



Philosophers and the fine art of business

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Business education should look beyond numbers to bring insight to the CEOs of tomorrow

Jeremy Hazlehurst

DO BUSINESSES that are trusted make more money? Is it ever morally acceptable to lie? Is a corporation a moral agent? If so, who does that mean is responsible if it does bad things? Not the most obvious questions that you might expect to face on an MBA course, perhaps, but these sorts of quandaries are at the forefronts of the minds of the students at Cambridge's Judge Business School who take the Philosophy in Business elective.

The course, which sits alongside traditional MBA fare such as Risk Management and Supply Chain Strategy, is run by two members of Cambridge University's philosophy faculty, Professor Alex Oliver and senior lecturer Hallvard Lillehammer.

If it sounds daunting, then it isn't – nobody expects you to hold forth on Schopenhauer or Kierkegaard. Instead, the philosophers take what they call a "bottom-up approach". Rather than bamboozling students with abstruse metaphysics, they introduce real-life examples and then bring philosophical rigour to bear on them. For example, if you were on holiday and somebody offered to sell you a carpet and said you could send him the money when you got home, would you do it? If so, why? Under the guidance of the philosophers, this simple example soon leads into some surprising insights into the nature of trust (and the morals of MBA students).

All very interesting, but is this just a frivolous break from the serious business of learning about collateralised debt obligations and Gaussian copulas? What's the point? "We want to help students become more self-aware and more self-critical, and to give them tools for effectively explaining and justifying their actions, and for decision-making," says Oliver. "We are well aware that as future business leaders, our students will need to take sides on a whole host of ethical matters."

The classes raise some interesting questions. One of the most fascinating aspects of all this is the way that culture affects ethics. From sitting in on one class, it became obvious that things are viewed differently in Helsinki and Hiroshima. For people who will find themselves working for multinationals, and quite possibly in a number of countries in their careers, these are valuable insights.

You might not get philosophy on every MBA course, but plenty of business schools are looking beyond the core financial subjects these days. The humanities are providing added enlightenment and inspiration. Some have always taken this approach, but since the financial crash others have started looking to broaden their offering.

For example, at Rouen Business School one of the professors, Rita Klapper, uses examples from art, music and theatre in her classes on entrepreneurship (for example, Sweet Dreams and Bitter Sweet Nightmare by Beyonce). At ESMT in Berlin, professor Konstantin Korotov uses a case study in his leadership class based around the conductor Daniel Barenboim's project where he put together an orchestra of Israelis and Palestinians.

At McGill in Montreal, Professor Nancy Adler uses the examples of Picasso and other modernists to change the way that people think – rather than seeing business through the prism of solving problems, she encourages them to look at paintings and reflect on the way that artists try to create, rather than problem-solve. She encourages people to see the “beauty” in leadership. At BPP in the City, they look at the way Damien Hirst used the same business model as the great painters and sculptors of the Renaissance – a studio of artists – to create his works and turn himself into one of the greatest art brands, and the richest artist, in the world.

This is more than a gimmick. BPP's director of MBA Katie Best says that these arts-flavoured electives are fundamental to the modern MBA. For a start, the very people who are on MBA courses have changed, she says. An MBA class is not a homogeneous bunch of corporate types from law firms and investment banks, but also includes plenty of people from the creative industries, especially in places such as London, where film, luxury goods and the arts thrive. People from those industries tend to think in different ways to those from the City, and to be more open to new ideas. This can be a revelation for those from, shall we say, less flexible industries. “Even accountants from advertising companies are more creative than accountants from banks,” Best says. For them, using art or philosophy in class is not odd at all.

But the connection between business and art goes even deeper than that. Business itself, says Best, is perhaps best viewed as an art-form of sorts, and the whole point of an MBA is to teach people to be more artistic in their business lives. “There's no point teaching

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somebody rudimentary finance that doesn't make them as good as the dedicated finance person,” says Best. “The MBA is about combining all the disciplines in a way that they can all work in conjunction. That in itself is an art-form.” The value of an MBA is that it teaches you to think differently, and to take ideas from other disciplines and apply them in new ways. This is the bread and butter of the arts and it's only natural that some look to them to teach it.

Business is often about looking beyond black and white thinking. Sometimes you need to learn that things are more complicated than you thought, which is one of the things that Judge's philosophers teach. It's necessary to read the textbooks, but they are not enough to make you good at business – just as owning a palette and brush is not enough to turn you into a painter.

Undoubtedly, MBAs can learn by studying Warren Buffett or Richard Branson, just as a painter will study Velasquez's brushwork or the way Tintoretto used perspective. There is no substitute for deep knowledge. But there is a spark that turns a solid performer into a brilliant one, and people in the arts know how to kindle it. Andy Warhol might have been smiling when he said that "good business is the best art." But he was on the right lines.

As found at:

<http://www.cityam.com/city-focus/philosophers-and-the-fine-art-business>