The Student: The First Wheeler Manager of His Idea

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Abstract: In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, students in entrepreneurial education programs often step into the role of "first managers" of their own ideas. This article examines how these students embody the Wheeler Manager role - an essential facilitator in flat organizational structures, which emphasizes autonomy, collaboration, and adaptability. Through an extensive literature review and examples from programs like the Startup Garage, this paper explores how these experiences shape future leaders, preparing them for effective management in non-hierarchical, circular organizations. Through a detailed literature review and examples from experiential learning programs such as the Startup Garage, we analyse how students take on responsibilities traditionally reserved for managers, including resource allocation, conflict resolution, and team coordination. The Wheeler Manager model is especially relevant as it equips students to handle dynamic challenges and navigate the complexities of non-hierarchical structures: this role encourages a shift in students' perspectives from passive learners to proactive leaders who oversee the development and strategic growth of their startup ideas. The findings highlight that by fostering inclusivity, transparency, and long-term planning, the Wheeler Manager approach empowers students to cultivate a resilient, solution-oriented mindset that is crucial for both entrepreneurial success and future careers within modern organizations. This study underscores the importance of integrating practical management experience within educational frameworks, preparing students to thrive in collaborative, innovation-driven environments.

Keywords
- Wheeler Manager
- Entrepreneurial Education
- Organiblò
- Flat Organizations
- Circular Organizations
- Experiential Learning
- Entreprenursery
- Strategic Thinking
- Innovation Management

I.   Introduction

Over the past few decades, the corporate world has seen a shift from traditional hierarchical structures toward flat and circular organizations that emphasize adaptability, open communication, and cross-functional collaboration (Daft, 2015; Hamel, 2008). This trend is evident not only in corporations but also in educational programs focusing on entrepreneurship, where students are encouraged to develop and manage projects that mirror real-world business environments (Citraro et al., 2023).

A key model within these flat structures is the Wheeler Manager (Traversa, 2024), who operates as a facilitator rather than a controller, managing the flow of information across teams, resolving conflicts, and optimizing resources. This role aligns with transformational leadership principles, which inspire and empower rather than control (Gratton & Erickson, 2007).

In educational programs like the Startup Garage, students often embody the Wheeler Manager role as they oversee their projects. Such programs foster a hands-on, experiential approach to learning, allowing students to gain essential managerial skills in communication, conflict resolution, and team coordination (Neck & Greene, 2011; Sarasvathy, 2001). This paper explores how the Wheeler Manager concept manifests in student-led

initiatives, highlighting the skills and perspectives gained and their relevance for the evolving demands of modern business.

Literature Analysis and Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in a comprehensive literature review that spans organizational theory, experiential learning, and entrepreneurship education. Foundational theories are drawn from texts like Organization Theory and Design (Daft, 2015) and The Future of Management (Hamel, 2008), which examine structural evolution in management. Modern approaches to flat and circular organizational models are further analysed, including Beretta et al.'s (2024) study on circular organizations and social sustainability.

The Wheeler Manager role (Traversa, 2024) is central to this discussion, exploring its functions and significance in flat organizational structures. Experiential learning theories, notably Kolb's model and Sarasvathy's (2001) effectuation framework, support the educational implications of the Wheeler Manager role, emphasizing iterative learning and strategic decision-making under uncertainty (Neck & Greene, 2011; Kuratko & Morris, 2024). This analysis aims to build a narrative connecting modern management practices with educational techniques that prepare students for dynamic, real-world challenges.

Analysis and Evaluation of "Flat" and "Circular" Companies

Flat organizations, characterized by reduced hierarchical layers, foster rapid decision-making and increased employee engagement (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). Unlike traditional models that rely on a rigid chain of command, flat structures encourage direct communication across teams and empower employees at all levels (Hamel, 2008). Studies by Leflar and Siegel (2013) highlight that companies adopting flat models experience a significant improvement in operational flexibility, which is critical in dynamic industries.

Examples of successful flat organizations, such as Google and Zappos, illustrate the potential for enhanced creativity and innovation when employees are given more autonomy (Duhigg, 2016). However, these structures can also present challenges, particularly regarding role clarity and accountability, especially in larger operations (Mintzberg, 1983). The Wheeler Manager role, as detailed by Traversa (2024), addresses these challenges by facilitating cross-departmental coordination and ensuring that information flows smoothly within the organization.

The circular organizational structure, or "round organization," advances the flat model by emphasizing inclusivity, interconnectedness, and shared mission alignment (Beretta et al., 2024). The Organiblò model, introduced by Beretta et al., combines circularity with agile principles, creating a feedback-driven culture that fosters a collective sense of responsibility for organizational goals. This model is particularly effective in promoting social sustainability, as it allows for collaborative decision-making that values diverse perspectives (Tapscott, 2014).

Wheeler Managers play a crucial role in these circular organizations, handling communication across functions and supporting innovation by resolving conflicts and facilitating resource allocation. This role aligns with findings from Hofstede (2001), who emphasizes that inclusive communication and shared cultural values are essential for team cohesion in diverse environments (Senge, 1990).

Who is the Wheeler Manager?

As above, we can define the Wheeler Manager as a facilitator within flat and circular organizations, responsible for connecting departments, managing resource flows, and fostering transparency and communication. This role aligns with transformational leadership principles, focusing on empowering rather than controlling employees (Gratton & Erickson, 2007). Wheeler Managers have three primary functions: information brokerage, conflict resolution, and resource optimization. Information brokerage, as explained by Nonaka and Takeuchi (2007), is crucial in decentralized structures, where effective information flow is key to organizational alignment and responsiveness. Wheeler Managers also mediate conflicts, ensuring that differing team perspectives are reconciled to support overall organizational goals, a task that aligns with adaptive management practices highlighted by Leflar and Siegel (2013).

The resource allocation function is vital in circular organizations, as Wheeler Managers ensure that resources are distributed efficiently across teams, fostering collaboration and innovation. Tushman and O'Reilly (2002)

emphasize that resource agility is critical in maintaining a competitive edge, particularly in industries where rapid change is the norm.

The Startup Garage: Incubating Ideas and Entrepreneurial Growth

The SUPSI Startup Garage is a dedicated space within the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (SUPSI), created to help students bring their ideas to life in an environment that is both welcoming and collaborative. It is designed to support entrepreneurial spirit through dialogue between students, faculty, and partners from the community, fostering a culture of innovation.

The Garage's purpose is to identify promising ideas among SUPSI students, acting as a collaborative hub where students interact with Standby Mentors - technical and scientific experts - and Skippers - peers who support each other's development. Together with external partners, these resources combine to create a dynamic environment conducive to idea generation. The atmosphere encourages freedom and autonomy, tempered by scientific rigor and commitment, helping to develop both personal and professional growth (Citraro et al., 2023). In this space, a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit is infused into daily interactions, inspiring students and faculty alike. Through events and initiatives, the Garage is continuously animated, encouraging creativity and collaboration. SUPSI works closely with academic partners, supporters, sponsors, and entrepreneurs to drive progress and create meaningful connections. Additionally, the Startup Garage emphasizes multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches, which broaden perspectives and enhance the development of innovative solutions for real-world applications. By combining resources, expertise, and a creative environment, the SUPSI Startup Garage transforms ideas into impactful projects (Citraro et al., 2023).

Programs like the Startup Garage provide a unique, hands-on experience for students to explore entrepreneurial ideas in a structure that mirrors business incubators (Citraro et al., 2023). These programs adopt flat organizational principles, granting students autonomy while offering mentorship and resources. According to Neck and Greene (2011), experiential learning environments help students develop essential skills in problem-solving, resilience, and adaptability. Kolb's experiential learning theory and Sarasvathy's (2001) effectuation framework emphasize learning through direct experience and iterative decision-making.

The Startup Garage applies these theories, allowing students to practice resource management, strategy, and leadership in an environment that encourages experimentation (Kuratko & Morris, 2024).

The Startup Garage's flat structure enables students to take on Wheeler Manager roles, overseeing their projects and making strategic decisions with minimal hierarchy. Studies by Bucăţă and Rizescu (2017) suggest that autonomy enhances motivation and engagement in project management, which is critical in fostering an entrepreneurial mindset. These environments are aligned with Organiblò's principles, where inclusivity and shared ownership promote long-term success (Beretta et al., 2024).

The Student as a Wheeler Manager: Overcoming Challenges in Entrepreneurship

The entrepreneurial journey for students entails more than just having a creative idea; it requires a robust and strategic approach to bring that idea to fruition. Acting as a Wheeler Manager enables students to approach their projects with the adaptability and strategic oversight needed to navigate real-world business complexities. In this section, we explore the challenges students face, why a managerial mindset shift is essential, and how the Wheeler Manager model prepares them for effective project leadership. In many educational environments, students are often encouraged to be problem solvers and critical thinkers but may not receive guidance on managing projects in a dynamic, team-oriented environment (Neck & Greene, 2011). Entrepreneurship, however, requires a shift from individual problem-solving to managing a collaborative, multi-faceted process involving resource allocation, team coordination, and strategic decision-making (Sarasvathy, 2001). This transformation necessitates students moving from a passive or solely creative role to one of active leadership and project oversight, mirroring the responsibilities of a Wheeler Manager (Figure 1).
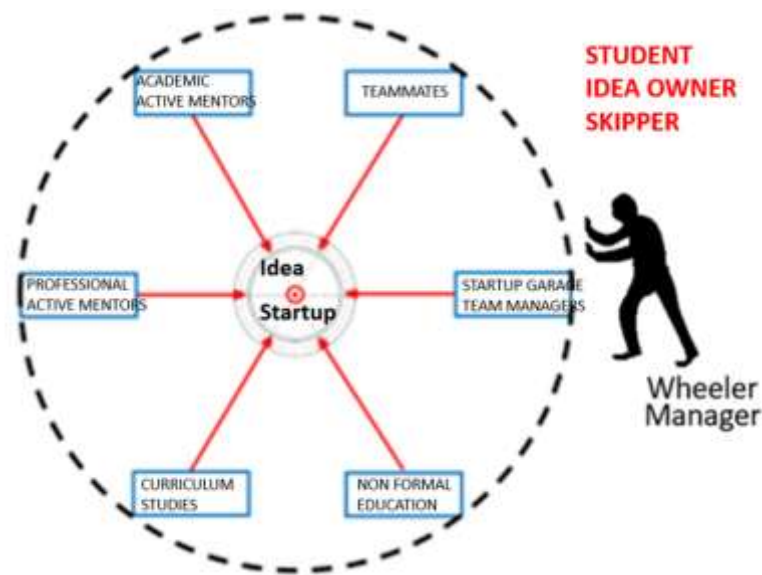
Figure 1. The Student as a Wheeler Manager

Source: Created by the authors

Acting as a Wheeler Manager requires students to step into a multi-dimensional role where they must balance creativity with operational efficiency, align team efforts, and maintain clear communication channels. This shift is critical, as it enables students to anticipate and overcome challenges that arise when managing a business idea, transforming their perspective from merely developing a concept to strategically navigating its execution. Entrepreneurial projects are rarely static; they require continuous adaptation to changing resources, market conditions, and team dynamics (Mintzberg, 1983; Hamel, 2008). Wheeler Managers in corporate settings are trained to handle such dynamic challenges through their role as facilitators, mediators, and information brokers and in case of students, adopting a similar approach allows them to develop resilience and flexibility, skills that are indispensable in both startup environments and established businesses (Kuratko & Morris, 2024).

In the context of the Startup Garage, students learn to manage limited resources, adapt team strategies, and navigate evolving project demands. The Wheeler Manager role, which emphasizes adaptability and iterative learning, provides a practical framework for students to assess, prioritize, and implement changes as they arise, reflecting principles of effectuation in decision-making (Sarasvathy, 2001). By taking on this approach, students become more capable of maintaining project momentum and making decisions that balance short-term needs with long-term goals.

The Wheeler Manager model equips students with critical management skills that extend beyond creativity and innovation. Key skills include:

- Resource Allocation and Optimization: Like Wheeler Managers, students must learn to manage resources strategically to ensure that each team member has the tools necessary to perform effectively. This skill is vital in entrepreneurial settings, where resources such as time, funding, and expertise are often limited (Beyerlein et al., 2006). Learning to prioritize and allocate resources judiciously prepares students to tackle resource scarcity with a clear, strategic mindset.
- Communication and Information Brokerage: Wheeler Managers excel in facilitating open communication across teams, ensuring that information flows efficiently (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2007). For students, developing this skill is crucial for managing team dynamics and ensuring alignment on project objectives. Effective information sharing helps prevent miscommunication, fosters a culture of transparency, and strengthens collaboration - critical elements in building a cohesive team (Bucăță & Rizescu, 2017).
- Conflict Resolution and Team Coordination: Managing a project inevitably involves navigating interpersonal conflicts and aligning diverse perspectives. As Wheeler Managers, students learn to approach conflicts constructively, seeking mutually beneficial solutions that drive team cohesion and project progress (Traversa, 2024). This ability to mediate conflicts and promote collaborative decision-making is essential for managing complex projects in real-world settings.

Entrepreneurship requires a blend of vision and pragmatism - qualities that are central to the Wheeler Manager role. By focusing on managing the development of their ideas, students cultivate a long-term vision, considering the steps needed to evolve an idea into a viable business. This approach aligns with the core philosophy of the Wheeler Manager, who balances immediate needs with future goals (Grant, 2019).

In adopting a Wheeler Manager approach, students move beyond short-term problem-solving to strategically plan for sustainable growth. This mindset helps them anticipate future challenges, adapt strategies proactively, and maintain a focused trajectory for their project (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). Programs like the Startup Garage highlight the importance of this transition by providing a structured environment for students to develop, refine, and execute their ideas over time, mirroring the iterative development process found in business incubators (Citraro et al., 2023).

The skills students acquire by acting as Wheeler Managers are not only valuable for entrepreneurship but are also highly transferrable to traditional corporate roles because, by managing the end-to-end development of their ideas, students learn to think and act like leaders, gaining confidence in their ability to make strategic decisions, resolve conflicts, and align team efforts with organizational goals (Neck & Greene, 2011).

This experience will also prepare students for various future career paths by embedding in them a proactive, solutions-oriented mindset that is adaptable to diverse organizational settings. As organizations increasingly adopt flat and circular structures, these Wheeler Manager skills will be in high demand, making students who have undergone such experiential learning better equipped for the challenges of modern work environments (Beretta et al., 2024).

II. Conclusion

The journey of students in entrepreneurship programs, where they manage their own startup ideas, presents a unique opportunity to bridge academic learning with practical business applications. Acting as the first Wheeler Managers of their projects allows students to transform their approach from purely creative ideation to strategic and managerial thinking. By embracing the Wheeler Manager role, students develop critical skills in communication, resource management, and adaptability - skills that are crucial in today's complex and rapidly changing business environments.

Programs like the Startup Garage also defined "Entreprenursery" (Citraro et al., 2023), provide students with an experiential platform that mirrors real-world flat and circular organizational structures, where decision-making is decentralized, and communication flows freely across teams (Edmondson, 2012). In this setting, students gain hands-on experience in managing the development of their ideas, transitioning from mere concept creators to proactive managers who must navigate the operational and strategic demands of their projects. This shift in perspective equips students to view their startups not only as creative ventures but as complex systems requiring careful coordination, strategic thinking, and long-term planning.

Adopting the Wheeler Manager mindset enables students to approach challenges with a holistic view, balancing short-term project demands with a vision for sustainable growth. The Wheeler Manager role encourages them to foster inclusivity within their teams, promote transparent communication, and optimize resources, which are all essential for scaling a business. This managerial approach also provides students with tools to effectively handle interpersonal dynamics and resolve conflicts constructively, skills that will serve them well whether they continue with their startup or transition into traditional corporate environments.

The benefits of this approach extend beyond immediate project management. As organizations increasingly adopt flat and circular structures, the skills that students acquire through acting as Wheeler Managers become highly relevant and transferable. They learn to work within collaborative environments, exercise adaptive leadership, and approach problem-solving iteratively - all qualities that align with the needs of modern businesses striving for agility and innovation (Fisher, 2000).

We can say that the Wheeler Manager role offers students a framework to manage their ideas strategically, fostering a mindset of resilience and adaptability that is indispensable in both entrepreneurial and corporate contexts. By shifting their approach to managing their projects as Wheeler Managers, students are not only preparing their startups for potential success but are also developing a foundation of skills and mindsets that will support their future careers in an evolving business landscape.

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