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## Systematic Application of Normative and Descriptive Aspects of Management Education

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### ABSTRACT

This theoretical study advocates strongly for clear differentiation and synthesis of descriptive and normative approaches in management education. There is a certain isolation of normative and descriptive theoretical frameworks presented in management courses. Normative models in management explain how organizations *should be* managed, while descriptive frameworks show how they actually *are* managed. Significant portions of what we teach in the business curriculum are predominantly descriptive; other parts are mostly normative, or prescriptive. If these domains are not sufficiently connected, the relevance of both approaches diminishes. When one piece of material explains the current reality without providing tools to improve it, while another piece prescribes steps for improvement that are not grounded in a particular context, students lose interest in both. The paper presents various modes of integration between two realms such as collocation of actual and desired conditions, contingency models, nesting descriptive and normative elements in the same framework.

**Keywords:** normative and descriptive framework; differentiation; integration; management education

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## ОРИГИНАЛЬНАЯ СТАТЬЯ

## Система применения нормативных и описательных аспектов управленческого образования

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### АННОТАЦИЯ

Данное теоретическое исследование решительно выступает за четкую дифференциацию и синтез описательного и нормативного подходов в управлении образованием. Существует определенная изоляция нормативных и описательных теоретических основ, представленных в обучающих курсах. Нормативные модели в менеджменте объясняют, как следует управлять организациями, а описательные структуры показывают, как на самом деле они управляются. Значительная часть того, что мы преподаем в учебной бизнес-программе, носит преимущественно описательный характер. Другие же части являются главным образом нормативными или предписывающими. Если эти области недостаточно связаны, то уменьшается актуальность обоих подходов. Когда одна часть материала объясняет текущую действительность, не предоставляя инструменты для ее улучшения, а другая предписывает шаги по ее улучшению, не основываясь на определенный контекст, то студенты теряют интерес к обеим. Работа представляет различные способы интеграции между двумя областями, такие как сопоставление фактических и желаемых условий, ситуационные модели, вложение описательных и нормативных элементов в одну и ту же структуру.

**Ключевые слова:** нормативно-описательная база; дифференцирование; интеграция; управленческое образование

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## Introduction

There is a certain isolation of normative and descriptive theoretical frameworks presented in management courses. Both descriptive and normative approaches taken separately are one-sided. If these domains are not sufficiently connected, the relevance of both approaches diminishes. When one piece of material explains the current reality without providing tools to improve it, while another piece prescribes steps for improvement that are not grounded in a particular context, students lose interest in both. Consider the instance of rational and administrative models of decision-making. The former is regarded as a normative model, the latter as a descriptive one. Thus, the first theory explains how good decisions *should* ideally be made, whereas the second describes how less than optimal decisions *are* in fact made. Placing ourselves in the shoes of students, we have to ask how exactly this knowledge would be helpful for us. One model sketches an ideal but unachievable state, while another model realistically depicts a “gray” situation without showing ways to ameliorate it. The value, or using terminology of Vroom’s expectancy theory [1], the valence of both approaches will be augmented if we can integrate them in some framework that is both realistic and provides a roadmap for enhancement of actual conditions. The low value of content pushes students to grade-seeking behavior [2], where the guiding motivation for learning certain theoretical material becomes an expected grade rather than the acquisition of practical knowledge.

This problem is exacerbated by the lack of clear discrimination between the normative and descriptive realms in most areas of management theory. The only fields where this distinction is made explicitly are business ethics and, to a certain degree, decision-making. Yet even in these areas, differentiation is not coupled sufficiently with synthesis. Scholars in business ethics have long recognized that the two dimensions gain significance only in connection with each other, and that it is essential to find synergy between them [3].

In many fields, it is quite common that normative and descriptive constructs are presented in the educational text in a mixed format without indication which domain they belong to. In order to increase the relevance of theoretical frameworks, there should be a deliberate differentiation between

normative and descriptive elements followed by their integration.

## Differentiation between descriptive and normative domains

When we encounter any theoretical framework or construct, the first question to be asked is whether this framework is normative or descriptive. For instance, the concept of *deviation* is normative, since it implies the existence of a certain standard and a mismatch between it and actual behavior. In contrast, *variety* is a descriptive term because it involves acceptance of differences that are not seen through a better/worse lenses. In general, a normative framework involves the following components:

- 1) presence of a standard such as a value, norm, rule, goal;
- 2) evaluation of current situation — if there is deviation from standards in actual situation;
- 3) prescriptive part — measures designated to close the gap between a standard and current performance.

In turn, standards can be characterized by such characteristics as quantity, power, feasibility, specificity, process vs. result orientation, etc.

In the field of decision-making, the rational model is regarded as a normative model, while administrative model as a descriptive one: the former explains how good decisions *should* be made, whereas the latter describes how less than optimal decisions *are* in fact made. In the field of business ethics there is a well-recognized division between normative and descriptive ethics [3, 4]. Normative ethics involves ethical principles such as the Kantian principle of the categorical imperative, which show how decisions ought to be made in order to be judged as ethical. Descriptive ethics reflect actual behavior. A prominent example of the descriptive model is the theory of stages of personal moral development [5].

In many fields of management discrimination between normative and descriptive aspects is not clearly articulated. The distinction is usually made between theoretical models and their application. Although there is a certain overlap between theory-practice and descriptive-normative dichotomies, they are not identical. The closest to the application concept is the prescriptive portion of the normative approach. Yet normative frameworks include other elements — the existence of a standard

and evaluation of possible deviations from the standard in real situation. Application of a theory can be purely descriptive when abstract concepts are “translated” into the mundane language of day-to-day activities. Even between prescription and application there is significant difference. Prescription may include a theoretical portion as well as practical guidelines. Consider need theories of motivation [6–8]. Regardless of how they differ in their descriptive portions, they all prescribe to identify and satisfy the dominant needs of individuals in order to enhance their motivation. This common theme of the prescriptive component is still theoretical rather than applicative. The latter would include practical steps designed to satisfy specific needs, e.g., introduction of training and educational programs so as to satisfy high-level, or growth needs.

The field of business ethics also illustrates the difference between application and prescription. Normative tenets of ethics such as Kantian or utilitarian principles are *theoretical* and *prescriptive*. Application of these principles requires provision of additional guidelines and practical recommendations, which specify measures that managers should take in order to implement these tenets.

Some of theoretical frameworks in management implicitly make a distinction between normative and descriptive sides, while others fail to do that. For example, the general model of decision-making process involves several steps, the first of which is problem recognition [9, 10]. A problem is defined as the discrepancy between a desired and actual state of affairs. The former in fact represents the normative aspect – the way things *should be*, while the latter represents the descriptive side – the way things really *are*. A similar gap between normative and descriptive sides is represented by a concept of environmental uncertainty. This construct relates to the discrepancy between required and available information in regards to various factors in an organizational environment [9, 10].

### Integration between descriptive and normative domains

Students’ engagement with a content will improve when two sides are presented in close connection. When such linkage is established, students obtain both a true picture of reality and the conceptual framework needed to improve it. The simplest way

to establish a linkage is to juxtapose current and desired states within the same framework and accurately define the absolute or relative difference between them. Collocation of actual and normative conditions demonstrates the distance between two domains. Objective assessment of this discrepancy does not provide a solution yet, but serves as an important initial step towards a solution.

A second type of linkage is provided in models that belong to a contingency approach. Contingency models were developed in the areas of organizational structure (e.g., mechanistic vs. organic structures [2], levels of centralization, different types of structural departmentalization [9]); leadership (Hersey & Blanchard’s model of situational leadership theory [11, 12], House’s path-goal theory [13]); decision-making (model of Vroom and Jago on different levels of participation of subordinates in decisions [14]), etc. Contingency models stipulate that there is no “one best way” in managing organizations, and that success in management hinges on whether or not dependent variables fit certain contextual factors such as organizational environment, size of a company, level of subordinates’ readiness, etc. Contextual factors depict specific existing situations and thus pertain to the descriptive domain. In turn, the concept of fit is evaluative, i.e. normative. It implies the presence of a certain standard (e.g., an apt leadership style), and possible deviation from this standard. Outcome variables (e.g., creating organic or mechanistic structures depending on the relative stability or instability of the environment) are also prescriptive, i.e., normative. Contingency models can be framed in an “if – then” format: if a certain condition *is* taking place (descriptive part) then one *should* respond with certain steps (normative, or prescriptive part). This format properly grounds normative measures in a particular reality, provided contextual variables accurately predict behavior of outcome variables.

Since contingency frameworks have an “if (descriptive) – then (normative)” pattern, both components of the system ought to be presented in textbooks in conjunction. When, by contrast, these descriptive and normative components are explained separately without emphasizing their connection, the value of both parts is reduced. For instance, in most textbooks on management, environmental uncertainty finds itself in the chapter

on Organizational Environment, usually located in the beginning of the book, while the topic of mechanistic vs. organic organizations, which is a normative response to uncertainty is covered in the chapter on Organizational Structure, located in the second half of the book. Thus, descriptive and prescriptive parts of the model find themselves in different parts of the text, which disconnects two dimensions and makes this content less meaningful to students.

Another type of linkage between the two domains occurs when normative and descriptive elements are “nested” inside one another so they can be regarded modules of the same multifaceted theoretical framework. Consider the general model of control process, which includes the following steps:

- a) defining standards;
- b) comparison between standards and performance;
- c) taking corrective action as long as there is deviation from standards.

Both normative and descriptive component are present in the model. Defining standards and the comparison of performance with those standards are normative elements. Comparison between standards and performance implies measurement of performance itself, which is the descriptive component of the process. Essential part of the corrective action is the analysis of causes of deviation. Causes exist in reality, therefore they pertain to the descriptive domain, while corrective action is normative — one should analyze causes of variation and take practical steps to close the loop. The whole model has a clearly prescriptive nature — it demonstrates the way control process *should be* carried out rather than how it *is* done in reality.

One more type of linkage is provided when a descriptive theoretical model is followed by a discussion of its practical implications. Many managerial models do not include prescriptive portion. Seminal Mintzberg’s model of managerial roles [15] presents an insightful description of actual managerial activities. Still, knowledge of a current situation in itself does not provide tools that would allow one to change existing conditions. In order to correct this shortcoming additional steps are warranted. Such steps might involve an exercise involving:

- a) students’ ranking of the importance of the roles in their actual work;

- b) ranking of their skills in performing these roles;

- c) comparison between the rankings and identifying mismatches between the significance of a role and the level of students’ skills.

A high rating in terms of importance along with a low skills rating for a particular role would imply the need to develop lacking skills; the opposite situation would mean “overkill” — high skills exercised in the performance of peripheral activities. Another example of a dearth of the normative aspect refers to descriptive constructs of programmed vs. nonprogrammed decisions. An instructor should not stop with mere explanations of constructs themselves; he should be focused on identifying and delivering the instrumental portions of a theory. One practical tip can be that when management chooses to decentralize decision-making in a company, it *should* start with programmed decisions.

### Relative strength of descriptive and normative components

The last question to be considered in regards to two approaches is whether descriptive and normative frameworks are equally solid and robust. Is descriptive part evidence-based? Is the normative aspect realistic and grounded in evidence?

Negative features of weak descriptive content involve superficial description on a phenomenological level; excessive details that are difficult to digest; constructs presented in unsystematic fashion. Some features from this list can be found in management textbooks. For instance, Thompson et al., [16] describe strategic concepts using excessive numbers:

- 12 industry’s driving forces of change;
- 13 potential organizational strengths;
- 13 potential weaknesses.

Many of these numerous features can be combined, while less critical cases can be omitted so that student would be able to focus on really *key* features.

Some textbooks do not show connections between concepts. Examples of this deficiency in descriptive narratives can be found in chapters on the subject of planning. Materials typically contain different types of plans without revealing connection between them. The concepts of strategic vs. operational plans, specific vs. directional plans, and single-use vs. standing plans appear in isolated

fashion [10]. It is preferable to point out that all these dichotomies are connected and that for instance a budget is a short-term, operational and single-use plan, while procedure is an example of an operational standing plan. It would be even more desirable to show the logical connection between strategic and operational plans — that the latter should stem from the former. Yet, in another textbook, concepts of single-use and standing plans are presented before the concept of strategy [9], completely obscuring this link.

In turn, a strong normative portion involves reasonable and fair standards; avoidance of excessive standards; both terminal (focused on outcomes) and instrumental (focused on process) standards, prescriptions based on a valid theoretical foundation. Conversely, it is quite typical for popular books on management to include long lists of prescriptions that are detached from analysis of real circumstances and are hardly applicable. Examples of deficiencies in normative approach can be seen in many texts on practical managerial systems such as MBO (Management by Objectives) TQM (Total Quality Management) and Six Sigma. Many applications of these systems failed because of disconnects between lofty tenets and cultural and institutional

context. TQM prescriptions are often presented in one-best way fashion, are too general, and suffer from lack of contingency approach. They disregard moderating variables such as organizational culture, impact of unionization, competitive strategy, level of uncertainty and others.

### Conclusion

It is not uncommon that textbooks illustrate positive managerial phenomena without examining conditions when such positivity is feasible. For instance, reading texts on servant, level 5 and moral leadership [9] that are purely normative and prescriptive leaves one with an uneasy feeling that implementation of these outstanding styles would involve significantly more challenges and conditions than are mentioned in the text. Illustrations by real examples of business leaders using these styles are helpful but insufficient because these examples might not be generalizable to other situations.

Implementation of presented ideas requires certain recalibration of management courses. It is important that both individual instructors and educational texts provide clear distinction between discussed spheres and at the same present them in integrative, systematic fashion.

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