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OBSERVER

The Business of the Humanities

By MICHAEL DEWILDE

Something strange is happening to me. Or out there, to the world. I'm not sure. It used to be that when I told people I was a professor of philosophy I'd get blank stares, awkward pauses, maybe even some embarrassment on my behalf. Every once in a while, someone would feign interest and ask, "Oh, you mean like psychology?" Right. Just like psychology.

It got so bad that when I traveled on airplanes or went to parties away from the university -- any place and time that a question about my occupation would likely arise -- I began telling people that I was a carpenter (the job I held before I was hired by my university). That, at least, seemed to interest them. Someone was inevitably redoing a kitchen or thinking about a new roof or wondering what kind of insulation to put in the attic. As a carpenter I was, in their eyes, useful, and I in turn was happy to answer their questions ("Yes, you should probably leave the load-bearing wall alone"). Not once before I started lying about my job did anyone ever ask me to please go over the mind/body problem with them one more time, or settle the question of free will and determinism, or argue the merits of a life built on the pursuit of pleasure as opposed to one built on the pursuit of justice.

But about three years ago that all started to change. Maybe it was September 11. Maybe it was the corporate scandals, global warming, the 2000 election, the Middle East, or threats to civil liberties. Maybe it was because I had started working as a consultant to a local business along with teaching philosophy, and was meeting a different crowd of people. I don't know.

In any event I remember when I first met someone who seemed to find what I did for a living important. I had been bumped to first class (an event that, for a professor at a state university, is roughly equivalent to winning the lottery) on a flight from Hong Kong to Detroit. I sat next to a huge, and hugely successful, Hong Kong businessman. In short order he unpacked most of his belongings, and his life story too.

He was, in his own charming telling, master of all he surveyed -- the owner of manufacturing concerns on three continents, the brain behind a myriad of affordable household products, and a management strategist of the first order. He held a degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science, and he was rich, well connected, and, of course, well versed in the languages of markets, interest rates, labor law, and all matters that pertained directly to his companies' success. He was quite an interesting fellow, the first of several businesspeople I've

met who get to play in this world of ours more or less as demigods -- people who can go anywhere at anytime, buy most anything, and have the world at their feet.

Several hours into the flight, though, at his initiative, the conversation turned from business matters to larger, though I would argue related, issues: the events of September 11, the origins of the conflict in the Middle East, the obligations of the news media in a democracy, sectarianism within Islam, the history of Christianity and Judaism, just-war theory. Things like that. Here he was on shaky ground and often deferred to me as it became obvious that, while no expert, I actually did know something about these areas, or at least had read books by people who did. He was not used to having his opinions (and relatively uninformed opinions were all he had on those matters) even gently examined, I suspect, much less challenged, however deferentially.

He was polite and interested, though, and I could almost see him trying to turn some of what I had to say into dollars and cents -- what risk-management strategies he should use if I was right. He complimented me on my learning, and as he did, the thought struck me that the world he helps run is, for the most part, a mystery to him. If something isn't for sale, if it is not -- or could not be -- instrumental to the bottom line, he doesn't pay it much attention.

I ended up feeling a little sorry for him, in the way I often do for the many students I have who are always calculating their own bottom lines -- that is, their GPA's. And, despite my pleasure over not having had to hide my affinity for philosophy for a change, perhaps I also felt a little sorry for myself. Why? Because my students want to be like him, and not like me.

But here's the funny thing I've learned since that flight from Hong Kong: The liberal arts, and the humanities in particular, seem to be a hidden passion for any number of CEO's, executives, Wall Street investors, and lawyers. In the three years following my chance meeting in first class, I have involved myself in our university's business-ethics center and set up a small, independent consulting business that employs the methods and content of the humanities to address a range of issues that people in business face.

I had dinner with a partner at Goldman Sachs who admitted to hiring mostly liberal-arts types. I attended a large meeting of the Young Presidents' Organization, an international group of CEO's and executives under age 50, in which both the Renaissance and emotional intelligence were topics of serious discussion. I engaged in an intense ethical debate with a vice president of a major manufacturing company squeezed by globalization.

The Goldman Sachs partner confessed that because he has to spend the better part of his days around a conference table with the same group of people, he "damn well better like them." Those with liberal-arts degrees, he's found, are much better company than your average business major, and equally, if not more, competent.

The businesspeople at the YPO meeting were not just willing to discuss the role emotions play in the decisions they have to make, they were eager. When I tentatively suggested that literature, art, and moral philosophy might help them understand those emotions, they didn't laugh: They agreed, and lamented their ignorance of those fields.

The vice president of the manufacturing business desperately wanted, more than anything, for his progressive company to continue to uphold its corporate culture. He felt driven to examine the forces allied against him -- and the business and the culture they had built there -- from historical, political, and philosophical perspectives, not solely economic ones.

The irony is inescapable. So many students, intent on becoming successful in business, steel themselves against the lessons of the humanities. So many managers, professionals, and business owners (a minority, perhaps, but still a significant number) have begun searching in the humanities for answers to their problems.

A manager and engineer at a huge aerospace company tells me, as do many others in workplaces I have visited or heard from, that no one in his company really knows the first thing about communicating well -- and as a result, resentment and a sense of helplessness have grown among the rank-and-file employees. Can the humanities help, he wonders? To communicate content and intent effectively -- from "Your performance is lousy" to "We're changing our entire operating system, and we want you to lead the change" -- it helps to have read widely, to have a broad range of references, analogies, and perspectives at the ready. The people one communicates with are often understandably confused or nervous about change. "Reading" them, and responding humanely, draws on the kind of thoughtfulness the humanities seek to cultivate. Yes, the humanities can -- and should -- help. "Life is tough; deal with it," while concise, is rarely helpful.

Still not convinced that the cold, cruel business world is interested in those of us who've spent most of our lives avoiding any businesses except bookstores? I don't blame you. I might not have been convinced either, except for the fact that I am fairly regularly plucked from my tiny office at my university by local CEO's who ask me to work with them and their companies.

I suspect more and more people in business are ready to hear our message because so much of what they have tried simply hasn't worked. Intelligent managers understand that their people are at least as complex as their systems and that their complexity must be respected. Real learning is incremental, affective, and unpredictable, but ultimately a good deal more satisfying than the kind of cheerleading or browbeating that otherwise passes for change in companies. Access to characters in literature and theater, ideas from history and philosophy, and images from art and film open conversations that are reflective, innovative, and, most important, continuing.

So what do I do? I start those conversations, facilitate them, learn from them, attempt to wrangle agreements about what will be done about them. Much of the work is similar to what I do in the classroom -- close examination, clarification, and communication -- with the occasional counseling thrown in.

Business leaders, in my experience, want to work with a staff that is smart and articulate, with people who have breadth, depth, and character, and who are intellectually curious, not terrified by change, and willing, with a little nudge, to engage at least a little in what Socrates referred to as "the examined life." They want their employees to be all those things, and they want my help - the help of literature, philosophy, history, and art -- in reaching that goal.

Imagine that. It's almost enough to make a guy give up carpentry.

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