

MUSHROOM MANAGEMENT THEORY: UNVEILING SHADOWS AND CULTIVATING INSIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Mushroom management theory, aptly named after the way mushrooms grow in the dark, refers to a management style where information is not efficiently shared, which often resulted in a toxic workplace culture. In this review paper, the researcher delves into the origins, characteristics, countermeasures and practical application cases in business organizations of this intriguing metaphor, aiming to provide actionable insights and research suggestions for leaders, practitioners, and researchers.

Keywords: Mushroom Management ; Metaphor ; Insights ; Suggestion

INTRODUCTION

According to definition given by Oxford reference (2014), mushroom management is the management of a company where the communication channels between the employers and the employees do not work effectively, and where employees are “kept in the dark” by management in regards to business decisions that affect their work and employment. The term “mushroom management” alludes to the stereotypical (and somewhat inaccurate) view of mushroom cultivation: kept in the dark and being fed only essential manure. Since the mushroom managers only provide limited information for mushroom employees, there is an information gap between them which often results in a toxic workplace culture, where trust is eroded, and team members feel disempowered and disengaged (Kiliç, 2015).

In this paper, the researcher starts by tracing the evolution of the concept of mushroom management and surveying the burgeoning line of researches on this concept. Then, the characteristics of mushroom management are illustrated with empirical evidence, and approaches are demonstrated with cases to counter the detrimental effects brought by mushroom management in this thesis. Finally, it concludes with research suggestions for further exploration of mushroom management theory.

The Evolution of Mushroom Management

The term “mushroom management” emerged informally in the late 20th century, aligning with growing concerns about managerial practices in organizations. Its roots can be traced back to several management and leadership theories that emphasize the importance of communication, trust, and employee engagement.

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Notably, this concept can be linked to the Human Relations Movement of the 1930s and 1940s, which underscored the importance of employee welfare and motivation in the workplace.

Herman's work, *The Process of Excelling: The Practical How-to Guide for Managers and Supervisors*, is one of the earliest references to mushroom management, which serves as a foundational text for understanding the implications of this management style. In the book, he introduced the concept as a metaphor for a management style that keeps employees uninformed about the broader organizational context (Herman, 1997).

Over the years, the rise of the knowledge economy, globalization, and technological advancements put tremendous pressure on organizations to foster innovation and collaboration. As organizations began to evolve in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the detrimental effects of mushroom management became increasingly evident. Therefore, recently, studies on mushroom management are increasing with the focus on the effect of mushroom management (Demirkaya & Fatma, 2023; Yorgancioglu, 2021; Ergun, 2021), the perception of mushroom management in an organization (Mustafa et al, 2021; Osmanoğlu & Üzüm, 2020; Sener, 2020;), the relationship between mushroom management and administrators' or employees' behavior (Demir & Kılıç, 2023; Özel, 2023; Ulun, 2022; Ötkan et al, 2022; Kılıç, 2015).

The former studies and influential works on mushroom management have established a framework for understanding how mushroom management practices can negatively impact employee engagement and organizational effectiveness but few of them summarize the characteristics of mushroom management with empirical examples and cases. Thus, this thesis is going to analyze the characteristics of

mushroom management with some empirical evidence and then put forward some countermeasures for the leaders, practitioners, and researchers.

Characteristics of Mushroom Management

The concept of mushroom management reflects traditional hierarchical organizational structures where information was centralized and disseminated on a need-to-know basis. In these organizations, employees are kept uninformed about the bigger picture of the organization, but only get given limited and necessary information. Here are the characteristics associated with mushroom management:

1. Lack of Transparency

Transparency is a value in the ascendance which relates to the disclosure degree of the information (David & Michael, 2018). It signifies not only an understanding that is clear and available but also an insatiable drive to uncover the hidden (Byung-Chul, 2015). Organizations practicing mushroom management are characterized by a lack of transparency. Information about strategic goals, changes in policies, and other critical aspects of the organization is often concealed from employees. This can create an environment of mistrust and speculation. In this environment, information is frequently withheld or selectively shared, resulting in employees being “kept in the dark” about important organizational developments and decisions (Morgan, 2006). The absence of transparent communication channels can lead to the spread of rumors and misinformation. In an information vacuum, employees may fill gaps with their assumptions and speculations, leading to a workplace rife with misunderstandings and false narratives. This can further erode trust and cohesion within the organization (Robbins et al., 2019). Here is the example of ABC Tech to show how the influence on this aspect.

Example 1: ABC Tech

ABC Tech, a technology startup, initially adopted mushroom management to protect its intellectual property and maintain a competitive edge. However, this approach led to a lack of trust and collaboration among employees. The company experienced difficulties in retaining talent and fostering innovation. After reevaluating its management practices, ABC Tech shifted towards open communication and transparency, resulting in a more engaged and productive workforce. Now, it has become an international technology provider offering next generation of Digital and Core banking, both in cloud and on premise.

2. Strict Control & Limited Autonomy

In mushroom management, managers usually exert strict control over the flow of information. They provide employees with only what they consider necessary, which is often insufficient for employees to fully understand the broader context of their work. This selective dissemination of information hinders employees' ability to make informed decisions and understand their role within the organization (Turkle, 2005). In this case, employees operating under mushroom management typically experience limited autonomy and decision-making power. They are assigned tasks with little context or understanding of the organization's larger goals. This restriction not only stifles creativity but also hampers employees' ability to contribute meaningfully to the organization's success (Robbins et al., 2019). The bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers is a good illustration.

Example 2: Bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers

Established in 1850, Lehman Brothers grew to become the fourth-largest investment bank in the United States. Its collapse on September 15, 2008, marked one of the largest bankruptcies in U.S. During

the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers in 2008, considerable information about the bank's management was revealed. At that time, the bank had started to concentrate more and more on excessively risky mortgages; however, neither the employees nor the public were aware of the bank's real financial situation (Harress & Caulderwood, 2013). Fuld, together with other managers, had strict control of the message and kept a significant amount of essential information secret, as well as lying to the investors and to all other involved parties. In this way, the outside world had thought that Lehman Brothers still run well, though they had been working with a much more risky portfolios (Montgomery, 2014).

The influence of Lehman Brothers extends beyond its own collapse; it served as a catalyst for the wider financial crisis, leading to a loss of confidence in other financial institutions and a widespread credit freeze (Acharya et al., 2009). The collapse of Lehman Brothers provoked a broader run on the financial system, leading to systemic crisis. All told, twenty-four countries fell victim to banking crises, and economic activity has still not returned to trend in most of them. One study suggests that the average American will lose \$70,000 in lifetime income because of the crisis. (Lagarde, 2018)

Increased Dependence on Management

By withholding information, management fosters a dependency where employees must constantly seek guidance and approval for their tasks. This dependence slows down processes and reduces overall efficiency, as employees are unable to make decisions independently or anticipate management expectations (Turkle, 2005). The sinking of the Titanic can be seen as a tragic event which caused by the crewmen's complete dependence on their leader- the captain.

Example 3: Sinking of the Titanic

When the RMS Titanic hit an iceberg, only a few members of the crew were aware that the ship was going to sink. Most of the crewmen were not informed about the seriousness of the situation by the captain, which resulted in chaos and disorganisation. The captain attempted to act on his own, without incorporating the officers into his decisions (Smart, 2014).

The sinking of the Titanic on April 15, 1912, had significant negative consequences in terms of casualties and financial losses. There are more than 1000 people loss their lives in the disaster, making it one of the deadliest maritime disasters in history. The loss of life had a profound emotional impact on families and communities, leading to widespread grief and trauma for those directly and indirectly affected by the tragedy. Consequently, public confidence in maritime travel began to wane. Moreover, the tragedy also resulted in an enormous irreparable blow to the reputation and shipping business of its parent company, the British White Star Line, and caused the firm to swiftly lose its market share to rivals. It marked the beginning of the end for White Star Line's bankruptcy, and it eventually merged with another shipping company in 1933, losing its influence and power as an independent shipping company. (Khanna, 1998)

Low Employee Morale

The lack of transparency and communication inherent in mushroom management can lead to low employee morale and job satisfaction. Employees often feel undervalued, unimportant, and mistrusted, which can result in disengagement and high turnover rates. The absence of open dialogue and recognition can significantly diminish employees' motivation and commitment to the organization (Robbins et al., 2019).

Mushroom management frequently creates an environment resistant to change and innovation.

Without proper information and context, employees are less likely to propose new ideas or improvements. The fear of the unknown and the lack of support for creative thinking stifles organizational growth and adaptability (Morgan, 2006). The story of XYZ Corporation devastating risks brought by mushroom management and the wisdom of turning the risks into a catalyst for positive change.

Example 4: XYZ Corporation

XYZ Corporation was once a leading manufacturer of electronic devices, with a loyal customer base and a reputation for innovation. However, in the past decade, the company faced a series of challenges that threatened its survival. Taking insights to the nearly bankruptcy situation of XYZ Corporation, it can be seen that it implemented mushroom management practices to maintain control over its operations. Managers withheld information about strategic changes, leading to confusion and frustration among employees. As a result, employee turnover rates increased, and overall productivity declined. The company eventually recognized the negative impact of its management style and transitioned to a more transparent and inclusive approach, which improved employee morale and performance. Now, the company successfully drove through the dark days and had historically been more successful in acquiring new or existing businesses than in generating its own (Venkataraman, 2017). Their story shows that bad management method can lead to devastating risks but these risks can bring positive transformation, if handled properly and strategically. By applying efficient and appropriate management in the company, other businesses can also survive bankruptcy and reemerge stronger.

In conclusion, mushroom management is characterized by a deliberate lack of transparency and control over information, which results in limited

employee autonomy, increased dependence on management and low morale of the employees. Understanding these characteristics can help organizations recognize and avoid the pitfalls of this management style, promoting a more transparent, inclusive, and effective workplace.

Countermeasures to Mushroom Management

As mushroom management, characterized by lack of transparency, strict management control, limited autonomy of the employees, increased dependence on management and low employee morale, there are some approaches to counter it which emphasize the importance of transparency, employee empowerment, effective communication, and fostering a culture of trust. By implementing these strategies, organizations can enhance employee engagement, innovation, and overall performance.

1. Promoting Transparency

Transparency is integral to creating a healthy organizational culture and is crucial for the effective functioning of any organization. It can significantly impact the trust levels within an organization. According to Baker (2018), organizations that improve transparency in an organization can improve employee loyalty and reduce turnover. By constructing a novel firm-patent panel database from 29 countries, Rong (2018) found that transparency directly boosts innovative effort, incentives and outcomes. Therefore, organizations that practice transparency who openly share information about goals, strategies, and performance with their employees can efficiently counter the negative influence brought by mushroom management. Here are two main aspects of how to improve transparency in an organization:

1.1 Open Information Sharing

Organizations should establish systems for regularly sharing information, such as newsletters, town

hall meetings, and internal portals. These platforms can provide updates on company performance, strategic initiatives, and other relevant topics, ensuring employees are well-informed (Robbins et al., 2019).

1.2 Clear Communication of Goals

Clear communication of organizational goals and objectives helps employees align their efforts with the company's vision. Management should ensure that employees understand how their work contributes to these goals, fostering a sense of purpose and direction (Turkle, 2005).

Case Study 1: Unilever, in Malaysia and Indonesia

In the Asian market, there exists a case where a company has achieved greater success through enhancing transparency. Unilever, as a global leader in consumer goods, is well aware of the environmental and social challenges associated with palm oil production, including deforestation, land disputes, and human rights violations. In Malaysia and Indonesia, Unilever has taken steps to increase supply chain transparency and empower the farmers through technology. By ensuring clear communication of goals and access to necessary training, they have not only improved productivity but also set a benchmark for responsible business practices in the region. (BernardBusinessConsulting, 2025)

2. Enhancing Communication

Another way to cope with the negative influence brought by mushroom management is enhancing communication in the organization. Effective communication is vital in addressing the challenges of mushroom management. Organizations should create channels for open and two-way communication between management and employees. Establishing regular feedback mechanisms and promoting regular meetings and updates should be conductible ways.

2.1 Feedback Mechanisms

Implementing regular feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and suggestion boxes, allows employees to voice their concerns and ideas. This practice not only improves communication but also demonstrates that management values employee input (Morgan, 2006).

2.2 Regular Meetings and Updates

Regular team meetings and updates from management provide opportunities for discussing progress, addressing concerns, and sharing information. These interactions can help bridge the gap between management and employees, fostering a collaborative environment (Robbins et al., 2019).

Case Study 2: AIS(Advanced Info Service)

In the realm of enhancing communication to improve corporate operations, AIS (Advanced Info Service) in Thailand has reaped substantial benefits. To elevate the customer service experience, AIS has established a comprehensive customer feedback mechanism, leveraging online surveys, social media interactions, and customer service centers to promptly gather and respond to customer feedback. These strategies not only enhance customer satisfaction but also enable the company to swiftly identify and address issues.

Moreover, to ensure effective interactions with both customers and colleagues, AIS has provided communication skills training for its employees. The implementation of these initiatives has not only improved the quality of customer service but also bolstered teamwork and internal communication efficiency. As a result of these efforts, AIS has become Thailand's largest mobile operator, renowned for its reliable network quality and high customer satisfaction (DCConnectGlobal, 2024).

3. Empowering Employees

Empowering employees by granting them more autonomy and decision-making power can counteract the negative effects of mushroom management. Empowered employees are more likely to take initiative, innovate, and contribute to the organization's success. To handle empowering successfully, delegating authority and providing chances for training and development need to be promoted.

3.1 Delegating Authority

Delegating authority to employees enables them to make decisions related to their work, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. This practice can lead to increased motivation and job satisfaction (Turkle, 2005).

3.2 Providing Training and Development

Offering training and development opportunities equips employees with the skills and knowledge they need to excel in their roles. Continuous learning fosters confidence and competence, enabling employees to take on more responsibilities (Morgan, 2006).

Case Study 3: Chomthana

Chomthana, a leading Thai food enterprise and subsidiary of Yili, has been granted a significant degree of autonomy through the full empowerment and delegation of substantial authority by its parent company. It has leveraged employee empowerment to achieve significant business improvements. By enhancing the work environment through initiatives such as outdoor rest areas and renovated cafeterias, and by investing in local talent development, the company has fostered a highly motivated workforce. (Yili, 2022) Even faced with the great threat brought by COVID-19 pandemic, Chomthana's commitment to employee welfare was evident through increased salaries, provision of protective equipment, and free vaccinations, demonstrating a strong focus on

employee health and safety. These measures have not only elevated employee satisfaction but also contributed to business growth. The core product of Chomthana, Cremo ice cream, achieving top-three market share in Thailand and expanding into international markets. The company's efforts have been recognized with "Outstanding Unit in Labor Relations and Welfare" awards from the Thai Ministry of Labour for three consecutive years, achieving a win-win situation for both the company and its workforce (Yili, 2024). Chomthana's success underscores the critical role of employee empowerment in driving corporate performance and sustainability.

4. Building a Culture of Trust

Trust is the foundation of any successful organization. Building a culture of trust requires consistent actions that demonstrate management's commitment to honesty, integrity, and employee well-being. Meanwhile, the contribution made by the employees should be recognized and rewarded to create an environment where the employees can feel they're beloved and motivated.

4.1 Consistent and Fair Policies

Establishing consistent and fair policies for all employees helps build trust in the organization. Transparent policies related to performance evaluations, promotions, and conflict resolution ensure that employees feel valued and treated equitably (Robbins et al., 2019).

4.2 Recognizing and Rewarding Contributions

Recognizing and rewarding employee contributions reinforces positive behavior and demonstrates that management appreciates their efforts. Regular recognition can boost morale and encourage continued engagement (Morgan, 2006).

Case Study 4 : Zappos and Chomthana

Zappos, an online shoe and clothing retailer, is known for its strong culture of trust and employee recognition. The company emphasizes core values, rewards employees for living these values, and provides a supportive work environment. This approach has led to high employee satisfaction and customer service excellence.

Chomthana is also a successful builder and exemplar of a trust-based culture. To implement transparent and fair policies, its parent company, Yili, has established cross-cultural integration teams to ensure consistent policies across international operations, fostering a sense of belonging among employees. Chomthana also recognizes and rewards employee contributions through initiatives like "culture recognition cards" and by appointing "cultural ambassadors" to promote corporate values. These efforts have led to increased employee satisfaction. Moreover, the trust-based culture has driven business growth, with Chomthana's core product achieving notable market share in Thailand and expanding internationally. The success of Chomthana highlights how building a culture of trust through fair policies and employee recognition can lead to substantial business improvements. (YangHe, 2023)

CONCLUSION

The emergence and content of mushroom management theory can be explanation of many failures and crises in companies and organizations. As what has been concluded in the former content, lack of transparency, strict management control, limited autonomy of the employees, increased dependence on management and low employee morale are the main characteristics of mushroom management. These characteristics are interconnected in a way that creates a negative cycle within organizations. To be more

specific, lack of transparency often leads to strict control measures as management attempts to maintain order without clear communication. This strict control, in turn, fosters increased dependence among employees, who become reliant on management for guidance due to their limited autonomy. The combination of these factors usually will result in low morale, as employees feel undervalued and disengaged. Then, the low morale can further exacerbate the problem by reducing productivity and increasing turnover, prompting even stricter control measures and perpetuating the cycle. Therefore, if an organization wants to break this cycle, it requires fostering transparency, enhancing communication, empowering employees, and recognizing their contributions to build trust and improve overall organizational performance.

Thus, when an organization is dominated or overshadowed by mushroom management, it will face a series of crises which may bring it to the brink of collapse. Employees who are under mushroom management may often feel excluded from decision-making and uninformed about company goals, which makes their productivity and innovation tend to suffer. Over time, their negative behavior will ultimately harm the organization's overall performance. Additionally, this management style can contribute to a toxic workplace culture, as it fosters feelings of resentment and disconnection among staff. Therefore, it is necessary for the organizations or companies to be alert to being involved in the traps of mushroom management and to be active in creating an environment where employees feel informed, valued, and empowered to build a more productive and successful organization.

SUGGESTION

Suggestions for Further Studies

As a relative novel concept in management area, the studies on mushroom management are still insufficient, and there is a wealth of valuable studies waiting to be explored by researchers. For future researchers, it is a better way to do some studies of mushroom management theory adopted a multifaceted approach, incorporating the theory with longitudinal studies, comparative analysis, psychological research, organizational culture, technological interventions, and policy impact assessment. In this way, the researches can deepen the understanding of mushroom management and provide actionable insights to enhance organizational practices and improve employee well-being.

To be more specific, researchers can do some longitudinal studies on the effects of mushroom management. These studies could focus on the long-term effects of mushroom management on employee morale, productivity, and organizational performance. By tracking these variables over time, researchers may find how information deprivation affects mental health, job satisfaction, motivation, overall performance and well-being.

Then, comparative studies across different industries can be conducted to understand how mushroom management manifests in various contexts. These researches can identify industry-specific factors that exacerbate or mitigate the effects of mushroom management.

Moreover, people who are interested in this topic could try to do some data analytic researches for mushroom management practices to figure out some patterns in communication and information flow and develop proactive management strategies based on the results of data analysis.

In addition, further studies can be done to analyze the interplay between organizational culture, leadership styles, and mushroom management. For example, analyze how transformational leadership can mitigate the effects of mushroom management.

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