

Creativity and Human Excellence in Management Education: A Personal Odyssey

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Abstract

In the wake of widespread and all-encompassing globalization, the global business scenario is increasingly being dominated by the phenomenon of market capitalism and the gospel of fierce competition. This has reduced the quest for Creativity and Human Excellence in global corporations to techno-economic pursuits with scarce attention to the deeper and higher dimensions of life and work. Pertinent questions on meaning of work and purpose of life have been pushed far beyond the margins of dominant corporate vocabulary. The present paper is a reflective article seeking to highlight the significance of search for Creativity and Human Excellence from a holistic and humanistic perspective with inspiration from the classical Eastern and Western masters like Rabindranath Tagore and Leonardo da Vinci with specific focus on lessons from these great masters for modern management. The paper ends with a Personal Story on Human Excellence through Balanced Leadership from an Indian household for promoting Enlightened Management in the twenty first century.

Whither Management Education?

In the last few decades there has been a strong and growing critique of mainstream management education and its dominant paradigm based on capitalism and industrial mono-culture. In 2004 Ian Mitroff, Professor Emeritus, USC Marshall School of Business sent an open letter to the Deans and faculty of business schools in USA where he came down bold and sharp of our existing management education where he identified five areas of failure that resulted in the following aberrations among the students and faculty:

1. A mean-spirited and distorted view of human nature;
2. A narrow, outdated, and repudiated notion of ethics;

3. A narrow and highly limited definition of and the role of management in human affairs;
4. A overly reified conception of the "sub-disciplines" of the field of management;
5. A sense of learned helplessness and hopelessness among faculties, students, and workers regarding control of their careers and lives."

All this points towards some glaring pitfalls in both the process as well as the outcome of mainstream management education – dominance of our techno-economic identity over deeper and nobler aspects of human nature; failure to impart ethics education in manner that is vibrant, engaging and relevant to the students; sharpening of instrumental reason at

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the cost of critical rational faculties; denigrating the power of lofty emotions in personal and organizational transformation; splitting the holistic conception of management into disconnected pigeon holes of areas and sub-disciplines; loss of meaning in work and purpose in life.

In modern academia there has been emergence of rising critique of our prevalent methods of learning among the academic circles in business and management from conscious and conscientious thinkers in search of 'the other' or alternative models of knowledge creation and dissemination.

A Personal Voyage

It has been more than two decades I had spent in management education as a Faculty at the IIMs. It began with a 16 year long stint at the Management Centre for Human Values, IIM Calcutta to be followed by my association in the Sustainability, CSR and Ethics at IIM Shillong for more than a decade. Thus my domains of expertise were not part of the dominant mainstream business school curriculum. The courses I taught were qualitative in nature with a lot of thrust on subjective perception and covering issues that have a whole lot of grey areas characterized by uncertainty, unpredictability and ambiguity. They included Management and Indian Ethos, Human Values in Management, Business Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility, Management and Liberal Arts and Wisdom Leadership. The teaching experience in the initial phase was challenging indeed as there were no easy and quick solutions to the problems. More so, because the mind of the students and even the business executives were trained all along to find answers with the aid of models and formulae! The level of interest

generated in the sessions fell far short of what is usually observed in a session on Marketing, Finance or Systems. Mainstream courses were 'hard' and utilitarian while these courses were perceived as 'soft' and philosophical. The spirit of engaging in dialogue was not so common those days among the students. Some critical questions would haunt us from time to time. Business leaders are ever concerned about capturing market share, but how does one capture the 'mind share' of the youth? Or to use a common cliché, how can we 'change the mindset' of the students? Thus began my journey in search of Enlightenment and Human Excellence in Management Education.

Three Sparks to Enlightenment

To respond to this challenge one concentrated on enriching the course materials with insightful articles and current case studies. This resulted in a temporary change in interest levels but that was only short lived. Back to square one, I started questioning my whole approach to teaching. Gandhi's voice rang aloud from within: "Be the change that you want to see in the world around you." It kindled in me the first spark. Mere innovations in teaching methods and materials will not serve the purpose. One has to undergo a 180 degree shift in one's role perception – from teaching to learning. One must be able to convert every session and interaction in class or even with an individual student into a rich, learning experience. The dawning of this realization prompted me to expand the horizon of my experience by attending lectures, seminars and conference on these areas even beyond the ambit of business schools to social, cultural and spiritual organizations where topics like values and ethics, leadership and creativity were being discussed and debated upon. It was a revelation indeed!

In all these prestigious forums, there was no dearth of good speakers who had sound knowledge of their subject. They also had the genuinely good intention of making a positive change in the society and the world around. But who all are sitting in the audience? One looked around observed that the average age of the people in the audience would be no less than sixty, if not more. Now when an organization or the society at large looks ahead towards transformation by values it has to depend largely on the dynamism of the vibrant youth power. Where are the young folks in the audience? One would sometimes spot them occupying the back seats either sporting a dull, stony look or chatting among themselves on topics of their interest. Then how will the movement of values and ethics become a reality? Surely the people with values as a post-retirement engagement cannot be the vanguards of these movements. Bulk of their vital-energy or life-force has been spent off in their working life!

This kindled in me the second spark – One has to find ways to attract the youth. Great leaders and teachers like Tagore and Vivekananda, Gandhi and Netaji or even Martin Luther King and Mandela were all targeting their messages to ignite the youth to join their movements. I was convinced that I must make the inputs in my courses ‘interesting’ and ‘relevant’ to the students so that their participation becomes lively and spontaneous in the class. They must find this journey or rather adventure of values and ethics an interesting and creative engagement. This is probably the surest way to ensure their involvement in this movement.

But what is the first prerequisite for generating their interest?

This gave me the third spark - unless the Faculty finds this movement of values an interesting journey that fosters creativity, there is no way he can create the interest of the students in this subject. I turned the fingers around pointing to myself. I must first find it an interesting voyage. Then only I shall be able to radiate my interest and passion in my sessions with them.

Where did I look for inspiration to make this journey ‘interesting’ for myself first? Let me share below one such source of luminous inspiration from a legendary creative genius.

Creative Learning: Inspiration from Tagore

It was the opening scene of a famous bio-documentary on a literary genius. It portrays a cortege proceeding to the burning *ghat* for the last rites of funeral to be administered. One can see the body of a bearded old man lying in state carried on the shoulders by many devotees and admirers and accompanied by thousands of others. In the background one can clearly hear the unmistakable baritone voice of the director.

“On the 7th of August 1941, in the city of Calcutta, a man died. His mortal remains perished but he left behind him that no fire can consume. It was a heritage of words and music and poetry, of ideas and of ideals. And it has the power move us, to inspire us today and in the days to come. We, who owe him so much, salute his memory.”

There had been several documentaries made on various aspects of the life and work, mission and messages of Rabindranath Tagore, the great Nobel Laureate poet from India. But this one creates an indelible impact on our minds as the maker of the documentary is none other than Satyajit Ray, another multi-faceted genius of world fame who has been the only Indian recipient of the prestigious Oscar Award for

Lifetime Achievement in Films. It is the portrayal of one genius by another and that is what makes a world of difference.

A significant part of the documentary is dedicated to highlight Tagore's unique and novel experiments on education that are extremely relevant to us even today. It begins with the childhood days of young Rabi when he was sent to school. The mastery of Satyajit Ray is the way he presents a poignant depiction of the disenchantment of the young boy in school. The scene shows a classroom situation where we see some nameless students and a faceless teacher whose torso is not visible to the viewer. But we can hear a hackneyed mechanical voice speaking to the students in a manner that is a sordid example of rote learning. The conversation or rather the exchange of words was like this:

Teacher (in a loud and monotonous tone): "Can you see a box?"

Students (as if in a mindless cacophony): "Yes, I can see a box."

What was young Rabi doing that time when this lifeless teaching was going on? The shot portrays Rabi looking out of the window of the classroom. Far from participating in the rote learning exercise, he was simply casting his wide and curious eyes out of the window. We see a young boy intently watching and enjoying the colourful and rhythmic movements of nature – the birds flying, the wind blowing and the water flowing. With rapt attention he was sipping in the elixir of life from nature least interested in the apology of a learning process going on inside the classroom. When the air inside the classroom was heavy and stagnant, the light of knowledge groping in the darkness, this young

harbinger of futuristic education was looking out of the window for fresh air and new light. Nothing seemed more fascinating to him than the world outside. He attended four schools and hated them all and finally had his education at home.

Creative Vibrant Learning Spaces: Tagore's Tryst with 'Openness' and 'Otherness'

Ever since his childhood this sense of 'the other' haunted and also inspired Tagore to explore newer avenues of learning and living off the beaten track. This is something that comes as striking blow to the very roots of the diehard proponents of professional education who champion the cause of 'the one and the only way' to excellence nay success in life by pursuing higher education as in engineering or management. Just imagine, Tagore was sent to study Law in England and guess what did he learn there? He came back without completing his studies but with a comprehensive knowledge of western classical music that would find abundant experimental adaptations in his future creative musical journey. When he was sent to manage their ancestral property in Silaidaha on the bank of the river Padma (presently in Bangladesh) he would often spend time sitting in his boat and watching the myriad moods of nature and the life of people in the rural milieu. The raging waters of the river and the vast open sky expanded the mental horizons of this ever lively spirit. This would later find expression in all his future endeavour to create 'not this' but 'the other' content or form of expression because he would always keep his options 'wide open'.

The most significant achievement of Tagore in this search for 'openness' and 'otherness' was the creation of his beloved Institute of Higher Learning - Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in the

district of Birbhum in West Bengal. This was to be his novel experiment in the open space in the lap of nature far from the madding crowd of the metropolis of Calcutta. He made it abundantly clear to the students that they will have to learn from their teachers in person as well as the trees around. This way he remodeled his institution with inspiration from the 'tapovan' or forest schools of ancient India where classes would be held in the open fields under the trees. Observation and living contact with nature were integral parts of the learning process. Intimate daily relationship with the teachers in the institute environment was essential for holistic education and all round development. Teachers and students participated in this novel venture not just from India but different parts of the world. Here we have a classic example of a global mind with local roots in Indian culture and heritage. Tagore's education was a synthesis of the East and the West, a bridge between the ancient and the modern culture, between the rural and the urban milieu. His lifelong quest was to remain out of the root from his school days in search of something new. He built five houses in Santiniketan but never lived in one of them for long. Even in one house he would keep on changing the room where he would be staying in and come to think of it, at the ripe age of seventy his creative spirit found a completely new expression – painting! It was all driven by his quest for 'the new', the different' and 'the other' all through his life.

Towards Human Excellence in Management Education: Lessons from Tagore

What then are the key lessons that I learnt from Tagore to revitalize modern management education with a creative force towards human excellence?

The dominant mainstream of technological and management education is founded on the pillars of predictability, measurability and objectivity. It creates an aggressive mindset among both the faculty and the students there is one and only one solution to any problem. Moreover the nature of the solution must be based on techno-economic rationality. No wonder Viktor Frankel in his insightful book 'Man's Search for Meaning' had clearly diagnosed that the problem of modernity is not nothingness but 'nothing-but-ness'. This captured the cock-sure attitude of the techno-managerial mind that there is no space for 'the other' or alternative solutions to any particular problem. We tend to forget that there are intricate social, psychological, cultural and human dimensions to any problem – technical, managerial or otherwise. Even though courses on these dimensions are introduced in the academic curriculum, the mainstream stalwarts and consequently the bulk of the student community treat these as 'soft' or irrelevant courses that hardly deserve any worthwhile attention. This leads to building organizational cultures devoted solely to the pursuit of profits, turnover and economic expansion. Such organizations turn out to be engines of manipulation and exploitation that tend to disregard the finer qualities and sensibilities of man and the deeper human aspirations beyond money, power and fame. The architecture of these organizations and educational institutions make them completely divorced from Nature. Tagore's experiment on holistic education based on learning in the ambience of nature comes as a bold and powerful challenge to such mindless behemoths that keep on churning out millions of 'One Dimensional Man' (title of book by Herbert Marcuse) devoid of heart and soul.

All this brings us to a vital issue. To what extent do we need to retain the acquired knowledge in

the mainstream and to what extent we must need to find new avenues of knowledge creation and dissemination? We the academics of structured management education must be willing to challenge ourselves – our thinking and perceptions, our beliefs and values to chart out pathways in this journey or movement. We need to evolve alternative sources and non-conventional methods of learning. One such example is learning from Nature that stimulates our finer perceptions and holistic development of our psycho-physical faculties leading to all-round human excellence.

Let me now share another source of inspiration in this journey towards Creativity and Values but this time from the West.

Principles of Learning and Creativity: Lessons from Leonardo da Vinci

Leonardo da Vinci, the stellar figure of the European Renaissance, was a unique and rare blend of Human Excellence in Arts and Science, left and right brain, logic and imagination, analysis and synthesis. He has left behind for us seven Principles of Learning and Creativity for all round development of our fullest potential. Michael J Gelb, in his bestselling book, *How to think Like Leonardo the Vinci*; has not only given us these principles but discussed in details their implications for holistic development of individuals in education, management and otherwise. These principles are as follows:

1. *Curiosita*: An insatiably curious approach to life. “Da Vinci was the most curious person who ever lived,” Gelb said. “He was curious about everything. He wanted to know truth, beauty, and goodness.”

What can we all do to enliven and enrich our curiosity? Gelb asked the audience where they

tend to be physically located when they get their best ideas. Some of the most common replies were in the shower, at the beach, and in the middle of the night. These are all places where we tend to be relaxed and calm. Being overly busy and stressed, on the other hand, doesn't typically foster curiosity and creativity. Give yourself the time and space to think, wonder, and contemplate.

2. *Dimonstrazione*: A commitment to test knowledge through experience or demonstrate things in your own experience. Da Vinci signed his name ‘disciple of experience;’ he knew he had to be an original thinker. Back in his day and age, the biggest challenge to independent thinking was the church. “Today our challenge is too much information,” Gelb said, “How do you cut through the tsunami of spam and think for yourself?” He encouraged the audience to view the situations and challenges in their lives from different perspectives and make an effort to filter out the many distractions that surround us.

3. *Sensazione*: The continual refinement of the senses, especially sight, as the means to clarify experience. “Da Vinci trained his sensory awareness like an Olympic athlete trains their body for competition,” Gelb said. He added that mindfulness is the key to sharpening our senses as we get older. Mindful contemplation of beauty every day is also the secret to enjoying one's life. “Ask yourself, ‘How can I make my life more beautiful every day?’”

4. *Sfumato*: A willingness to embrace ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty. Taking on complex problems means there's going to be a lot of uncertainty, and sticking too rigidly to established beliefs or norms isn't likely to help solve those

problems. “Highly creative people have an ability to embrace the unknown,” Gelb pointed out. “If you need a definite answer you’re not going to innovate.”

5. *Arte/Scienza*: Developing the balance between science and art, logic and imagination. Balancing apparent opposites gives us a more complete view of the world and allows us to think with our whole mind rather than just a portion of it. Gelb said elite scientists are highly likely to have a hobby involving arts and crafts; Nobel laureates are 2.8 times more likely to have an artistic pursuit than the average person. It’s all about balance.

6. *Corporalita*: The cultivation of ambidexterity and poise. Similar to balancing the different parts of the mind we must each balance our own body and mind in order to preserve our health. The choices we make have an effect on our wellness.

7. *Connessione*: A recognition and appreciation for the connectedness of all things and phenomena; “systems thinking.” Be aligned with your , your big question. “We suffer from premature organization which prevents conception.” Gelb said, The key to make progress on a big task, is to generate first, then organize—and that means being aware of the big picture from the outset. Gelb’s—and da Vinci’s—approach to unlocking human potential is closely aligned with modern-day holistic views of However, that doesn’t mean we’ve become skilled at implementing this advice in our lives. We may not all end up painting the next Mona Lisa, but keeping the da Vincian principles in mind each day may help us make the most of our own unique gifts

for our all-round development towards the goal of achieving Human Excellence..

Postscript: A Personal Story

I would like to conclude this article but not this journey with a personal story on Human Excellence. I had experienced this in a Balanced Leader in my personal life that ever has ever remained aflame within me as a fountainhead of inspiration in my search for Creativity, Values and Human Excellence. I had shared this personal story on *Balanced Leadership* shared at the International Conference on ‘Developing Balanced Leaders: the Role of Executive Education’ organized by Aspen Institute, New York, and held at Rockefeller Conference Center, Pocantico, New York, November 15-17, 2000.

Fire in the Storm

Story from an Indian Household

It was a cold winter evening, and a violent storm was raging. The kids were jumping all over the household, wild and playful. Spanking and scolding by the elders simply didn’t work when she came, quiet and strong was she, carrying a book by Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate poet from India. Amidst the storm rose her sonorous voice. And slowly the kids gathered around her, listening to ‘The Poem Finale’ as she recited:

‘The footsteps of time are marching ahead,
Can you hear, my dear?’

I happen to know her from my childhood – consciously. Not a corporate prima donna, but an archetypal Indian woman from a middle class joint family background, always struggling to strike a balance between the home and the world.

A demanding mother-in-law, a working husband, his unemployed brothers, and budding son – that was her family. Her ‘world’ was a kindergarten school with 500 children and 25 lady teachers, and there she was a leader and an entrepreneur. Conflicting demands from multiple directions at home and at work were part of her daily existence, and there were moments of crisis too. More so, because the running of the school was an economic compulsion for the family. Today the institution has emerged to become a household name in the city. She has touched seventy by now.

Often I would spend my time sharing her experiences and insights. Here are some of the learning points:

What are your ‘critical success factors’?

“Attention to work, its details, and affection for the people with a deep sense of purpose and direction.”

You mean -- a mission?

“Yes, but the mission has to be part of a bigger purpose of life. Otherwise, life suffers as business grows.”

Then, are profits not so important?

“Who says? But you must build your own reputation first. Profits are bound to follow.”

But... what about competition?

“Try to exceed yourself in every possible way. Then your competitor becomes an extension of yourself – not your dreaded shadow.”

And this struggle for balance – doesn’t it upset your natural disposition?

“Until and unless you master the art of conducting your life and work with grace and elegance and achieve harmony in relationships.”

But how do you do this?

“You must have a center, an anchor in life, a cardinal value. For me, it’s been an unflinching faith in God, not as in rituals, but as seated in the hearts of all of us.”

That sound fine for you, but how does it work for others?

“You must start with FAITH IN YOURSELF and REVERENCE FOR LIFE. Slowly the differences dissolve and convergence evolves on the basis of understanding and empathy.

But such a leader must be an aggressive one?

“Not quite. The power of silence and prayers can work wonders in crisis and confusion”.

You mean, it has cleared all your confusions?

“Except the ones created by you.”

Ah, the tyranny of love for your only child! And you can’t emerge as a clear winner!

“I feel graceful in that defeat. But can you show me an all time winner? These win-win experts are going against the law of life – a play of opposites. They epitomize the pathology of imbalance. What is important is to handle both success and failure with a positive approach. And for that, in the darkest hours of night in silence, I still keep my lamp burning when I feel being in communion with mothers and sisters all over the world.”

Friends, in order to achieve this balance, the

leader must be able to light this lamp – the fire within – the fire of love and sacrifice, and the lamp of wisdom in our corporate ‘HEART’ – QUARTERS in times of turbulence. And if you love and believe Beethoven, after the storm will begin the celebration of joy and sunshine at the hour of Thanks giving - a day not so far away.

Notes

- + The third movement of the Pastoral Symphony of Beethoven portrays ‘The Storm’ followed by ‘Thanksgiving’ – the fourth and the final movement.
- + The Conference was held just on the eve of the day of Thanksgiving in the United States of America.



“Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things.”

Peter Drucker