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Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management, advocated creative thinking in the MBA curriculum long before the financial crisis that led to the recession made leading business schools re-evaluate their approach.

Leadership goes holistic

BY LANE WALLACE

Ten years ago, Roger Martin, dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, had an epiphany. It began when the leadership at his son's elementary school asked him to figure out how to replicate its retiring principal's success. He discovered she thrived by thinking through clashing priorities and potential options, rather than hewing to a pre-planned strategy — the same approach taken by the managing partner of a successful international law firm in town.

"The 'Eureka' moment was when I could draw a data point between a hotshot, investment bank-oriented star lawyer and an elementary school principal," Mr. Martin recalls. "I thought: 'Holy smokes. In completely different situations, these people are thinking in very similar ways, and there may be something special about this pattern of thinking.'"

That insight led him to begin advocating what was then a radical idea in business education: Students needed to learn how to think critically and creatively every bit as much as they needed to learn finance or accounting. More specifically, they needed to learn how to approach problems from many perspectives and to combine various approaches to find innovative solutions.

Critical thinking has historically been associated with a liberal arts education, not a business school curriculum, so this change represents something of a tectonic shift for business school leaders. Mr. Martin describes his goal as a "liberal arts MBA." "The liberal arts desire," he

Post-financial crisis 'liberal arts MBA' has its converts

says, is to produce "holistic thinkers who think broadly and make these important moral decisions. I have the same goal."

Ever since 1959, when two influential studies by the Ford and Carnegie Foundations chastised business schools as being too vocational, most MBA programs have taken anything but a broad approach. But even before the financial upheaval, business executives operating in a fast-changing, global market were beginning to realize the value of managers who could think more nimbly across multiple frameworks, cultures and disciplines. The financial crisis underscored those concerns. As a result, several prominent business schools have re-evaluated and, in some cases, redesigned their MBA programs.

Two years ago, for example, the Graduate School of Business at Stanford made a sweeping curriculum change that included more emphasis on multidisciplinary perspectives and understanding of cultural contexts. "If I'm going to really launch you on a career or path where you can make a big impact in the world," says Dean Garth Saloner, "you have to be able to think critically and analytically about the big problems in the world." He says Stanford wants its business students to develop "a lens that brings some kind of principled set of scales to the problem."

One of the most distinctive blueprints being developed is at Rotman. In addition to discipline-based courses, first-year students take Fundamentals of Integrative Thinking, which focuses on understanding and analyzing how people use models in their everyday lives.

For example, Mr. Martin says, students analyze how a book becomes a best-seller, and then learn how to break the model down to its core assumptions. In a followup practicum, they practice "the art and science of building new models," using real-world problems, such as developing a growth model for an alternative airline or a model for reviving Yahoo Canada.

So does Rotman's curriculum create a fundamentally different graduate? Steve McConnell, a managing partner at Seattle-based architecture firm NBBJ, said he noticed a distinctly different approach in the Rotman grads he hired. "They seemed to be naturally free of the bias or predisposition so many of us seem to carry into any situation. And they brought a set of skills in how you query and look into an issue without moving toward biased or predetermined conclusions that has led to unexpected discoveries of opportunity and potential innovation."

Will such changes have a big role in preventing future economic crises? Mr. Martin says the problems that led to the crisis are bigger than business schools alone can address. "The vast majority of our students want to be a positive influence on the world. And if you give them ways of thinking that help them with these complicated dilemmas, they'll make choices that are in some sense more worthy and have a higher moral quality."

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