

When Leaders Better Anticipate the Unknown

"The unexamined life is not worth living."
Socrates

A few years ago, with my co-author, Professor Ken Brown (from the University of Iowa), we had a simple yet bold and courageous idea for the American Strategic Management Society. We approached some of the greatest minds in business education in the world and asked them to answer a burning question in 200-300 words: *"What will it take to educate the next generation of thought leaders for a complicated world?"* Given their incredibly busy schedules, this question caught their attention and the result was a booklet of 63 world-class educators sharing their deep insights and wisdom, giving us reason to pause and reflect for a better world. As much as there was diversity in their responses to this question, there was great convergence in what was needed to prepare for the unknown.

Whether it is to prepare the next generation of undergraduates or groom boards of directors to better manage the unexpected, the hallmarks of education for today and tomorrow are surprisingly paradoxical and counter-intuitive! Given the intensity of our VUCA world of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity, much of which is unanticipated, we need to learn BETTER, FASTER and MORE than we are currently used to.

Added to this is the importance of developing a more complicated understanding of our worldviews. Thinking at the "simple" and one-dimensional level can be a recipe for disaster. If our industry and our environments are ever changing and in a dynamic state of flux with multiple moving targets, "complicate yourself!" There is actually a technique to do this. First, look for different perspectives on a particular phenomenon of interest. In the myriad of ideas, look for integration (literally reconnect the dots) by detecting the convergence between different points of view. This will inevitably lead to the "aha-moment" (insights).

Most people are trained to look for intuitive ways of dealing with complex problems. For most of us, the blind spot is not realizing that problem setting is as much a part of problem solving as solving the problem itself. Even more counter-intuitive in what will lead us to the next level is to do the opposite: RELEVATE – making the irrelevant relevant. The best ideas (almost) always come from outside our fields. This has been the case in almost all disciplinary fields, from music to sports, to business and even to breakthroughs in academic publications (grounded in multidisciplinary research).





Similarly, if you really want to see the future, look for places where people are having the most fun. Plato had it right from the very beginning. Yet, somehow as we get more senior in our organizations and careers, "play" and the importance of "serious play" seem to be so far away. This is why children are so happy when they create new things and are curious about everything. Quite simply, they are the most creative when they are happy! When we play and are in a state of play, our mind is more open to experiment with ideas, leading to true radical learning.

Generative metaphors also play an extremely important role in dealing with complex, novel, rare and unanticipated problems, issues and challenges. Metaphors are "seeing-as", "doing-as" and "feeling-as". They allow us to establish connections and relationships with things we would not normally associate with in ways not yet imagined. In short, they help us make the unfamiliar familiar.

As we are talking about going back to our childhood days (and there is much adults can learn about how children learn), we should also look back in history and learn from what worked and what did not. Not only should we look to the future, but also deep into our roots to understand why civilizations and species not only survived but thrived. You may think that history is old and redundant in a futuristic world characterized by the Internet of Things, social media, big data and artificial intelligence. Yet history (and our past) is exactly what binds us to the present and to what tomorrow holds.

If we go back even further and look into the great philosophers: Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Confucius, Lao Tzu and many others, they can teach us great lessons about "*being and becoming*", virtues, our search for happiness, the soul, psychology, our quest for knowledge ...

and timeless perspectives that plunge deep into the human condition. These works from Antiquity to the Renaissance, to the great books and speeches of our time, move us, engulf us (for better or for worse) and in the process, make us who we are today. Reading the classics and developing a habit of reading and DISCUSSING what we read with friends and colleagues has the power to open us to "Otherness" – to other forms of reasoning, other forms of logic, other forms of explanation and other ways of knowing. Looking forward by looking back is something we need to constantly cultivate at all levels of development.

Perhaps the most important in our fast-paced world is to slow down! The great educational psychologist John Dewey once said that we learn a lot from doing, but we learn even more when we THINK about what we are doing (and not doing). Whether in an executive education course, in an undergraduate classroom or simply as part of our daily challenges, we need to make room for a quiet moment to stay calm, pause and reflect. Through such disciplined reflection, we begin to see things differently, allowing us to see different things.

*"In pursuit of knowledge,
everyday something is acquired.
In pursuit of wisdom,
everyday something is dropped."
Lao Tzu*



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