“MBA=Leader” and Other Half-Truths as Seen Through the Eyes of Henry Mintzberg

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Henry Mintzberg believes that both management and management education are deeply troubled, but that neither can be changed without changing the other.

Mintzberg asserts that conventional MBA classrooms overemphasize the science of management while ignoring its art and denigrating its craft, leaving a distorted impression of its practice. We need to get back to a more engaging style of management, to build stronger organizations, not bloated share prices. This calls for another approach to management education, whereby practicing managers learn from their own experience. We need to build the art and the craft back into management education, and into management itself.

Mintzberg examines what is wrong with our current system. Conventional MBA programs are mostly for young people with little or no experience. These are the wrong people. Programs to train them emphasize analysis and technique. These are the wrong ways. They leave graduates with the false impression that they have been trained as managers, which has had a corrupting effect on the practice of management as well as on our organizations and societies. These are the wrong consequences.

Mintzberg describes a very different approach to management education, which encourages practicing managers to learn from their own experience. No one can create a manager in a classroom. But existing managers can significantly improve their practice in a thoughtful classroom that makes use of that experience.

From the dust jacket of Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Managing Practice.

A Symptom of our Times

While in his book Dr. Mintzberg takes aim squarely at the MBA as the wrong solution for the wrong problem involving the wrong people, he reflects on why this is. In his book he ponders:

You might think that beginning a career in this way – detached from making and selling, and managing itself – would hardly launch people on the road to leadership positions in large enterprises. Yet the evidence is opposite. MBAs are becoming CEOs in increasing numbers.

To his point, Dr. Mintzberg traced the success of a group of very famous CEOs who graduated from a prestigious business school to find out that the majority eventually failed (most miserably and a few several times) as leaders of their companies.

Why, with the track record that MBA programs have, do companies continue relying on the MBA as a promotion and assignment tool?

The answer may be expedience and self-protection: Got an MBA? Check! Welcome to the executive suit! If the manager fails, we can blame the school. Simple and safe. We as hiring managers are relieved of the need to think.
Half-Truths Abound

As with the above case of “MBA=effective leader”, we tend to gravitate toward the half-truths. The half-truth is that MBAs are exposed to many elements of business such as finance and marketing and that this exposure may be better than NOT having it. The other half of the truth is that MBAs often are missing the experience to effectively integrate their analytic skills appropriately AND are missing the “soft skills” to effectively lead and motivate their employees to action.

As leaders, we accept many of the half-truths that are rampant today, thanks in large part to increased media hype and saturation. Pick up any business paper and read:

- We live in times of great change!!
- The world is becoming more global!!
- The heroic leader saves the day (and the company)!!

While these make for great headlines, their lessons make for lousy leadership and managerial development:

- Certainly there’s change (half-truth), but most things haven’t changed, and we only notice what has changed. To lead and manage as if the sky were constantly falling (now THERE’S a change!), results in fatigue, anxiety, and meltdown.
- Certainly there are more opportunities for global trade and interchange (half-truth). But for most of us, the majority of our business is done locally. Managing or leading globally when your customer base is largely local could prove disastrous.
- Most of us are not the kind of heroic leaders that make the front page of the business section. Could it be that really good management and leadership is done quietly? Could it be that great management looks pretty boring? Heroic leaders may inspire us (a half-truth), but real leaders lead quietly, day in and day out, without major incident.

The Danger of Half-Truths

Half-truths are dangerous – not simply because they omit the full truth, but because they cause us to act without thinking. Half-truths sound plausible. However, acting on a half-truth without thinking can be deadly for a manager, leader, or organization.

As mentioned in a previous broadcast (Sherron Watkins and Dr. Joseph Badaracco on ethical leadership), true leaders work quietly making thousands of decisions that change – in small but very significant ways – the world in which they and their employees live. True leaders are shaped by the decisions they make. In turn, the organization and the people in it are shaped by the leader’s decisions and actions.

Half-truths dilute the leader’s decision making. Basing decisions on only half the truth results in more than just ineffectual decision-making. Basing leadership decisions on half-truths may lead the organization down the wrong path – and to failure. Basing leadership decisions on deliberate thought and choice results in sound, mature judgments – and organizational success.
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