

THE SCHOOL FOR RINGMASTERS

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Zubin R. Mulla

The increased emphasis on qualification and certificates in the post-industrial society has led to a proliferation of professional education courses. These vary considerably in terms of academic rigor, but they share the common aim of providing membership to a professional body and indicating capability in a professional role. But what is the real value derived by the participants in this education? Does it also provide the knowledge and skills essential to the chosen profession, or is the goal simply to obtain membership to the professional community and a seeming expansion of job opportunities?

Consider the analogy of the child and the ringmaster given below, to evaluate how effective the professional management educational institutions have been.

A child at the zoo knows the names of all the animals he sees.

He points to them and proudly names them all.

He even knows their habitat, eating habits, lifestyle and anatomy.

But all this is possible only while the animal is safely behind bars.

The ringmaster need not know all this,

He knows his animals like the child never can.

He is deeply sensitive to their needs and moods.

He can communicate with his animals,

*He is with them, not separated by bars,
And so, he makes them perform in synchrony.*

Similarly, in business schools we learn various terms, models and classifications. We are experts at analyzing, categorizing and giving recommendations. All this, while the "animal" is safely within the cage. Just like the child in the zoo, we are good at naming, classifying and building associations. At any case analysis discussion we can hear: "This organization is a *professional bureaucracy* with a *flat structure* and *horizontally differentiated*.....their strategy is one of *market penetration* and *cost leadership*..... using *Porter's framework*: they must perform a *SWOT* analysis.....analyze their *competitive environment*, identify their *core competency* and formulate a *corporate strategy*." Good words are these and a typical b-school talk.

According to Pfeffer and Sutton ("The Smart-Talk Trap", Harvard Business Review, May-June.1999): Managers let talk substitute for action because that's what they have been trained to do. Most executives have been to business school where they have learnt to talk and that the ability to talk smart pays. Smart talk is the essence of management education where students learn to sound smart in classroom discussion and to write smart things on essay examinations. When we contrast this with the training people receive when their performance is a matter of life and death we find that doctors, soldiers and pilots all supplement their training with the simulation of real situations.

Business education does provide for a period of summer internship where some exposure is given to business realities. However, here the summer trainee's role is usually restricted to a single function or simply to data collection / market research.

If we want to succeed in the dynamic business environment, we must learn to be like the ringmaster. *Be one with the environmental forces.* Forget about the names, jargon and classifications so dear to us and get down to brass tacks. Students must be well trained to be sensitive to the surroundings and to respond to various stimuli. It is then that we can harness the very forces that have threatened us to our advantage and become *ringmasters* in the business circus.

The first step towards moving from a childlike knowledge to the ringmaster's skills involves revamping our teaching system. In order to develop sensitivity to complex business situations, alternative-teaching styles must be adopted. Learning must become more experiential and less prescriptive. Students must be encouraged to wonder and dream of *possibilities* rather than just memorize categories and business models. This will entail a great deal of extra effort on the part of the teachers in terms of being up-to-date with the latest innovations in learning psychology and teaching methodology.

Since teaching is a unique skill, which can not be substituted by mere academic brilliance, the faculty of professional institutions must be divided into two categories: teachers and researchers. These categories are not exclusive, which means that a particular faculty member can be part of more than one category based on his / her skill sets and accomplishments. The rationale behind this distinction is that teaching is in essence communication and research is inquiry, two very distinct skills. Since teachers have the task of communicating the curriculum to the students it is necessary for them to be very experienced, sensitive and trained communicators.

Dedicated faculty who do not like teaching must not be forced to teach; instead they could serve as guide and an information resource to young teachers. Teachers must ensure that they stay

abreast not only of the latest developments in their subject, but they must also be familiar with the innovations in educational methodologies.

Persons who are specially qualified and experienced in the field of "education management" must be in charge of the administration of the institute.

Theoretical concepts can be introduced either through lectures, demonstrations, and real life examples or through a Socratic questioning technique. As the subject progresses, the focus on theory must gradually be reduced and simultaneously practical problems be introduced.

At the end of the course, the teacher must ensure that each student has understood the essentials of the subject. The focus is not on remembering facts, but the ability to apply concepts and to develop sensitivity for the subject.

The second year in a business school must be dedicated to mastering the application of theory in the real world and integrating the knowledge across various subjects. This can be done by forming teams of students and giving them complete projects in the form of real life assignments or simulated situations. A faculty team should closely monitor the progress of the student team. Like the students, the teachers must also work together to create the project, guide the students and provide feedback on performance.

In addition to benefiting the students, this methodology would also help the faculty get valuable feedback on how effectively they were able to equip the students in the first year.

Throughout the entire process, the emphasis must be on developing expertise in the implementation of decisions in the real world, rather than on using theoretical models to come up with recommendations and reports.

Another point, which must be continuously emphasized, is working in groups. **Faculty must also work in teams so that they face the issues and obstacles in working together. This**

makes them more sensitive to group dynamics and they will be able to help their students better.

If business schools are to survive as suppliers of managerial talent in the future, they will have to seriously rethink their assumptions and improve their processes. They will have to move closer to realities in the world, and aim for the all-round development of the individual rather than simply concentrate on superficial tools and techniques. It is time for the hallowed institutes of management to apply the concepts, strategies, models and frameworks that they advocate for businesses to themselves.