G. Searle Professor of Organization and Management at Yale, is an international expert on leadership and decision making.

He joined Yale in 1972 as Chairman of the Department of Administrative Sciences and Associate Director of the Institution for Social and Policy Studies. When the School of Management was founded in 1976, Professor Vroom was named to its original board of permanent officers.

A native of Canada, Professor Vroom received his B.Sc. and M.Sc. degrees in psychology from McGill University in 1953 and 1955. After receiving his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Michigan in 1958, he was named Study Director at the university's Institute for Social Research.

Professor Vroom's research has focused on issues of motivation and of leadership in organizations. He is the author of nine books and over 50 articles. His 1964 book, *Work and Motivation*, is regarded as a landmark in that field and continues to be widely cited by scholars. In 1971 he collaborated with Professor Edward Deci in writing *Motivation in Management*, which sold over 100,000 copies and was totally revised in 1992.

Professor Vroom has consulted to over 50 major corporations, including Bell Labs, GTE, American Express, and General Electric.

Firstly, a very warm welcome to you. Can you tell us a little about the Yale School of Management and your day-to-day role?

Victor Vroom:

The Yale School of Management is Yale's newest professional school, having been founded in 1976. I served as chairman of its board during its formative years, helping to plan its curriculum and hire its first dean. Now I occupy the John G. Searle Professorship of Organization and Management and teach the required course on leadership to its MBA students. In addition, I travel regularly to Europe and to Asia teaching leadership to executives. Fortunately, my research and writing parallels and informs my teaching. For the last three decades I have been studying leadership style and developing models to both understand the factors influencing what leaders do and to guide them in matching their styles to the challenges they face.

You have spent over four decades teaching MBA students. What changes have you seen in business schools over this time?

Victor Vroom:

When I first got my Ph.D., I would not have considered a job in a business school. Historically, they had very low status within the university. Faculty were often part-time or retired managers and the curriculum was uninformed by developments in economics, psychology, or operations research.

In 1959, two reports by the Carnegie and Ford Foundations recognized the situation and recommended a complete overhaul of business education. Ford not only characterized the unhappy state of business education, but also sought to rectify it with a major infusion of funds designed to significantly alter the academic and research underpinnings of business education. They awarded more than \$35 million to seven selected business schools. The funds were to be used not just for the benefit of these institutions, but also for spreading the gospel to other universities. Ford gave research grants for faculty research, sponsored an annual doctoral dissertation competition, and financed courses and workshops for faculty. In the late 1960s, the Ford Foundation extended its activities to management education and research in Europe.

The landscape of management education today is, in substantial part, a reflection of the vision portrayed in the Ford and Carnegie reports. As a

recipient of, and participant in several of Ford's programs, I applauded their vision of management education and like many others, moved from a psychology department to a business school. Today, business schools have gained acceptance in the halls of academe and are a valued part of their universities.

However, I have come to agree with my colleagues, Warren Bennis and Henry Mintzberg that the pendulum might have swung too far! Little of the rigorous research is relevant to the practice of management. Today's MBAs are typically more prepared to solve well-structured quantifiable problems which fall within the disciplines and functions of management than they are in dealing with complex, unquantifiable issues necessary for managing in a global organization.

I am not arguing for a return to the 1950s, nor am I arguing for less emphasis on research. I am pleading for more research that is relevant to the practice of management and more education in the messy problems that cut across both functions and cultures.

Business schools are unique among professional schools. Most faculty in medical schools have MDs, most law faculty have law degrees, but few business school faculty have MBAs and even fewer have business experience. My former colleague, Herb Simon, once wrote that business schools require knowledge from the disciplines and knowledge from the world of practice. The integration of these two bodies of knowledge is a necessary component of both sound management research and sound education. Unfortunately in too many of today's business schools research and education begins and ends on the theoretical side of this divide.

Your 1964 book *Work and Motivation* is universally regarded as a landmark in its field. How do you reflect on your achievement 40 years later?

Victor Vroom:

It is interesting that you ask that question. I recently finished writing a chapter on that subject for a book published by Oxford University Press entitled *Great Minds in Management*. Naturally I am gratified by the attention that *Work and Motivation*, which introduced expectancy theory, has received. I never thought when I wrote the book that it would still be in print 40 years later. I am particularly pleased at what I perceive to be the greater acceptance of psychological theory to guide research on how people choose the work they do, how they feel about their work, and how motivated they are to perform it effectively. The field of industrial psychology, in which I had been

trained, was largely a set of techniques and research methods devoid both of theoretical underpinnings and of connections with the rest of psychology. Now work in industrial organizational psychology makes extensive use of theory and has become integrated into the discipline of which it is a part.

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Regarding the specifics of expectancy theory, I am less sanguine. I wrote *Work and Motivation* when I was a newly minted Ph.D. and there were many things that I had yet to learn or which had yet to be developed, that would have caused me to formulate the theory and the book somewhat differently. I will not go into these differences here, but an interested reader should read the previously mentioned article in the Oxford volume.

You have consulted to over 50 major corporations, including Bell Labs, American Express, and General Electric. As an authority in the field of leadership and decision making theory, what key lessons did you learn about actual organizational practices from these companies? Did these practices meet your preconceptions?

Victor Vroom:

My consulting work played a very important role in my scholarly development. However, it is difficult to point to a specific practice or lesson that made the difference. The key thing for me was the process of continually testing my ideas

about motivation and leadership against the thoughts and experiences of very smart managers and executives. For over 30 years I spent roughly 20 days each year at General Electric's University (Crotonville) teaching my research and theories with some of the brightest managers in the world.

In your recent *Management Decision* article entitled, "Educating managers for decision making and leadership," you state that educating managers to "think intelligently about participation in decision-making and its uses and pitfalls is critical to reducing the high failure rate in decisions." How far do you think the traditional "command and control" view of management is to blame for poor decision making practice in organizations?

Victor Vroom:

Command and control or autocratic decision processes are certainly responsible for many, but not all of the failures. Autocracy may have had a more prominent place in organizations 50 or 100 years ago than it does today. The combination of greater complexity of decisions, a more highly educated and more diverse workforce, flatter hierarchies, and information technology has created more situations in which autocratic decision making is likely to risk either the quality of the decision or the commitment and support needed to implement the decision effectively.

Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Scientific Management* published in 1911 argued for "one best way of doing each job" and literally eliminated any opportunity for people to influence how they did their jobs or the policies or practices of the organization around them. Gradually, not only manufacturing plants but corporations, schools, and even families have moved to organizational forms that provided more opportunities for individual discretion and participation. The task for today's manager is not to avoid making decisions without participation by others, but rather to understand when to do so. In other words, they must match their decision-making process (the form and extent to which they involve others) to the demands of the specific problem they face.

The article to which you refer describes a computer model that I have developed called Expert System, which can be used by any manager faced with a problem to solve or decision to make. The programme asks the manager eleven questions about the problem and then advises the manager whether the best response is to make the decision autocratically, to consult with others either individually or as a group, to act as facilitator in a group meeting, or to delegate the decision.

In addition to Expert System, which seeks to advise managers on the most effective leadership style, we have also developed a diagnostic tool to enable managers to view their own implicit way of matching their style with the situation. A manager reads 30 cases covering a wide array of different decisions facing managers. These cases are available on either the Internet or as hard copy. For each case they are asked to choose the leadership style they would use. These choices are then entered into a computer programme called Lestan, which compares his or her choices with the recommended choices of Expert System as well as with the actual choices made by any two selected groups of managers varying in nationality, level, and industry. These comparisons are then incorporated in a 12-page report created specifically for the manager. This leadership style analysis culminates in a personalized set of recommendations about what he or she should do differently.

You have also spent a lot of time investigating leadership styles in the workplace. From your experience, which business leaders do you admire most, and why?

Victor Vroom:

I have many favourites. I admire Jack Welch for his incredible success in globalizing GE; Herb Kelleher of Southwest for showing us how an airline can be run profitably in today's economy; and Eileen Fisher for combining high quality women's clothes with a social consciousness that is without peer in her industry.

If I had to settle on one leader, I would have to select Steve Jobs for his ability to nurture the creative processes within Apple Computer and Pixar films. More than anyone else, he has shown consistently that James McGregor Burns' concept of transformational leadership is applicable not only to the pulpit and the realm of politics but to the private sector. His string of successes, from the early days of Apple Computer through the introduction of the Macintosh and the award-winning movies from Pixar, to his monumental achievements with the iPod, is the stuff of which legends are made.

Finally, what interests you outside of your professional life, and why?

Victor Vroom:

My autobiography, published about a decade ago in a book called *Management Laureates*, describes my love affair with jazz and my early career playing alto saxophone and clarinet during the big band era. That love affair continues, but as an avocation rather than a vocation. I continue

to play as I did while putting myself through college and graduate school but now typically I find myself in small combos or playing solo for close friends.

My other, more recent passion is for sailing. For the last 25 years, I have been the proud owner and captain of a 39-foot sloop called *Leadership*. (The dinghy is called *Followership*.) At the moment she is berthed at our summer home in Nova Scotia but at various times has been up and down the east coast of the United States and the Caribbean. Invariably, I take my clarinet along with me on my voyages, and when anchored in some beautiful harbour, have been known to break the tranquillity with melodies like "When the Saints Come Marching In" and "Stardust." □