

BLOG

Roger Martin



Management Is Not a Profession — But It Can Be Taught

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Richard Barker makes several interesting and important points in his [July-August 2010 HBR article, "No, Management is not a Profession"](#). I have a lot of sympathy with his views. I agree with him that management is not a profession and that it would be very hard to turn it into a profession like medicine or law.

Barker's argument that management is not a profession is based on information asymmetry, "the mark of a true profession". In other words, for someone to be a professional they have to know some things that only a few, carefully trained people know. I think this is a piece of the puzzle but I also link the existence of a profession to a particular [regulatory context](#).

We have always known that we have a very tricky commercial situation when the buyer can't determine quality in advance and the cost of failure is high. These situations tend to attract regulation — whether in air safety, drug approval, food inspection or, no doubt, [deep-sea drilling](#). Now, if a product/service in this situation is delivered by an identifiable individual practitioner, it tends to become a regulated profession. Doctors are regulated

professionals because if they screw up, people die and we know exactly who was responsible for the failure (or we think we do!).

In contrast, we don't think of insurance agents as professionals, because the entity responsible for potential failure is the insurance company (if it doesn't have the capital to cover your insurance claim in the future), not the agent. So while there are some training requirements for insurance agents, the regulatory focus is on the insurance company in terms of capital and liquidity requirements.

The higher the cost of failure, the more likely the individual practice in question is to become a regulated profession. And frankly, if a profession isn't regulated, we pay almost no attention to it in any event. Many years ago, the consulting firm I worked for got the mandate to do a broad review of health discipline regulation. While one might think that the various medical professions would have lobbied the lead partner on the project to recommend excluding them from any regulatory burden, the exact opposite was the case. One after another, wannabe professions — from shiatsu massage therapists to mind-body-spirit healers — traipsed into our offices to argue for why they needed to be regulated. They all longed to be taken seriously and regulation was their ticket.

So my basic calculus is as follows: If quality can't be determined in advance and cost of failure is high, the market in question will attract regulation. And if the product/service is delivered by a single identifiable individual, it will become a regulated profession. If it doesn't attract regulation, it doesn't matter a whit whether an activity is deemed by its participants to be a 'profession.'

Based on this calculus, management isn't and won't anytime soon be a profession. It's true that quality is hard to determine in advance. But, despite a few highly public debacles, the cost of failure is not considered to be high. More often than not a bad manager is thought to cause short term damage from which the company in question can recover after the bad manager is fired. Management also tends to be a group activity rather than an individual one. Failure is seen as the product of a team of managers doing a poor job in concert, rather than the product of one manager. Of course, CEOs get singled out for disproportionate blame. But the question is not whether being a CEO should be a profession but rather whether management should be a profession.

I am in wholehearted agreement with Barker when he argues that: "The skill of integration distinguishes managers and is at the heart of why business education should differ from professional education." I also agree with his view that this isn't taught in business schools almost (but not quite) without exception. But I part company with Barker on his assertion that: "The key here is to recognize that integration is not taught but learned."

Here he falls prey to a logical fallacy that I experience every day in my world, the world of business education — and that is the view that because something is untaught, it is

unteachable. It's a handy argument, of course, because it enables virtually the entire management education industry to sit on its hands and continue to teach easy stuff they've taught for the past fifty years.

I believe that integration is absolutely teachable and that is the **challenge we set ourselves at the Rotman School of Management**. Success will not be easy; it requires rigorous advances in management theory and smart pedagogical development to bring those advances to life in the classroom. If we and other business schools can get there, if we can demonstrate to the world that the inability to integrate is the prime cause of managerial failure, then perhaps management could move toward being a profession in which people could be tested and certified on their ability to think integratively. Still, let's not run before we can walk.

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