Over 100 years ago, Mrs Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* was published. Now, in the age of celebrity chefs, what can business people learn from the bestselling domestic bible? Robin Wensley’s classic 1996 article provides food for thought, but also suggests that the world described by Isabella Beeton is rather more calm and ordered than the frenetic and chaotic one we see nowadays on our TV under the direction of Jamie Oliver or Gordon Ramsay. Of course, it may be that this is more because the latter makes better TV.
In 1859, Mrs Isabella Beeton published the first of 24 monthly supplements to the Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine. Republished as the 1,112-page Book of Household Management (1861), these became the essential source text, at least in the UK, on all aspects of household management. The book sold 60,000 copies in the first year. The households Mrs Beeton wrote about were the equivalent of small businesses, with between five and thirty full-time resident employees, plus part-timers working from their own homes. Household Management is mainly about “service business” – medical care and education and the management of stables as well as the cooking for which Mrs Beeton is chiefly famous today. But it strays into small-scale production management (making butter and cheese, perfume, shampoo and furniture polish; preserving seed for next year’s kitchen garden crop). Of course the household did not run at a profit: it might be seen as the Victorian English equivalent of a cost centre with an often tight budget – based on the salary and investment income provided by the man of the house. Profit was therefore irrelevant, but economy essential. And many of the management processes were not dissimilar from running a small company, then or now. How then does Mrs Beeton stand as a latter day management guru?

Mrs Beeton’s three principles of good management

Mrs Beeton’s approach can be summarised in three principles, which would certainly feature in most practical management texts:

- setting an example and giving clear guidance to the staff
- controlling the finances
- applying the benefits of order and method in all management activities.

These three principles are expressed so clearly in her book that, even for today’s very different context and cultural norms, her own words more than suffice.

An example to staff

“Early rising is one of the most essential qualities which enter into good Household Management, as it is not only the parent of health but of other innumerable advantages. Indeed, when a mistress is an early riser, it is almost certain that her house will be orderly and well-managed. On the contrary, if she remain in bed till a late hour, then the domestics, who... invariably partake somewhat of their mistress’s character, will surely become sluggards.”

“Good Temper should be cultivated... Every head of a household should strive to be cheerful, and should never fail to show a deep interest in all that appertains to the well-being of those who claim the protection of her roof.”

“The Treatment of Servants is of the highest possible moment... If they perceive that the mistress’s conduct is regulated by high and correct principles, they will not fail to respect her. If, also, a benevolent desire is shown to promote their comfort, at the same time that a steady performance of their duty is exacted, then their respect will not be unmingled with affection, and they will be still more solicitous to continue to deserve her favour.”

Control of finance

“A Housekeeping account-book should invariably be kept punctually and precisely. The plan for keeping household accounts... would be to make an entry on that particular day, be it ever so small. Then at the end of the month, let various payments be ranged under the specific heads of Butcher, Baker... and thus will be seen the proportions paid to each tradesman, and anyone month’s expenses may be contrasted with another. The housekeeping accounts should be balanced not less than once a month; so that you may see that the money you have in hand tallies with your account of it in your diary.”

“A necessary qualification for a housekeeper is that she should thoroughly understand accounts. She will have to write in her books an accurate registry of all sums paid for any and every purpose, all the current expenses of the house, tradesmen’s bills, and other extraneous matter.”

Interestingly, in the Victorian household keeping the accounts was seen as an area of female expertise. As an earlier writer, Mrs Rundell, observed in her book on A New System of Domestic Cookery (1830): “Perhaps few branches of female education are so useful as great readiness with figures.”

Order and method

“Cleanliness, punctuality, order, and method are essentials in the character of a good housekeeper. Without the first, no household can be said to be well managed. The second is equally all-important: order... is indispensable, for by it we wish to be understood that ‘there should be a place for everything and everything in its place’. Method, too, is most necessary, for when the work is properly contrived, and each part arranged in regular succession, it will be done more quickly and more effectually.”

A last sample of Mrs Beeton’s prose shows how she applies “order and method” to the important human resource issue of job descriptions:
“We would here point out an error – and a grave one it is – into which some mistresses fall. They do not, when engaging a servant, expressly tell her all the duties which she will be expected to perform. This is an act of omission to be reprehended. Every portion of work which the maid will have to do, should be plainly stated by the mistress, and understood by the servant”.

The nature of management
As these extracts show, Mrs Beeton’s view of household management is related to supervision and detail rather than to grand policy and direction. Her view of management was very consistent with others of her time. However, this does not mean she should be seen as merely historical and therefore irrelevant. The more recent assumption that management should concentrate on a broader remit is itself open to question – or at least could be a trend which has gone too far.

The notion of management has confused and humble origins.
The word *manage* derives from two distinct sources. The first is the Italian word *maneggiare* which (roughly translated) meant handling things (Latin, *manus*, a hand) and especially horses. In this derivation it was ultimately a masculine concept to do with taking charge, especially in the context of war. The word *manage* carried this broader sense until the beginning of the sixteenth century, but soon became confused with the French *menager* which meant careful use (especially in a household) – altogether a more gentle, perhaps feminine, usage.

The idea of management seems to have kept this dual character ever since; and also means coping in any kind of situation. The first *managers* were really no more than agents of owners or those in charge of public institutions such as workhouses. The operative change in the nineteenth century was probably the steady increase in the size of organisations so that it made sense to talk about *the management*, ie a body of people acting for the owners. The concept was neutral or even pejorative. In more refined employments – the colonial and civil services – there were no managers but *administrators*.

Indeed, our economist friends who regard management (like most of the rest of life) as a part of economics do have a point in this context: the word ‘economy’ derives from the ancient Greek *oikos nomos* – house and management. Mrs Beeton herself was conscious of being part of a long-standing tradition and often refers back to the earliest western households: her book’s illustrations of pots and pans, she says, include “some of the ancient utensils copied from those found in the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii”.

She had a domestic perspective on the proper place for Homeric heroes: “Ulysses, like a modern charwoman, excelled at lighting a fire, whilst Achilles was an adept at turning a spit”.

Indeed, the earliest Greek expert advice on *oikos nomos* came from Hesiod, c 715 BC, whose manual of rural management was in poetic form (a skill sadly missing among modern management gurus). He might be described as the first western exponent of the bracing effects of competitive market forces: “[Strife] rouses even the shiftless one to work. For when someone whose work falls short looks towards ... a rich man who hastens to plough and plant and manage his household well, then neighbour vies with neighbour as he hastens to wealth: this Strife is good for mortals. So potter is piqued with potter, joiner with joiner, beggar begrudges beggar, and singer singer.”

Hesiod’s work is about running a farm, including selling the produce overseas. The tenor of his advice is uncannily similar to Mrs Beeton’s (though, to the
strategic management: two aspects of the shift from strategic planning to management. This focused attention on the business life to the act of creation,” says the subject’s best known text book, “It is concerned with creating the products and services upon which we all depend. Since the creation of products and services is the-very reason for any operation’s existence, operations management should be at the heart of its affairs. No student of organisational or business life should therefore be without, at the very least, an understanding of the role, objectives and activities of operations management.”

The evolution of the contrasting strategic management perspective is complex and multi-stranded. Two key developments in the genesis of strategic management were from operational to strategic management and, later, from a notion of planning to one of management. Alfred Chandler is, probably rightly, seen as the father of strategic management writing. He interpreted previous actions by key executives as distinguishing between the operational and the strategic in the nature of the managerial task. “Thus the new structure left the broad strategic decisions as to the allocation of existing resources and the acquisition of new ones in a top team of generalists. Relieved of operating duties and tactical decisions, a general executive was less likely to reflect the position of just one part of the whole, even though old ties and attitudes were often hard to break. Moreover, the top team was now less the captive of its operating organisation,” he writes in his 1962 classic Strategy & Structure.

Thirty years ago, management experts had more faith than we have today in the power of analysis and planning – including more faith in the extent to which strategies could be developed and planned in detail by top management and head office corporate planners. Since then, more emphasis has been placed on managing strategically by building competencies and delegating authority. The need for a more flexible approach was powerfully reinforced by the OPEC oil price shocks in the 1970s. As if on cue, in May 1973 an International Conference on Strategic Management was organised at Vanderbilt University. This focused attention on two aspects of the shift from strategic planning to strategic management:

Style: the notion that strategic management was concerned with the development of response capability as well as with the forecasting of changes itself. Harvard Business School’s Robert Hayes argued (in 1985) that the validity of one’s assumptions about the nature of the firm’s environment should be of critical concern in assessing the value of any particular strategic approach: “When you are lost on a highway, a road map is very useful; but when you are lost in a swamp, whose topography is constantly changing, a road map is of little help. A simple compass which indicates the general direction to be taken and allows you to use your own ingenuity is much more valuable.”

Scope: the notion that focusing analysis on the external environment should be balanced by analysis of internal configuration. This moved consideration of process issues of organisation and implementation onto the rarefied agenda of general strategy (in contrast to bringing strategy down to earth).

These developments in the debate occurred with scant recognition of consequential problems. The issue of style raises questions about our underlying assumptions on systematic and analytical knowledge. The issue of scope raises questions about assumptions on organisational boundaries and managerial legitimacy both inside and outside these boundaries.

Such questions are rarely at the forefront of the North American debate. At the risk of unacceptable oversimplification: Europeans have tended to take more account of vested-interest and political influences on the strategy process, perhaps because such problems are most evident in state-owned enterprises which have played a smaller role in management research in the United States. Inadequate attention to these questions, however, means that senior managers risk missing the trees for the wood: if those in top jobs concentrate too heavily on the big issues, whilst delegating operational authority down to others (even those with well-developed competencies), they may be tempted to forget that part of their job is making sure that things do actually happen at the operational level.

This brings us back to Isabella Beeton, with her notion of management as an activity within a limited domain and a focus on supervision of operational detail. A recent buzzword is the “resource-based perspective” – as opposed to the earlier emphasis on the impact of the industry and sub-industry environment. One key aspect of this perspective is a greater emphasis on the detail of the internal capabilities (and hence routines) of the organisation. Perhaps this is a sign that the pendulum of the debate on the relative importance of detailed implementation and broad vision in the management function is again swinging in...
Mrs Beeton’s direction. Does she now represent the new rather than the old wave in management practice and thinking? Is strategic management more of an oxymoron than Household Management?

Mrs Beeton and the gender issue

Isabella Beeton could not avoid the gender issue. Would she have become a household name if she had been a man?

The way she tackles gender is well illustrated by comparing what she says with Hesiod’s view of the economic role of women – perhaps the only topic where he differs from her. Hesiod did not mince his words: “No arse-rigged woman must deceive your wits with her wily twitterings when she pokes into your granary; he who believes a woman believes cheaters.”

By this standard, Mrs Beeton comes over as a model of gender impartiality. She has a gentle sideswipe at both genders when she quotes – with approval – the Vicar of Wakefield: “She who makes her husband and her children happy, who reclaims the one from vice and trains up the other to virtue, is a much greater character than ladies described in romances, whose whole occupation is to murder mankind with shafts from their quiver or their eyes.”

Her comments on the inadequacies of the female and the male when hiring servants suggest that she did indeed view the genders as “equal but different”: “When the lady of fashion chooses her footman without any other consideration than his height, shape and tourname of his calf, it is not surprising that she should find a domestic who has no attachment for the family, who considers the figure he cuts behind her carriage, and the late hours he is compelled to keep, [to be] a full compensation for the wages he exacts, for the food he wastes and for the perquisites he can lay his hands on. Nor should the fast young man, who chooses his groom for his knowingness in the ways of the turf and in the tricks of low horse-dealers, be surprised if he is sometimes the victim of these learned ways.”

Reflecting the French language input to the word management, Mrs Beeton describes household management as the highest ranking “of all those acquirements which more particularly belong to the feminine character”. A forerunner of Shirley Conran’s Superwoman, with servants, she juggled her own domestic and professional life, her explicit published message foreshadows the breadth of responsibilities carried by many modem women – from running the household to reclaiming the husband “from vice”: not for her the idea that the husband might be responsible for reclaiming himself!

However, her correspondence with her husband highlights his big domestic role, as agent for her views; and Household Management assumes the man brings in an income. Is it significant that the strategy for their overall joint professional endeavours was Samuel’s, not Isabella’s?

A place for everything

Isabella Beeton’s advice on the principles of good management was based on a wider world view which can be summarised as “there should be a place for everything and everything in its place”, a proverb she coined. She does not explicitly echo the concerns expressed in more recent management texts with the instability and unpredictability of the wider organisational context. Not for Mrs Beeton, Tom Peters’ entreaty to Thrive on Chaos, or Robert Pascale’s notion of Managing on the Edge. In the context of Household Management, chaos means: “…the discomfort and suffering... brought upon men and women by household mismanagement. I have always thought that there is no more fruitful source of family discontent than a housewife’s badly cooked dinners and untidy ways”. It is another matter whether Mrs Beeton’s advocacy of order should be seen more as a defence mechanism against what appears to have been the rather turbulent nature of her own life or a genuine view that, whatever the nature and degree of wider confusions and uncertainties, a domain of order was to be encouraged in the home. As others have commented, she would certainly not have been alone among commentators on the Victorian social scene in proposing that the response to chaos and disorder was to revert to a sense of order.

However they originated, Isabella Beeton’s belief in order and her focus on the detail of managerial supervision are central to modem debates about the nature of management. In management language, having “everything in its place” meant being prepared for all eventualities. The alternative argument often put today is that to cope with a chaotic external environment the firm should itself mimic that environment and move towards a more chaotic internal environment, cutting internal structure. Perhaps the best-known exponent of this perspective is Tom Peters. The analogy is often made with the chaotic and unpredictable aspects of the natural and social world (partly stimulated by chaos theory, based on the mathematics of non-linear systems). However, in the actual world of living systems, we see a more complex picture: autonomy and adaptation are both essential.
characteristics of long-term survival, but at every level of aggregation and disaggregation we find a marked degree of order as well as disorder: a dynamic interaction in terms of both structure and change between any organism and its environment.

Coping with control

The chaos gurus face more problems as they attempt to deal with the nature of control in their exemplar organisations. This takes up less space than their proselytising of disorder (often described as empowerment or facilitation). But control still has to be there somewhere. Tom Peters tells the story of how, as a new McKinsey recruit, he hired on his own initiative a Canadian consultant for a $5,000 fee to help him assess the long-term market for certain agricultural chemicals. Afterwards his boss talked to him about this: “He lavishly applauded my initiative as ‘good McKinsey tradition’ but allowed as how I might have given him a jingle before doing the deal. He assured me he would have approved my effort, and I’m sure to this day that he would have. The story is a fine example of how to teach initiative-taking – and limits.”

There is another slant to this story – its similarity to the underlying notion developed by Peters’ original co-author Robert Waterman (always aware of the power of alliteration): “friendly facts and congenial controls”. What is missing from both Peters’ and Waterman’s analyses is the recognition that the nature of power itself is the problem. We could reframe Tom Peters’ story as one of arbitrary behaviour by his boss on the basis solely of his power position: he is unwilling to specify prior criteria but wishes to be able to veto any specific decision merely by fiat.

Maybe Isabella Beeton is more honest than Tom Peters about the real nature of power and delegation: “When in a large establishment a housekeeper is kept, it will be advisable for the mistress to..."
examine her accounts regularly. Then any increase of expenditure which may be apparent can easily be explained, and the housekeeper will have the satisfaction of knowing whether her efforts to manage her department well and economically have been successful.” Maybe, she could also have taught a thing or two to Tom Peters’ boss.

The other important question is the extent to which adaptability and flexibility are helped or hindered by routines and procedures. Order is sometimes seen as a euphemism for destructive bureaucracy. Mrs Beeton starts her book with a military analogy: “As with the commander of an army, or the leader of any enterprise, so it is with the mistress of a house. Her spirit will be seen through the whole establishment; and just in proportion as she performs her duties intelligently and thoroughly, so will her domestics follow in her path.”

In military strategy, back in the fourth century BC, Sun Tzu argued that order was essential to preparedness for any eventuality: “When the general is morally weak and his discipline not strict, when his instructions and guidance are not enlightened, when there are no consistent rules to guide the officers and men and when the formations are slovenly, the army is in disorder. Chang Yu ... Chaos self-induced.”

Many would argue that this view is strongly reinforced by many more recent examples in military conflict, with the emphasis on clear and decisive leadership alongside the importance of routines and discipline.

A management guru?

Isabella Beeton’s own life story at times verges on the heroic: among other things she managed to write the extensive and dominant textbook in her field while aged 23 to 25. It was an impressive text covering in a comprehensive manner all that might be regarded as best practice in household management of the time. It was a major undertaking, as she noted herself in the Preface: “I must frankly own, that if I had known, beforehand, that this book would have cost me the labour it has, I should never have been courageous enough to commence it.”

Over one hundred and forty years later, it is perhaps her comments on the nature of good practical management, particularly on the nature of people management, that stand the test of time: more so than some of her guidance on cooking or etiquette (few of us would now argue that carrots should be boiled for between 30 minutes and two and a quarter hours). She was not the first to enunciate these principles either generally or in the context of the household. But she continues to deserve wide recognition because of the clarity of her approach, her widespread readership and the longevity of her work.

Resources
Hyde, H. M. (1951), Mr and Mrs Beeton. George C Harrap & Co.

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