

Managers As Thinkers

Thought
Leadership



For a long time now, the dominant view of the seriously successful business manager has been one of the strategist. Led by post war American management thinking, this view imagines a manager as a one conversant with an ever growing tool-kit of 2x2 matrixes, portfolio models and game-theoretic competitive approaches that help the organisation out-perform competition. With a somewhat mechanistic view of the role of the manager, the unstated, unexamined and underlying assumption was that only the shareholder, among all stakeholders, really mattered.

However, as Western economies rapidly moved from a production and product centric one to a service economy, it was increasingly realised that the tools of operations management from a product perspective did not adequately serve a service business. Employees suddenly became crucial to business performance and even customers were understood to be a part of the service production process. This in spite of the fact that the Japanese approach to management, as exemplified in The Toyota Way, which crisis ridden Western corporations saw as another mechanical mantra, had, at the root of its philosophy, a very positive view of the employee.

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It is now being increasingly realized in the Western world, and we consider the Western world because of its claim to have invented management and management education, that mechanical application of models and strategies in a lemming-like approach only leads to mass failure. The events of 2008 are testimony to that. Managers need to be increasingly aware enough of their remote and proximate environment to understand its fundamental drivers. While the political philosophy of the democracies in which businesses function seek to capture diversity, the management philosophy of businesses reward conformance.

Business is now beginning to realise that while there is a place for models, tools and techniques, what is more important is for managers to be able to do their own model building. This is what all successful CEOs and entrepreneurs have been doing. When they fail, as inevitably some do at some point, it is a failure of model-building. For organisations to sustain, they need to ensure that this model building capability permeates as low down the hierarchy as possible. This is what the now attractive quest to discover and foment leadership is all about.

The ability to build models, as opposed to the ability to simply follow one, presupposes deep ability in critical thinking. Successful Indian senior managers, while undergoing their management education in the IIMs in the late 60s upto the late 70s, had not been exposed either to a truly

competitive environment or to TQM, TPM, ERP, SCM. JIT, CRM, BPR or indeed to most management three letter words. Yet it was this bunch of managers who successfully withstood the post 1991 transition. All that they had at their disposal was the faculty of critical thinking, which helped them take the path not trodden before.

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Slowly academia is also beginning to realize that some paradigm shift is underway. At the Harvard Business School, which has always preferred a practice oriented approach, there is now an intense debate of the future of MBA education. Spurred partly by Harry Mintzberg’s recent devastating critique of business education, but rooted in the strong tradition of the case-based approach, there is seemingly a more nuanced understanding of the different roles of dissemination through the MBA course and through consulting. In-depth knowledge of many tools, techniques and models evolved by academia or through consulting are best imparted through consulting, while the MBA course keeps its sights firmly on fundamentals.

Indian B-Schools are also beginning to question and innovate. As is so frequently

the case, this change is more pronounced with the schools that have no baggage. At the Asian School of Business, Trivandrum, for example, innovation in process, content and methodology is across at least five dimensions. Of course, with a Board comprising stalwarts such as Ramadorai of TCS; Kris Gopalakrishnan of Infosys; Samuel Paul, retired Director of IIMA and Prakash Apte, retired Director of IIMB, there is not only much experience based out of the box thinking, but their closeness to ground reality ensures that innovation does not meet with irrelevance.

Most B-Schools make their admissions process much more inconvenient than strictly necessary. While it is clearly justified for every institution to constantly raise the bar with respect to minimum acceptable quality, definition by parameters which have evolved largely to exclude as many as possible, rather than discover the talented is inappropriate, and there is little concern for the unjustifiable inconvenience and pain that the prospective student undergoes. ASB’s approach is refreshingly different. They maintain that the challenge of an educational institution lies in adding as much value as possible, to those who have the potential to cope with the course, rather than restrict the education to only the “privileged”.

The philosophy of management today revolves around ensuring that the experience every stakeholder has with the organisation is one of ‘delight’. The Asian School of Business believes that unless the practices of the institution reflect this

philosophy, it would only produce a generation of managers who are unresponsive to the needs of society. Hence, even the Admissions Process is designed to give the prospective participants as pleasant an experience as possible.

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While their Entrance tests are offered at a number of convenient locations all over India, the test can be taken at a time convenient for the candidate. Thus, they are unlikely to be excluded from or perform poorly in the process for reasons of conflict with other events, emergencies etc.

Further, they offer the flexibility to leave the programme at specified stages, provided the participant has maintained the minimum prescribed academic standards, to pursue an employment opportunity and return to the programme to complete the requirements for graduation

Induction programmes in most Schools are seen as a necessary evil. At ASB as

much effort goes into this as a regular core course. With 100 hours devoted to the Foundation Programme, the objectives of ensuring unlearning and new learning of concepts, tools, behaviours and attitudes are substantially achieved. A core course in Critical Thinking equips participants with the lifelong ability to examine any issue critically, deeply and dispassionately. This course is one of the most challenging and satisfying one to participants.

Every course, whether core or elective, seeks to demonstrate that while for practical reasons, teaching is in silos in terms of Marketing, Finance, HR, Operations etc, what managers face in the field are business issues and not just marketing problems or finance problems. While a course on Strategic Management is considered as a capstone course in most Schools, ASB has gone further to conduct a core course for final year students in Integrated Cases. This is an entirely case analysis driven course, drawn from a variety of organisations across the world, each of which calls for multi-functional analysis.

Clearly, there is much turmoil in management education and those who embrace change and more so, those who lead change are the ones who will sustain.

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