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Integrated Thinking

In a recent talk he gave, my good friend Raghu Krishnamoorthy, Chief Learning Officer of GE, made a couple of bold statements that hooked his audience immediately:

1. Talent is abundant not scarce
2. Intelligence is now a commodity

To illustrate his first point, he talked about how GE Aviation redesigned their engine brackets through crowd sourced innovation. They ran a global contest for designs to reduce the weight of the brackets by 30%, and offered a prize of $20,000 for the best design. To their surprise, the winning design came from a small town in Indonesia, which reduced the weight by a whopping 84%. Now, how’s that for exceeding your innovation KPI by 180% at the cost of just $20,000? Who would have thought that the world’s biggest aviation giant would achieve such a breakthrough for so little, and more importantly, from small town Indonesia?
What skills and mindsets determined professional success until the mid-90s? Why?

What disruptive changes began in the 90s, and how are they shaping the global business landscape today?

What skills and mindsets are most important for professional success today and in the next 10-20 years?

In a class I gave to 30 emerging leaders from different companies recently, I posed the following three questions:

1. What skills and mindsets determined professional success until the mid-90s? Why?
2. What disruptive changes began in the 90s, and how are they shaping the global business landscape today?
3. What skills and mindsets are most important for professional success today and in the next 10-20 years?

The group found no difficulty in answering the first two questions accurately. In essence, knowledge was power until about the mid-90s. The more specialised knowledge one had, the more one was likely to succeed. As Daniel Pink nicely puts it in his wonderful book “A Whole New Mind”, our left brains have made us rich in the last century. Thanks to the knowledge-is-power era, we now live in a world of abundance, where we have an amazing array of choices for anything we want to buy or experience. However, as knowledge is becoming free and easily available, and as computers are replacing human tasks (and thinking) at an alarmingly fast pace, is knowledge likely to remain the key to professional success going forward? My class rightly determined that it will not. However, there was no agreement about the answer to the third question. Some said relationships, others said caring leadership, while still others said integrity.

The GE experiment is just one small example of how drastically the business world is changing. Thanks to Google and 24/7 connectivity, Raghu’s second point about the commoditisation of intelligence is also easy to see. But I am not sure if the real impact of this knowledge-is-free-and-abundant age is fully appreciated and understood.

So we discussed the third question at length, and concluded that the following three abilities will determine success going forward:

1. **Symphony Making:**
   The ability to think big picture, and to integrate seemingly unconnected elements within and between systems in order to find holistic solutions

2. **Connecting Deeply:**
   The ability to touch people’s sense of meaning and happiness

3. **Designing for Beauty:**
   The art of creating solutions that are visually and emotionally appealing
The three abilities combined together is what we call Integrated Thinking. To paraphrase the words of Daniel Pink again – in today’s “conceptual age”, right brain acumen will be equally if not more important than left brain acumen.

If Pink is right, the implications are huge, particularly for Asia. While educating and developing our kids, we in Asia place a disproportionately high emphasis on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Someone studying liberal, fine or performing arts is not always considered smart enough. With some exceptions, while evaluating candidates for key jobs, we still largely regard left brain (STEM) skills higher than right brain skills. It might be time for us to think differently, and give right brain development its due share of focus going forward.

While the education sector is beginning to do its bit, Asian corporations will serve themselves well if they incorporate right brain development within their employee ranks. So far, we do not see enough evidence of this happening. As we partner with companies across Asia to help develop leadership and management skills within their organisations, we routinely work clients’ competency models. In five years, we have seen only one example where an organisation lists Integrated Thinking as a core competency for success. Other than this one, we are yet to see any hint of right brain emphasis in competency models or corporate curricula. If you approve or oversee talent development for your organisation, it might be worthwhile looking at your mix of offerings to make sure you have the right balance.

Thinking about the following questions should help:

1. How is the marketplace for our products and services changing thanks to automation, 24/7 connectivity and abundance?
2. What core capabilities determined our success in the last 10-20 years? How many of them were left brain skills versus right brain skills?
3. What capabilities do we need in the next 10 years? Will the left-right mix remain the same? How should we build the new capabilities within our organisation?
Global perspectives
Asian insights