

Switching Figure and Ground: From Global Business Towards World Views

A personal view
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11 September has changed the world, or so it is claimed. Has it changed ours – the world of management education? Apparently not. The same words still ring in our classrooms – Global Strategy and Market Leadership, for example – the same cases – a US firm opening a subsidiary in Asia and ‘conquering’ local challenges – the same models of political risk, stock arguments in favour of globalisation. If anything, 11 September is now the preamble that is meant to strengthen the old message further – the world is an unpredictable, even dangerous place and the task of management education is to make it appear manageable – ‘winnable.’

In private, among serious practitioners, a different conversation is taking place. A brooding, and self-critical conversation. Have we got it all wrong? Having discovered and paraded the mantra of Global Management, have we slipped unexpectedly to discover that the world is

larger than our ‘globe’? Have we left an assumption unchallenged for too long – that business issues must dominate the stage while people, places, cultures – indeed civilisations – constitute the backdrop, to be studied and researched only to achieve a ‘best fit’ with business decisions? Have we mistaken figure for ground?

Traditional management education treats the world simply as a context. In doing so, it turns it into a passive recipient of business actions. Actions such as opening a sweatshop in a poor country, or engaging in global advertising for a brand. Just as a recipient must be made ready to receive, the thrust of much management education is to prepare the context, so that business actions might proceed without hiccups – that customers should buy and employees should produce without the irritation of ‘cultural differences’, and ‘conflicting values’. Business gives and society receives. That is the assumption, with managers seen as clever transaction agents.

Not surprisingly, such a passive view of the world as context makes it static in our minds. All that is needed is clever measurement, a few simplifying frameworks to order the disorderly streams of data, and forecasting models that project the past into the future.

In the world before 11 September, all this had seemed perfectly normal. If indeed the context was not to explode, was happy to continue serving as a backdrop, then why would it need special attention?

Management educators were well advised to leave the history to the historians, the sociology to the sociologists, the culture to the culturalists. Herein the fatal fallacy.

Perhaps the world of business will change as a result of the recent events, not simply in terms of bankruptcies, mergers, and share point shifts, but fundamentally. What absolutely has to change is how management educators present the world to their students in the classroom.

For the world is *not* the ground, but figure. It has always been so, and always will be. Its currents are deeper than the drivers of business success – they propel humanity towards change, shape our desires that manifest in every aspect of our lives. Understanding such complex, ever-present, forces of civilisations requires more than studying their immediate manifestations in limited domains – such as taste differences among cola drinkers in Europe and Africa. Of course, such a complex understanding will not yield easy answers – it may not, for example, clue us into the next mega brand idea, but might help explain and prepare our managers for much of what seems inexplicable today. Why, for example, do crowds spontaneously smash up McDonald's restaurants when they are unhappy with US policies? Why can't businesses be bullet-proofed against terrorism? Why are patent regimes routinely flouted by countries who see themselves as victims of the emerging international order? Why do employees deliberately subvert the careful plans set forth by their supervisors?

It might even prepare the next generation of managers to recognise that society does not exist for business but business for society, and that business actions are as much responsible for the explosions that we see around us – the wars, the rivalries, the hate. If they see themselves living in dolls' houses – their companies – chaperoned by 'friendly' politicians, yet

with the power to subject customers and employees to their own values, then they'll never be prepared to face the inevitable consequences.

Engaging in business must mean engaging with the world – and not on one's own narrow terms. It must mean learning both generally and specifically about major evolutions and revolutions, about religion and spirituality, about popular and classical cultural traditions, about local and national rivalries, about historic schisms and historic affinities, about nature, about prejudices, about emerging ideas. Learning about the world cannot be treated as 'training' – learning a few useful tricks, that is. It must be diffused enough to provide the right sense, not necessarily *a* direction.

Much of management education is obsessed with finding answers. Which is why courses on International Management, International Finance or International Marketing have tended to pose stock questions that have elegant answers. An American-led post war fascination with models has invested our trust in abstract formulae and made us suspicious of descriptive richness. It is difficult to find a management educator who can hold an audience through knowledge of an industry or a region, developing a holistic feel for the phenomenon, relatively easy to find an expert who knows how to wield a functional theory or model.

Yet, it's the whole, and the intuitive and finely honed sense of that whole that conveys the world better than standard frameworks. It is arrived at through idiosyncratic experiences, in part through formal learning, and through serendipity. It is that non-deterministic and creative journey that we must encourage in our classrooms. Management education must strive to open minds, replacing the mindset of Global Business with that of World Views. Anything else would mean mistaking figure for ground.

'Traditional management education turns the world into a passive recipient of business actions.'