Schools must learn to tear down their walls

Soapbox
By Arnoud De Meyer

I have been following with interest and some bewilderment the debate about the role of business schools in the financial and economic crisis. Professors and deans argue that their research is too far removed from the reality of business, that we have the wrong paradigms, or that we do not share the right set of values with our students. Shareholder value is out of fashion and ethics or corporate social responsibility have become de rigueur. This leads to interesting tinkering with the design and the content of our programmes. But I think we miss the point. The real problem with business schools is that they are precisely that: business schools. I propose that we need to become schools for business, ie schools that listen to what organisations see as their main problems and that come up with answers based on whatever universities can offer in terms of disciplines.

Underlying the concept of a “business school” is a well defined and limited body of knowledge that one needs to possess in order to become a qualified manager: an understanding of what markets are about, how one develops new concepts, how one transforms resources into value and how you manage human and financial resources. Cap it all with a bit of strategic thinking and infuse it with management control, and you are supposed to have an ideal recipe for what a manager needs to know.

However, what a manager needs to know is in constant flux because the problems that confront organisations are subject to change. Today, senior managers need to formulate responses to new problems of a geopolitical nature, or sustainability of the environment, conservation, energy, security or diversity on top of the problems of positioning, competition and efficient use of resources. These are different problems than those they were confronted with yesterday, and no doubt tomorrow’s problems will be different. What we need to do is provide the tools and concepts that can help these managers to complement and hone their talents and intuition, so they can respond faster and better. These tools and concepts are often not available within the traditional management disciplines, but increasingly some of these come from anthropology, engineering, physics, philosophy or mathematics. It is our task to listen to what the people who lead organisations need, and be a facilitator in providing them with the appropriate conceptual support, wherever that support comes from.

This evolution is compounded by the fact that many of our entering students are increasingly savvy in the basic concepts of management, with many attending management courses before going to business school. Students expect more than a simple rehashing of the traditional management disciplines. They want to see the relationships and need a systemic view of how organisations fit in and interact with their context. I think a paradigm shift is needed. Rather than business schools that focus on the basic management disciplines, we need to become schools for business, ie active facilitators that provide managers and business leaders with access to the wide range of disciplines that a university can offer, and that can help them to handle the systemic problems they are confronted with. For risk management, for example, we should ask for help from our colleagues in mathematics and psychology, while for issues in sustainability or conservation our colleagues in engineering, physics, economics, geography or biology can help. In health management we need to enlist the help of our colleagues in the medical school. When we ask ourselves what the purpose of the company is, we may have to turn to economics and philosophy. Let’s tear down the walls of the business school and transform it into a school where business and non-profit organisations can find the best answers to their challenges, even if the answer does not come out of a traditional management discipline.

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