Guest Opinion: Why Our Business Leaders Need the Liberal Arts

Richard Sawyer
By Richard Sawyer

Why Our Business Leaders Need the Liberal Arts

The exemplary partnership between business and education in Massachusetts was emphasized earlier this year by the one-day conference, “Striving for Excellence,” co-sponsored by Senator Paul Tsongas and the New England Council.

Many forward-looking professionals from both sectors expressed their concern about the need for further improving the current business-educational relationship to meet the domestic and international challenges of the next twenty years.

Speakers and panelists made many sincere remarks about business education, computer training and literacy, finance and accounting knowledge and the physical sciences. However, there was precious little mention -- despite addresses by Governor Dukakis and other notables -- of the liberal arts, the social sciences and the tradition that humanities plays in developing clear thinking, ethical judgment, expository writing, skills, evaluation, the discipline of inductive and deductive reasoning, creative problem-solving, and the ability to take disparate elements from many apparently isolated administrative and technical specialties and relate them to one another.

There was also seldom any mention of the part that the humanities, liberal arts and social sciences can play in the international sector, where so much of our business acumen and profitability in the next twenty years will count. As Harvard President Derek Bok has noted, “the critical problems lie in how business can accommodate itself to larger public concerns expressed by legislatures, government agencies and community groups” -- including international constituencies.

Today’s leaders -- and more importantly, the leaders of tomorrow -- will profit greatly from acquiring and improving international negotiating skills, human relations and communication skills, and the ability to foster creative problem-solving and entrepreneurship. But, with so many of these skills currently lacking or needing improvement, we must ask ourselves where this training will come from. Ideally, such training has come from our colleges and universities -- and increasingly our state university systems must play the major role here.

Today, however, we have in the Commonwealth, as in many other states, what can be called the aging of the professions. A Fortune Magazine cover story recently noted that MBA graduates are in trouble. They’re searching for jobs and opportunities that don’t exist. They know that their professional forbearers, now in their mid-30s and 40s, have taken their place on the career ladder and unless they decide to go into business for themselves will seldom vacate the posts they worked so hard to acquire.

This means that we must motivate millions of new, young, potentially enthusiastic employees facing the rigors of a new age with demographic statistics against them. Today’s pressures to get a good job, study for grades and not the love of learning, choose careers not out of committed interest but for practical reasons, all tend to limit the focus of our students, limit risk-taking and generally impoverish the pool of exceptional talent we need to revitalize business.

The business schools have just now begun to include more liberal arts courses in their curricula because of complaints from companies about MBA performances. Essentially, though, the liberal arts have been devalued to the point that attrition among the professional teaching ranks in these areas will take ten to twenty years to bolster. Un fortunately, we need leaders today to solve the problems of remaining competitive tomorrow.

If you look at our own state school system, you find that in many of these colleges and universities there has scarcely been a new hire in the liberal arts areas of history, philosophy, English, languages and the arts for a decade or more. At Lowell University, for example, the youngest professor in the English Department is about forty years old. If we can no longer offer the tradition where knowledge can be passed with continuity to the next generation, our ability to compete will increasingly erode.

Although many managers and business leaders can define objectives and command employees, it is the unusual and gifted manager who can be called truly visionary -- especially where motivating today’s young professionals is concerned. Because we are living, as Peter F. Drucker says, in “turbulent times,” it is precisely the skilled, visionary leader we need to assure the costs of doing business tomorrow. Such leaders have an instinctual ability to see the big picture to plan strategically, to coordinate, to network new arrangements in a changing world — to be, in a word, innovative; technically, organizationally, cross-culturally. But instinct alone cannot help us weather the storm. Older managers need new training. Young managers need experience. Prospective managers need both. If we fail to reeducate our current supply of good managers, and fail to provide both education and a continuity of professional experience for our younger managers and aspiring leaders, our international influence will falter.

We are at a watershed in our educational history. President Reagan’s bi-partisan commission report on education, A Nation At Risk, and a dozen other similar studies have shown that. What we choose to implement today for the next twenty years — because of our “can-do” attitude — will determine to a great degree nationally, and more importantly internationally, our success in an increasingly hostile, confusing and complex world.

At this critical juncture, before setting an inflexible policy that excludes the liberal arts, business, government and educational leaders need to re-evaluate how the liberal arts tradition can significantly contribute to a strengthened economy.

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