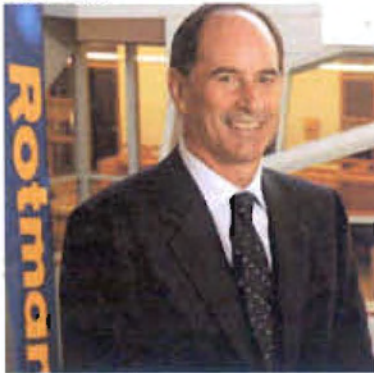


From The Times
January 23, 2008

Students advised to judge leaders by thoughts not deeds

The power of integrative thinking, is what defines the most successful of leaders



Des Dearlove

"The ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function" is the sign of a truly intelligent person, according to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Today the American writer's theory is being applied to MBA courses through the application of an approach known as integrative thinking.

Roger Martin, the dean of the Joseph L. Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, is championing the concept. Having studied successful leaders over many years, Martin became convinced that the traditional preoccupation with what a leader does is misplaced.

His own research among top business leaders identified an unusual quality. "These leaders have a predisposition and capacity to hold in their heads two opposing ideas at once," he explains. "And then without panicking or settling for one alternative, they are able to resolve creatively the tension between those two ideas by generating a new one that contains elements of the others but is superior to both."

Martin's work reached a wider audience through an acclaimed article in the Harvard Business Review last year, and he is the author of a new book *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*. So what are the lessons for MBA students?

"Moves that work in one context often make little sense in another, even at the same company or within the experience of a single leader," Martin explains. He cites the example of Jack Welch, the celebrated former chief executive of General Electric, who pursued diametrically opposite courses at different times.

Rather than learn from what a leader such as Welch does, Martin says MBA students should focus on how they think: "Early in his career at General Electric, Welch insisted that each of GE's businesses be No 1 or No 2 in market share in its industry; but years later he insisted that those same businesses define

their markets so that their share was no greater than 10 per cent, thereby forcing managers to look for new opportunities beyond the confines of a narrowly conceived market.”

At Rotman integrative thinking is now a staple of the MBA programme. Since 2000, the school has redeveloped the curriculum for its two-year and three-year MBA programmes, adding required and elective courses to the curriculum. Integrative thinking modules have also been added to the executive MBA and Omnium Global executive MBA programmes and to the school's executive programmes.

Last month the initiative was given a boost when the school received a donation of C\$10 million (£5.1 million). The gift, from Marcel Desautels, the president and chief executive of the Canadian Credit Management Foundation, brings his total donation to C\$31 million. The money will support initiatives of Rotman's Desautels Centre for Integrative Thinking, as well as the construction of a new building for the school, which is scheduled to open in 2011.

“The traditional MBA focuses on tools for understanding and analysing options,” says Martin. “While there is value to rigorously analysing options and choosing the better one, it is much less valuable than creating entirely new options that are better than the existing obvious ones. That is a skill that integrative thinking nurtures in our MBA students.”

The idea is catching on. At Nottingham University Business School, MBA students also do a project on integrative thinking. “They look at a particular innovation from several perspectives, seek out tensions and contradictions in these different perspectives, then try to find a resolution which, ideally, offers the best of all worlds,” explains Professor Peter Swann.

Martin believes that integrative thinking will produce better MBA graduates. “It means that they will see themselves as model creators rather than model choosers. They will see their role in life as always seeking a better model, rather than accepting the models that currently exist.”

That also applies to their MBA education.

www.rotman.utoronto.ca/integrativethinking

The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking, by Roger Martin, is published by Harvard Business School Press.

How Successful Leaders Think, by Roger Martin, Harvard Business Review, June 2007