

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Feb '15

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 803



PHILOSOPHER KINGS

from
The Economist

Business leaders would benefit from studying great writers

IT IS hard to rise to the top in business without doing an outward-bound course. You spend a precious weekend in sweaty activity—kayaking, climbing, abseiling and the like. You endure lectures on testing character and building trust. And then you scarper home as fast as you can. These strange rituals may produce a few war stories to be told over a drink. But in general they do nothing more than enrich the companies that arrange them.

It is time to replace this rite of managerial passage with something much more powerful: inward-bound courses. Rather than grappling with nature, business leaders would grapple with big ideas. Rather than proving their leadership abilities by leading people across a ravine, they would do so by leading them across an intellectual chasm. The format would be simple. A handful of future leaders would gather in an isolated hotel and devote themselves to studying great books. They would be deprived of electronic distractions. During the day a tutor would ensure their noses stay in their tomes;

in the evening the inward-bounders would be encouraged to relate what they had read to their lives.

It is easy to poke fun at the idea of forcing high-flying executives to read the classics. One could play amusing games thinking up titles that might pique their interest: “Thus Spake McKinsey”, or “Accenture Shrugged”, perhaps. Or pairing books with personality types: “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” for a budding Donald Trump and “Crime and Punishment” for a budding Conrad Black. Or imagining what Nietzschean corporate social responsibility would look like. Or Kierkegaardian supply-chain management.

Then there are practical questions. Surely high-flyers are decision-makers rather than cogitators? And surely they do not have time to spend on idle thought? However, a surprising number of American CEOs studied philosophy at university. Reid Hoffman, one of the founders of LinkedIn, was a philosophy postgraduate at Oxford University and briefly contemplated becoming an academic before choosing the life of a billionaire instead. Anyway, executives clearly have enough time on their hands to attend gabfests such as Davos, where they do little more than recycle corporate clichés about “stakeholders” and “sustainability”. Surely they have enough time for real thinkers.

Inward-bound courses would do wonders for “thought leadership”. There are good reasons why the business world is so preoccupied by that notion at the moment: the only way to prevent your products from being commoditized or your markets from being disrupted is to think further ahead than your competitors. But companies that pose as thought leaders are often “thought laggards”: risk analysts who recycle yesterday’s newspapers, and management consultants who champion yesterday’s successes just as they are about to go out of business.

The only way to become a real thought leader is to ignore all this noise and listen to a few great thinkers. You will learn far more about leadership from reading Thucydides’s hymn to Pericles than you will from a thousand leadership experts. You will learn far more about doing business in China from reading Confucius than by listening to “culture consultants”. Peter Drucker remained top dog among management gurus for 50 years not because he attended more conferences but because he marinated his mind in great books: for example, he wrote about business alliances with reference to marriage alliances in Jane Austen.


Inward-bound courses would do something even more important

than this: they would provide highflyers with both an anchor and a refuge. High-flyers risk becoming so obsessed with material success that they ignore their families or break the law. Philosophy-based courses would help executives overcome their obsession with status symbols. It is difficult to measure your worth in terms of how many toys you accumulate when you have immersed yourself in Plato. Distracted bosses would also benefit from leaving aside all those e-mails, tweets and LinkedIn updates to focus on a few things that truly matter.

Looking for answers

The business world has been groping towards inward-bound courses for years. Many successful CEOs have made a point of preserving time for reflection: Bill Gates, when running Microsoft, used to retreat to an isolated cottage for a week and meditate on a big subject; and Jack Welch set aside an hour a day for undistracted thinking at GE. Clay Christensen of Harvard Business School was so shocked at how many of his contemporaries ended up divorced or in prison that he devised a course called “How will you measure your life?”. It became one of HBS’s most popular courses and provided the basis of a successful book.

“Mindfulness” is all the rage in some big corporations, which have hired coaches to teach the mix of relaxation and meditation techniques. Big ideas are becoming as much of a status marker in high-tech hubs as cars and houses are in the oil belt. Peter Thiel, a Silicon Valley investor, holds conferences of leading thinkers to try to improve the world. David Brendel, a philosopher and psychiatrist, offers personal counseling to bosses and recently penned a blog for the *Harvard Business Review* on how philosophy makes you a better leader. Damon Horowitz, who interrupted a career in technology to get a PhD in philosophy, has two jobs at Google: director of engineering and in-house philosopher. “The thought leaders in our industry are not the ones who plodded dully, step by step, up the career ladder,” he says, they are “the ones who took chances and developed unique perspectives.”

Inward-bound courses would offer significant improvements on all this. Mindfulness helps people to relax but empties their minds. “Ideas retreats” feature the regular circus of intellectual celebrities. Sessions on the couch with corporate philosophers isolate managers from their colleagues. Inward-bound courses offer the prospect of filling the mind while forming bonds with fellow-strivers. They are an idea whose time has come. 



HAVE A BITE OF HUMBLE PIE BEFORE HEADING TO THE OFFICE

Christopher B. Nelson

President, St. John's College, Annapolis, MD

It's hard to hear the news about someone like Marilyn Tavenner stepping down and not think about the expectations we put on our leaders. In Tavenner's case, when she became acting head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in 2011, politicians expected her to know the field of health care inside out. On top of this, they expected her to be an expert at designing complex websites, running a business, navigating bipartisan politics and marketing policy changes. Do these expectations sound excessive? Well, they were. And the result was the disastrous HealthCare.gov rollout in the fall of 2013.

Finally, just a few months ago, Tavenner said of the website that we should expect "visible improvement, but not perfection." That is the sort of humility we should have been hearing all along.

Humility as a desirable attribute is just beginning to be discussed among top leaders. "Don't believe your own brilliance," Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson told the BBC at the World Economic Forum last week in Davos. "You need to be curious and you need to be doing more listening than talking. It's possible to glorify the position of CEO—it's important that they should not be the only one making the decisions. Nobody is that brilliant."

Last July, a study from Arizona State University showed CEOs with a touch of humility are much better for their company's management and bottom line. "Humble CEOs are more open to making joint decisions and empowering others," one of the study's authors, Angelo Kinicki, told ASU News. "Their behavior positively affects both top and middle managers, who then exhibit higher commit-

ment, work engagement, job satisfaction and job performance. We see a trickle-down effect that seems to influence the company overall.”

Kinicki shared three “humble” CEOs who are making waves in today’s economy: Tony Hsieh of Zappos, John Mackey of Whole Foods and Mary Barra of General Motors. “It’s time we understood that humility isn’t a sign of weakness or lacking confidence,” he said in his interview, “but rather, a good thing that can benefit us all.”

Another set of researchers turned their sights on “intellectual humility” last spring. In a report published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* in March, the researchers conducted a series of studies in an effort to gain a “folk” understanding of what intellectual humility means and what its possession does for a person. “Curiosity drives intellectually humble people to be willing to engage with others,” Peter Samuelson, one of the study’s co-authors, told the *Deseret News* this month. “It spills over into all kinds of social activities.”

These modern thinkers are in good company. The greatest thinkers of the past have long recognized humility as a leadership quality.

Galileo, one of the fathers of modern science, is supposed to have said, “Doubt is the father of invention.” Why did he think that doubt is generative, whereas others consider it paralyzing or destructive? Because doubt is the source of understanding and innovation. Doubt is what causes us to ask the next question, which in turn leads us to a new possibility. Doubt threatens the sense of security that keeps us tied down to what we thought we knew. And once we find a new understanding, doubt pushes us to go beyond that and never remain complacent.

Michael Faraday, another pioneering scientist, argued that to acquire the habit of good judgment, individuals must engage in a program of self-education that rejects blind dependency on the authority of others. They must examine themselves and become their own sharpest critics. “This education has for its first and last step humility,” he said in his lecture “Observations on Mental Education.” “It can commence only because of a conviction of deficiency.” In other words, learning begins from knowing that we don’t know.

In this, Faraday is merely repeating Socrates, the patron saint of intellectual humility. The Socrates of Plato’s dialogues shows us

again and again (perhaps most memorably in the Meno and the Apology) that it is only when we understand the depth of our own ignorance, only when we appreciate how little we know, that we are ready to develop the lifelong habits that will best support learning. When we break free from conventional thinking and begin to doubt what we have been taught about the world—then we can begin to imagine a whole new way to see the world and our place in it.

But is this attitude something that can be expected of leaders? We pile expectations on our leaders. We love to follow self-confident people who do not display their doubts in public—if they have any.

And that is the danger. By demanding that leaders have ultimate self-confidence, we run the risk of choosing people to lead who don't have any doubts. And it is obvious that choosing leaders lacking in humility sets us up for disappointment. Or worse.

Fortunately, the conversation about humility as a leadership quality is finally beginning. Even those in charge of hiring young minds say they are placing humility at the top of their list as a hiring attribute. Last spring, in fact, Thomas L. Friedman ran a popular column in which Laszlo Bock, the head of Google hiring, said he looks not for GPA strength but rather for humility in a candidate. Specifically, he said, “intellectual humility. Without humility, you are unable to learn.”

Shall we try, as a society, to throw off traditional thinking about leadership? Shall we make a concerted effort to see whether humility can lead us to heights that conventional leadership qualities cannot? Shall we let ourselves wonder whether leaders and followers can reach further as co-learners than they ever could before?

And then shall we dare to ask the next question?



[We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.](#)

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.