

A Commentary  
on “Undergraduate Education:  
The Implications  
of Cross-Functional Relationships  
in Business Marketing—  
The Skills  
of High-Performing Managers”

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**ABSTRACT.** Collaborative skills that promote cross-functional dynamics, boundary spanning, and inter-firm cooperation are essential to every marketing manager. Most courses in the business curricula do not address the development of relational skills and competencies that support the ability to cooperate and reconcile diverse interests and objectives as needed in real world practice. I propose that we revise the fundamentals of our educational models to support the development of collaborative, cooperative and relational competencies in our business graduates. A “values” driven perspective is a must. It entails understanding, examining, reflecting, externalizing, discovering, accepting and challenging about our past experiences and beliefs as we refresh our perspective about things, people, situations, and options. New dimensions a business curricula that sustains a “values” driven perspective must include are: (1) Design curriculum from a systems thinking perspective, (2) Develop leadership potential and management capabilities, (3) Nurture and rehearse the use of different types of intelligences, (4) Foster deep approaches to learning

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when validating educational goals and academic achievement, and (5) Incorporate value driven decision-making and a sense of spirituality. doi:10.1300/J033v14n01\_09 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Collaborative skills, business curricula, deep learning, relational intelligences, learner profile

Collaborative skills that promote cross-functional dynamics, boundary spanning, and interfirm cooperation are essential to every marketing manager. It is also a reality that most courses in the business curricula and curriculum structures do not address the development of relational skills and competencies that support the ability to cooperate, reconcile diverse interests and objectives, and allow for a holistic view of business marketing problems as they occur in real world practice.

In this vein, the authors of the previous paper highlight the role of relationship management skills that build collaboration and cooperation in business and impact the interface of marketing with other organizational functions and processes. Their claim sparks the re-evaluation of competencies and skills in the marketing curricula and particularly on the role of business marketing courses within. Moreover, alerts us on the consequences of not designing appropriate course content that fosters role-taking ability, interpersonal communication, perspective taking, responsive ability, and adaptive skills as critical traits that high-performing managers have mastered.

Relational or interpersonal skills are a must in every business graduate in order to improve his/her effectiveness as a leader and manager and to be able to nurture collaborative mindsets in teams, projects, and alliances. As suggested by Gosling and Mintzberg (2003, p. 58) "to be in a collaborative mind-set means to be inside, involved, to manage throughout." Still, we do not have clear what within the curriculum will develop those skills and competencies. We could, as the authors suggested, include business speakers, learning projects, case discussion, and role-playing in the classroom as several means to train students in such cooperative and collaborative skills. However, serious revisions regarding orientation and substance in the curricula should precede these methodologies.

I propose that we revise the fundamentals of our educational models to support the development of collaborative, cooperative, and relational

competencies in our business graduates. Schools of business should develop educational models that include knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values as their core pillars. Technical or functional competency alone is not enough. Moreover, educational encounters along the curricula should allow for students to discover, capture, internalize, rank, judge, and communicate values as new learning advances. In order to have the ability and competencies to nurture relationships, collaboration, cooperation, trust, and commitment, future managers should understand their meaning, dimensions, mechanisms, and externalities, but most importantly develop an individual position and a sense of believing towards them. Only when this is achieved future business graduates will exhibit empathy and sensitivity to understand others and the integrity and ethics to build and sustain interpersonal and business relationships. A “values” driven perspective is a must. It entails understanding, examining, reflecting, externalizing, discovering, accepting, and challenging about our past experiences and beliefs as we refresh our perspective about things, people, situations, and options. Ultimately, deep thinking will allow students to recognize that their decisions truly reflect what they stand for: values, intellectual self, and spiritual self (Kumar, Ressler, and Ahrens, 2005). Let me suggest the following new directions that can assist in building business curricula that sustains a “values”-driven perspective.

*Design Curriculum from a Systems Thinking Perspective*

Relational skills and competencies are not privilege of the marketing domain. As such, they should be approach not from the functional aspect of this discipline but from a more inclusive level of analysis such as decision making or leadership. Kumar, Ressler, and Ahrens (2005) have suggested that students become more systems thinkers and decision makers than problem solvers. Systems thinking is the ability to understand how systems are structured and how they operate by reflecting on the relationships between two or more variables. The focus is on studying the patterns of relationships since everything connects to everything else. To understand these relationships, interdisciplinary thinking competency, defined as the management of intellectual knowledge obtained from diverse professional backgrounds is critical (Badal, 2005), and may be incorporated in the curricula through course requirements from other disciplines outside business, that is, arts management,

industrial psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, cognitive diversity, and communications.

*Develop Leadership Potential and Management Capabilities in All Business Graduates*

Be cautious to build strong leadership skills over good management foundation in business students. It becomes imperative to develop “personal quality” or “inner” growth more than just professional skills. Educators should design more meaningful experiences from which students can learn the tacit components of leadership, that is, building relationships, understanding employees, creating consensus, working with others, and learning to learn. For this, developing “reflective” mind-sets, as those that go beyond introspection and are able to perceive familiar things in new ways (Gosling and Mintzberg, 2003) is essential. However, be sure business students learn their disciplines in depth (Mintzberg, 2004).

More importantly, design educational experiences that foster individual competitiveness built on strong self-efficacy beliefs and intrapersonal competencies and translate capacities into actions and pragmatism. In this vein, programs that support meaningfully connecting with communities and becoming active and responsible citizens are appropriate. Community-based research and the service-learning movement may be the answer to facilitate students’ connection to the real world as they foster the development of “intentional” leadership that influence peoples’ lives (Paul, 2006). Intentional leadership provokes involvement and allows for continuous re-evaluation as students reflect, learn, share, lead, make an impact, and reflect again about the communities they impact, their proposals, and their role within.

*Nurture and Rehearse the Use of Different Types of Intelligences*

Overall, students have wide range of capacities. Gardner (1999) has suggested the existence of seven types of intelligences: These are linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily kinesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. Recently, Gardner has proposed that naturalist, spiritual, and existential may be new intelligences. Unfortunately, educational institutions have focused primarily on two types—linguistic and logical with little attention to the others (Tucker, Sojka, Barone, and McCarthy, 2000). Education works most effectively if we take into account that students do not have all the same kind of “minds.” In fact, building strategies to develop cognitive diversity in the design

of curricula, learning objectives, and learning experiences may harvest richness from individuals.

Emphasis on developing emotional versus cognitive intelligence in the curricula is a must. Emotional intelligence is “a type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey and Mayer, 1990, p. 185). Emotional intelligence is a key ingredient of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences. Weisinger’s (1998) framework includes two dimensions: intrapersonal relates to perceiving one’s own emotions (self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation) and interpersonal (ability to empathize and mentor and ability to relate well and perceive others’ emotions). The concept of emotional intelligence particularly the complex capabilities of vision, relationship building, and people development are seen as critical leadership competencies (Salopek, 2004).

More important, emotional intelligence theory can be incorporated in the curriculum (Myers and Tucker, 2005) using social learning theory concepts as suggested by Whetten and Cameron (2002). It can be improved through learning and it requires a great deal of individual determination and persistence (Latif, 2004) as students integrate the “what” or left-brain functioning (logic, analysis, linear thought) with the “how” or right-brain functioning (concepts, relationships, lateral thought) as total brain leadership.

#### *Foster Deep Approaches to Learning When Validating Educational Goals and Academic Achievement*

Deep approaches to learning have a strong impact on strategic learning in business students as they complement each other rather than being mutually exclusive (Rodriguez, 2006). A strategic approach refers to the intention to achieve the best grades possible by adapting to the assessment demands (Entwistle and Waterston, 1988) and has a competitive motivation alone. A deep approach suggests that the intention to understand the material is motivated by the subject matter. When students are deeply motivated to learn they will think creatively and critically; and they will use a deep strategy (Zhang and Sternberg, 2000). As a consequence, they maximize understanding by focusing on meaning and integrating new learning with previous knowledge (Evans, Kirby, and Fabrigar, 2003) and develop the ability to be a versatile learner, one that recognize different academic tasks and designs the appropriate learning strategy (Entwistle, 1977).

Deep approaches to learning are consistent with understanding, reflection, and critical reflection (Leung and Kember, 2003). A possible explanation is that deep learners develop self-regulatory practices and use meta-cognitive strategies to supervise cognition during task execution (Bouffard, Boisvert, Vezeau, and Larouche, 1995). Most importantly, business students that use this deep learning approach develop strong intrapersonal self-efficacy beliefs (Rodriguez, 2006). Curricula should be designed to ensure that students adopt a deep learning approach, are intrinsically motivated to learn, and engage with the content on a personal level (Hodgeson, 1997). Under this approach, students are able to attach a personal meaning to the learning task.

#### *Value Driven Decision Making and a Sense of Spirituality*

A “values” driven curricula will bring together logical thinking with ethical thinking. Students will recognize that the assumptions that sustain their reasoning must be verbally discussed. This reflection process will question and enlighten about interests, duties, virtues, and rights. Unfortunately, our educational models does not require scrutiny of the assumptions while making decisions (Kumar, Ressler, and Ahrens, 2005) fostering a value-free analysis.

When leaders exhibit integrity, the needs and activities of the people they lead must transcend their own needs (Stefano and Wasylshyn, 2005). Integrity relates to the individuality, personality, or character. Integrity calls for moral standards that entail the sense of personal agency or stake, especially with respect to other people. We achieve an inner harmony, knowing our actions are helping others as well as ourselves (Kumar, Ressler, and Ahrens, 2005). The authors refer to this as the ultimate level of human knowledge—spiritual. The development of relational skills and competencies will require that our graduates move from “doing” knowledge (one that applies techniques to solve problems) to spiritual knowledge where moral and ethical responsibilities are inherently part of the solution.

### **THE ROLE OF FACULTY IN BUILDING STRONG RELATIONAL SKILLS**

I believe that we as educators should focus our efforts in the design of educational climates that favor the development of emotionally mature business graduates. Previous research has shown that faculty expecta-

tions set directions for students' intellectual and social growth and themselves become motivational drivers (Rodriguez, 2005). Emotional competencies will flourish as new learning experiences that sustain individual autonomy are designed. Emotional resilience will permit students to tolerate the demands of the curriculum in an effort to generate socially skilled candidates that foster harmonious social networks. Emotional honesty will guide open communication and sustain trustworthy relationships. Emotional stability will foster conscientiousness, reliability, and integrity as factors that permit the resolution of conflicts derived from misaligned values (Abraham, 2004).

The best educators produce a sustained and substantial influence on the way students think, act, and feel. In helping students build their own identities good teachers discover, appreciate, and work with the individual values that each student exhibits. They set high standards, nurture students' self-efficacy beliefs, and build rewarding and sensitive learning environments that impact positively students' academic performance. But most importantly students' interpretations of their surroundings shape their inner selves. So, let us go back to the drawing table and revise our teaching and learning maps to focus on educating well-rounded graduates who will provide value to their organizations, be agents for change, and appreciate people. In this endeavor, our challenge is to blend the emotional and social competencies with intellectual, managerial, and technical ones. It is time to revise the psychological contract with our students. Let us educate them and they educate themselves about the relativistic "meaning" of each business relationship, as we encourage them to be active learners towards their individual growth.

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