

December 2008

Educating Business Professionals for 2010 and Beyond: Six Critical Management Themes and Skills to Emphasize

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Recommended Citation

Akbari, Hamid (2008) "Educating Business Professionals for 2010 and Beyond: Six Critical Management Themes and Skills to Emphasize," *Journal of the North American Management Society*. Vol. 2: No. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://thekeep.eiu.edu/jnams/vol2/iss2/6>

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Journal of the North American Management Society

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Educating Business Professionals for 2010 and Beyond: Six Critical Management Themes and Skills to Emphasize

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Abstract: In this paper, based on the recent global and technological developments, I propose six main critical themes/skills which need to be emphasized much more than before for educating business professionals in management for 2010 and beyond. While there is interdependence among these six areas, I separate them for reasons of focus and understanding.

Since the turn of century, when Taylor (1911) and Weber (1947) gave rise to the idea of management of organizations as a profession, function and an academic discipline, management has become a mainstream field of education and practice. Grey (2005, p.53) notes that “Management has been one of the success stories of the modern world.” Before Taylor, the term management coming from “the French *menager* and the Italian *maeggiare* – the first denoting domestic or household organization, the second the handling of horses” (Grey, p. 53), was not considered in high esteem in practical and educational terms (Grey, 2005). In the twentieth century, the rise of industrial societies in the world and the increasing rationalization of the organizations resulted in the rise of management as a pre-eminent function as resonated by Drucker’s 1955 assertion that “Management will remain a basic and dominant institution perhaps as long as Western Civilization itself will survive.” (cf. Grey, 2005, p. 55). A look at the business sections of any newspaper and the number of books published on the subject of management and the celebrity status (e.g., Jack Welch) as well as notoriety (e.g., Jeff Skilling of Enron) of the CEOs further attests to the prominence and significance of the field management in today’s world.

While in twentieth century the mainstream field of management education and practice has been dominated by a set of theories, writings and experiments set in motion by Taylor (1911), Weber (1947), Barnard (1936), Follett (1941), Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), and many others, the imposing reality of a new global world dominated by Internet communication and easier and more prevalent transportation between the world continents and countries, has dramatically changed the landscape for management education and practice. Among three most important developments are the exponential rate of increase in the presence, use and impact of globalization, Internet and communication technologies on our everyday lives and experiences. These three, combined with the increasing pace and diversity of the populations immigrating to the western industrial societies, have already forced all fields, including management, to begin a process of developing new competencies for the present and future managers.

In this paper, I identify six themes/skills which I propose should be given emphasis in educating and preparing managers for the year 2010 and beyond. The main reason for my proposal is that while there is a general understanding of their importance in the field, there is not sufficient research or educational materials concerning their use in educating the business professionals. The proposed themes/skills to emphasize are: global thinking, diversity skills, online experience, universal demand for human rights, managing oneself and dealing with information overload. It is needless to state that this list is not exhaustive and it does not in anyway suggest that some other concepts such as leadership and ethics are less critical for the future generations of business professionals. The emphasis is rather on what is not yet more fully emphasized or what should be emphasized much more than before.

GLOBAL THINKING

If we agree that globalization is a reality, then we should agree that global thinking by managers and leaders is an imperative skill. All the evidence point to the fact that we are living in a global world (Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis, 2005). While it is true that international trade and interaction has been in existence throughout the history and human societies, the phenomenon of globalization is pretty recent. Therborn (2000, p. 159, cf., Clegg, et. al., 2005, p. 453) notes:

“in the major dictionaries of English, French, Spanish and German of the 1980s the word [globalization] is not listed. In Arabic at least four words render the notion. Whereas in Japanese business the word goes back to the 1980s, it entered academic Chinese only in the mid-1990s. The Social Science Citation Index records only a few occurrences of ‘globalization’ in the 1980s but shows its soaring popularity from 1992 onwards, which accelerated in the last years of the past century.”

This shows that unlike what may seem to be by now a long standing theme, the realization of globalization is a very recent phenomenon. However, the reality has already exceeded the present management’s literature and educational materials for responding to its demands. This means that business educators must increasingly include global writings, thinking, cases and examples in their coverage of the materials. As educators, it is not sufficient anymore to talk about the reality of globalization; we must raise the bar by actually demonstrating to our students how we, ourselves, think and teach globally. For example, no Strategic Management theory and approach should be presented without dealing with its global aspects. More specifically, Porter’s generic strategy of cost leadership must include a consideration of how a cheaper product produced elsewhere in the world can at anytime enter into competition with the particular company which is developing a low cost strategy. Or, global thinking will require to think of how every change in academic standard of admissions and in tuition structure, will not only impact our traditional students but also our international students.

The main argument here is that much more emphasis and teaching resources and techniques need to be devoted to globalization than before. Differently said, to those who may argue that globalization is already given enough emphasis, I reply that so far we have only seen the tip of the iceberg or “we haven’t seen anything yet.”

DIVERSITY SKILLS

There is only one trend in the diversity of the populations throughout the world and especially in the United States, Europe and industrial world: more diversity. Teaching and learning about how to effectively lead and manage diverse workforces is going to become increasingly more critical. Relating to many people from many parts of the world with different worldviews is going to be ten times more important in the next five years, than it has been in the last five years. The immigration trend in the United States portends of a population by about 2050 that is not anymore composed of a white Anglo Saxon majority. Hispanic population rise is so rapid that it has prompted a major political writer, Samuel Huntington (2004) to bring up his controversial identity question of who are we? In positive and hopeful terms, this needs to be embraced. In negative and fearful terms, this needs to be stopped or managed. The reality, however, is that the world, and not just the United States, is moving towards more diversity, not less. Most fortunately, the United States, being historically an immigrants’ country and a country welcoming immigrants better than any other place on earth, is very well equipped to treat diversity in positive rather than negative terms. Based on this simple and undeniably existing trend toward more diversification, this author strongly suggests that diversity must be embraced and should be promoted as an opportunity for harmony, peace and progress of the mankind inside and outside the United States.

As for practical and business application, the future managers must learn more about what is diversity, how to be comfortable with it, how to relate to different cultures, and how to lead and motivate employees via understanding their diversity. This understanding of diversity is not just for the so called non-diverse white Anglo-Saxon population, it is for all populations.

For a specific example, sometimes ago, the author teaching an MBA course was asked by a student and manager in his class about how to bring about a change agenda within a primarily diverse and immigrant workforce in his Schaumburg based company. From the conversation, I found out that most of the employees were of Hispanic origin. Since this was during the world cup soccer in June/July 2006, my first question for the student was whether he knows anything about soccer. He replied not really. I advised him to understand soccer better for being able to share the passion for soccer with his Hispanic employees and before being able to embark on any change conversation about their work. This simple example, by no means, reveals the complexity of diversity or the intended change in that situation. However, it points out to the fact that diversity competency in management, requires much more than the traditional notions of management. Beyond and beneath the soccer there is of course, a necessary understanding of the diverse workforce's cultural, historical, social and political backgrounds and affinities of the organizational members. And most importantly, effective display of diversity skills, requires a clear commitment to listening and learning from the diverse workforce about their views, concerns and ideas.

ONLINE MANAGERIAL SKILLS

Every manager we train and educate has two lives, offline and online. Our management literature, writings and knowledge remain strong and full of offline theories, methods and skills. There is practically none that deals with online skills in managing. While most of us and our students and practicing managers know about the significance of Internet, E-mail, Websites and B-logs, we know essentially none about how to effectively manage our organizations online or electronically. In contrast, there is a lot that is known about E-commerce in marketing literature.

To illustrate the point, an electronic search by this author under the topics of E-management on EBSCOhost database at my university's library website resulted in essentially no journal articles on E-management and rather produced articles with such titles: Getting the most out of reverse e-auction investment, and Application of a quantitative risk assessment method to emergency response planning. As for the author's search under the keyword of E-leadership, the emerging titles at the first glance created more hopes which were soon dashed by the a more careful review of the articles' content. For example, an article titled: "Leading From Day One," by John West (2006, p. 52), dealt with "developing leadership skills that would be advantageous to building a career in the field of information technology."

Against this not so bright reality, we must begin researching, learning and training our students in effective online skills for managing and leading people. By this, I do not mean giving lessons to students in how to compose an E-mail, etc. Rather, I am suggesting how to utilize, communicate online and have an effective online presence with the colleagues and employees for effective management and leadership. The traditional topics in management, such as organization theory and design, motivation, team building, decision making and leadership need to address the reality of online life. Nowadays organizational members and employees live a significant amount of their work hours online and so need to the managers and leaders. Of all the themes proposed in this article, we know the least about this one and we need to do the most to enhance it.

UNIVERSAL DEMAND FOR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Underlying the above themes are two ideas that pervade and permeates them: the spirit and era of democracy and the concept of universality of human rights. Whereas since the Russian Revolution of 1917 until the collapse of communism in 1990s there were two competing political themes segregating the world system and people, communism vs. democratic capitalism, there is now only two that unify most of the world's population: democracy and human rights. No manager in this century and beyond will survive if she/he does not understand the basic concepts, practices and the required respect for these two universally popular and on demand concepts.

The basic idea behind human rights is that there are a set of humane rights that no one nowhere in the world can be denied having and being able to exercise them. These rights are the right to free speech, association and expression among many others. The basic idea behind democracy, since the ancient times – albeit on an evolutionary path - has been the right of each person to participate in the government and administration of the affairs of the organization which governs them. More and more people everywhere in the world and especially in the industrial societies and even in essentially the last large communist country, China, seem to have a grasp of the notions included and advanced by these ideas. And for this simple reason combined with the compelling evidence available, the managers need to understand both of these concepts and apply them in their practice in organizations.

Pragmatically, managers more than ever before need to have the participation of all organizational members in setting the agenda and processes for achieving organizational goals and projects. This may mean the sheer abolition of certain organizational systems such as mechanistic structures and the adoption of organic structure as the primary model of organizing and modifying it subject to enhancing and or preserving its democratic features and mechanisms. As for human rights, the rights of every individual to free expression (e.g., whistle blowing), and association (e.g., local unions or possible organizing into new global unions) should be recognized and actively respected. At the very least, the main idea here is that the managers need to be well versed in the concept and application of these two universally present and popular ideas that everyday more people seem to embrace and subscribe to. The management of today and tomorrow cannot do without including them in its routine practice.

MANAGING ONESELF

The developments and realities addressed so far, globalization, diversity and online life, human rights and democracy, have all but made and will further make the practice of management more complex and difficult. While Taylorism made it easier to manage workers whose jobs was only to do what the management controls, the notions of diversity, globalization and human rights among others will make it much more difficult to do it as prescribed by Taylor. Workers and employees everywhere claim to have certain universal rights and present a unique identity that cannot be anymore captured in the mere division between workers and managers. We are all human beings, unique in terms of our diversity and universal in terms of our inalienable human rights, and we demand a democratic voice in our organizations. If the previous reality does not seem to be here in its entirety, it is on its way. And all this means, managing others will become harder to the extent that we do not manage ourselves effectively. Managing ourselves means that we need to know our own personalities, weaknesses and strengths and thereby learning both our independence but more importantly our dependence on other people in order to relate to them and ask them for their helping hands and thinking heads.

There is already a good movement toward this in the field of management. Harvard Business Review, as the most widely read business and management publication in the world, includes a regular feature on managing oneself. Warren Bennis for long (1989, 2003) has been advocating the knowledge of self as an important pre-requisite for effective leadership. Yet, in none of the main organizational

behavior or management textbooks do we find an extensive or for that matter, any coverage of this very important topic. We need to do much better here as time and time again, we have seen how the leaders and managers who did not manage themselves, including their successes, have failed as managers and leaders. Kenneth Lay of Enron failed as he did not manage his insatiable greed. A few managers that I knew, despite their otherwise good managerial skills, failed as they did not manage their own destructive dependencies, such as alcoholism or anger. Of course, as these are more flagrant examples, there are also more subtle ones, such as a manager, not understanding his own biases, makes a bad promotional decision and turns his otherwise loyal staff against him. There is a huge territory that needs to be known, covered and discovered in the management of self, a most critical and neglected area.

DEALING WITH INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Globalization, Diversity and Online life all mean the exponential increase in the amount of information available and accessible, which undoubtedly translates into a huge and permanent information overload for almost any decision we make. This phenomenon has long been noted by the Nobel Laureate and organizational writer, Herbert Simon. In his famous theory of bounded rationality (e.g., 1976), Simon states that in decision making, organizational actors satisfice rather than maximize the outcomes of their decision by selectively choosing and attending to the information. This is in contrast to the rational requirement of analyzing all available data and all possible outcomes of their decision alternatives before making a decision. Meanwhile, the dimensions of the information accessibility and overload in light of the online, global and diversity currents are now much more acute than Simon first noted this problem. Partially this problem in certain respects can be dealt with the computers and their advanced versions. However, the ultimate decisions are today and in future made by the human beings and they are already overwhelmed by the enormity of information overload.

This overload, while impacting every area of life within organizations, is especially critical in the area of sensing and interpreting environments of business organizations (Huber, 2004). Huber notes that business press and literature have failed to fully prepare managers for dealing with the future, rather than past, business environments. He suggests that five forces have and will continue to substantially change the environmental landscape of organizations. They are (p. 15):

- “1. more and increasing *scientific* knowledge,
2. increasingly effective information, transportation, and manufacturing *Technologies*,
3. more and increasing *complexity*,
4. more and increasing *dynamism*, and
5. more and increasing inter-firm *competitiveness*.”

Thus the existing and increasing reality is the presence of information overload and rapid pace of change in producing them, which bring up the question of how to deal with it. Huber and others advocate many solutions to this reality. One that this author strongly recommends is the diversification of the sources of information to the extent feasible. Contradictory sources of information must be searched and opposing views must be more frequently sought in order to increase the probability of sensing and interpreting the environments correctly. Moreover, business professionals must be taught to identify and question their assumptions, values and beliefs which underlie their decisions.

A way to manage information overload is to redesign organizations. For this, Huber (p. 65) recommends “it will be more important for future firms, facing, as they will, more frequent and more rapidly occurring environmental changes, to ensure that upward communication channels are easily traversed.” An example he provides from Intel’s Andy Grove is illuminating (p.65):

“[A strategic inflection point] can be a major change due to the introduction of new technologies, a different regulatory environment, a change in customers’ values, or a change in what customers prefer. Almost always it hits the corporation in such a way that *those of us in senior management are among the last ones to notice.* (Puffer, 1999: 15-16)”

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The global, technological and communication revolutions in the world today require a commensurate adjustment in the critical educational themes and skills to be provided to the future generation of business professionals. We can no more work with the theories and models which were set in motion by the writers and practitioners in early twentieth century, such as Taylor, Weber and Mayo. There are at least six critical themes and skills that need to be brought to the forefront of our educational work for the future managers. They are: global thinking, diversity competency, online management, recognition of universal demand for democracy and human rights, managing oneself and dealing with information overload. This author has no doubt that any educational agenda void of all or most of these themes will be ineffective in educating and training business professionals that are in acute need for 2010 and beyond.

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