

Can Someone Be Brilliant and Illiterate?

During each class my students at Indiana University are posed questions to stimulate their thoughts about business. One question I pose is, “Can someone be brilliant and illiterate at the same time?”

One of Webster’s definitions of brilliant is keenly intelligent. The definition of illiterate is uneducated, unable to read. Based on these definitions it seems impossible for someone brilliant to be illiterate. Yet if you replace Webster’s definition of illiterate with Alvin Toffler’s, “The *illiterate* of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” The question and the subsequent answer take on a completely different perspective.

Other faculty members have asked me what this question has to do with business? To demonstrate the business correlation, I pull out an article I keep in my notebook at all times for ready reference.

The article is from the November 2002 issue of, “Leadership Strategies,” and is entitled “Pfeiffer’s Folly: Thinking He Knew the Best.” This article was taken from an interview with Noel Tichy. Excerpts from Tichy’s interview relate to how the inability to learn can be a leader’s fatal flaw:

Eckhard Pfeiffer was a brilliant CEO... unfortunately the former Compaq chief had a critical flaw...he was not open to learning. After Compaq purchased Digital Equipment... instead of learning from Digital about the new market they purchased – Pfeiffer set about directing the acquired organization as if he already had the expertise that he had just paid \$9.6 billion to purchase. Pfeiffer was fired...and the new leadership *did not change* Pfeiffer’s strategy...the new leadership *set about to execute* the strategy.

All leaders can learn from this example. You can be the best and brightest – but it takes more than brilliant strategies to make an organization successful. It takes execution, and execution happens *throughout* the organization ... not just at the top. A brilliant group of leaders set the direction – but they cannot make the strategies happen by themselves. This same group must be capable of getting the strategies accomplished through others.

Often my students tire of hearing the message I repeat each week. Success in business takes more than the ability to set direction, it requires executing direction which takes the development, engagement, alignment, and involvement of the entire organization.

Great leaders know they cannot go it alone or they will be like Eckhard. They may be the best and brightest – but they must have an organization capable of converting plans into actions to achieve success. With the ability to execute, the brilliant strategies will succeed. The successful organization will be comprised of brilliant *and* literate leaders who learn, unlearn and relearn to keep pace with the changing business environment.

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