

Shaking up 'the suits'

Roger Martin: Dean of Toronto business school hails 'integrative thinking'

Sarah Scott

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If Roger Martin could redesign business education, he would give the MBA students quite a surprise. At the beginning, they would focus on two subjects -- philosophy and physics. They are a great way to form a business mind, Martin says. In fact, he thinks aspiring executives would be better off studying philosophy at the undergraduate level than commerce.

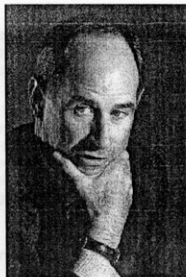
That might come as a surprise, especially to the university's 1,800 undergraduate commerce students, given the source: Martin is the \$300,000-per-year dean of the University of Toronto's Joseph L. Rotman School of Management, which means he presides over the MBA school and co-runs the commerce program. Since he took over in September, 1998, Martin has expanded the business school and hiked the cost of an MBA to \$51,250 as part of his campaign to turn Rotman into one of the top 10 business schools in the world. Rotman's star is rising: This year, the Financial Times rated it No. 21 in the world, up 10 spots from the previous year's ratings.

Yet Martin says business people need a foundation of philosophy and physics. "Business is the integration of people and things," says the lean, 46-year-old former Monitor consultant in a monogrammed white shirt and gold cufflinks. His clear, blue eyes fix on his fingertips as he considers the proposition. "Physics is the study of things and how they work," he says. "Philosophy is, at the basement level, human beings -- how they interact, what they do with each other, how they think. You put the two of them together to form a business concept: How to produce this thing in this way to sell to people like Sarah because I know how she thinks about life and where she shops."

One does not usually associate that kind of fundamental thinking with business school, and its typical focus on marketing, finance and strategy. But Martin is trying to change the way business people think. He even teaches a course on how to learn: "Being smarter is likely to make you a less good learner because smart people tend to be brittle," he says. "They want to be right and they are bad at integrating into the model the disconfirming data." In other words, they do not know what to do with information that disproves their point. "The course is about how can you see the world in a way that makes you more capable of taking advantage of disconfirming data...." The kind that makes you say: "Holy smokes. I was totally wrong about this!"

It is all part of his battle against narrow-minded thinking in business. You have seen it: The suit with the MBA strides into the plant with a brilliant new plan to improve productivity on the assembly line. He is pleased when his plan is implemented on schedule. But there's just one problem: Everyone quits and the plant closes. "The world is a complex and messy place, and the links between cause and effect are often not clear," Martin says. So the typical exec, fearful of error and the loss of control that goes with it, opts for what he can do -- a task so narrowly defined that it's guaranteed to succeed, for him if not the company. This is not good.

A better way, according to Martin, is to look at the whole situation, the entire messy thing that may not lend itself to a clear cause-and-effect diagram. Then you build new models to deal with the situation in a creative way. It demands a mental flexibility that Martin calls integrative thinking. Maybe that is why Rotman's airy executive offices are decorated with some great abstract lithographs by the U.S. artist Robert Motherwell, plus some hefty Inuit sculptures.



CREDIT: Peter Redman, National Post

Business guru Roger Martin, who became dean of the University of Toronto's Joseph L. Rotman School of Management in 1998, aims to make it one of the top 10 business schools in the world.

So, I wondered, how do you nurture that kind of thinking? Where does it begin? So many parents are obsessed with the education of their young children these days, I was curious about Martin's own schooling. How did he learn to think that way?

Martin grew up in a little town in southern Ontario called Wallenstein. His parents -- an entrepreneur in the feed business and a schoolteacher who quit after a year to raise five children -- never attended university. All five Martin kids went to local public schools. "You just went there; they sent you. I didn't think at all of educational choice." As a boy, Martin went to four elementary schools (they kept merging), sometimes riding a school bus 45 minutes to and from school.

His high school was Elmira District Secondary School: "To whatever extent I've succeeded in academic pursuits, I attribute a decent amount to Elmira District Secondary School," he says. For one thing, he learned to speed-read there, so he could take in a page in a second or two. He graduated with an 85% average, tied for second place. "I was not the top student," he says with a laugh. "I've never been the top student of anything."

Martin says three teachers at Elmira played pivotal roles in his life. His English teacher, William Exley, taught Martin how to write, and he has written a lot since, in the Harvard Business Review and other publications. Exley was also a cool guy who played in a band with the renowned contemporary artist Greg Curnoe, who subsequently died in a biking accident.

Then there was the guidance counsellor, Ron Conlon. In Grade 13, Martin made an appointment to see him. "Well, Mr. Conlon," Martin said, "where do you think I should go to university? He said, 'Well, Roger, it doesn't really matter. They're pretty much all the same.' " Martin starts laughing and repeats the line, incredulous. "You are a friggin' guidance counsellor! What guidance is this? I've always thought that since I was such a jock, maybe he thought I was very dumb. So I said to myself, 'I'm going to demonstrate to you they're not the same. I'm going to Harvard. That'll teach him.'

"I'm a fairly wilful guy," Martin notes. So he applied. "Sure enough, I get into Harvard, which to this day still shocks me. I'm a naive country boy."

Martin did not spend months thinking about the admission essay, as students do these days. He just picked up a pen and wrote out the answers to the questions, one by one, scratching out words as he went along. No drafts, no rewrites. Years later, he saw his application in the university files. The admissions officer had underlined Wallenstein and written an exclamation mark. The words Martin had crossed out were circled in red with an exclamation and a question mark. "I think I got in totally on the novelty factor. Here's this whacked-out guy who doesn't understand anything about this institution, from a little town in the middle of nowhere."

Once Martin got in, he got cold feet. He did not want to venture that far away from his girlfriend in Wallenstein. "I happened to be telling this to Robert Huschka," the gentle history teacher. "He took a long look at me, so calm, so great, and he said: 'Well Roger, you know what? There are rules against this, but if there weren't, I'd put you up against that wall and beat you until you changed your mind. And he just walked off."

Martin considered that possibility and called Harvard. It changed his life. His first mark in economics was a C-. He called home. "That's OK, Roger, no problem," his mother said. "You should just quit and come back here to University of Waterloo." Martin sounds like an indignant Boy Scout: "That's not what I wanted! No, I am not quitting!"

Lesson learned: "Intrinsic motivation is better than extrinsic." It is something he considers in the raising of his three children, aged 17, 15 and 12. "I had very laissez-faire parents, and I'm probably very laissez-faire in that sense. All I encourage my children to be is themselves. There is something about the current educational system I find a little too honing for my liking. We're honing you into the type of person you should be."

The English teacher clearly left his mark on Martin. Just last year, he published an article in the Harvard Business Review called the Virtue Matrix, which proposes a way to look at corporate virtue. He also wrote a book called The Responsibility Virus, which describes what happens when the "heroic leader" takes charge, and takes on more responsibility than he or she can handle. The followers, denied responsibility, retreat into passivity. Then things start to screw up.

The book launch in New York took place at the home of Tina Brown, the glamorous editor who ran Vanity Fair, The New Yorker and the late Talk Magazine. Martin knew Brown through Malcolm Gladwell, the New Yorker writer who wrote The Tipping Point. Gladwell was best friends with Martin's brother, and a fellow alumnus of Elmira District Secondary School. He brought Martin into The New Yorker to figure out its economics. "I convinced them to pitch themselves as they are -- a magazine of early adopters," Martin says. He proposed some other stuff, too -- cut the number of pages, cut the writers who need too much editing -- but Brown moved on, and so did he.

Maybe magazines do have something in common with management strategy after all. "It's design," says Martin, rubbing the tips of his fingers together. "I think of my job as a designer. How do we have to think about this? What's our framework for thinking about it? I provide the design to allow others to do productive work."

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