

Unleashing the Power of Connecting Disciplines

Introduction

I am a business consultant and not an expert in organizational learning, but I have been repeatedly privileged to observe the power that can be unleashed when different disciplines or points of view connect. The breakthroughs and insights that are possible from combining two skill sets and ways of viewing the world are far beyond what is usually possible using just one discipline.

While talking with Ed Schein recently, we realized that my experiences might be relevant to organizational learning experts. So, this article gives some personal examples of the power and benefit of connecting disciplines and then ends with my tentative thoughts on why this additional power occurs and how to encourage the connection.

Solving Problems by Focusing on Other Interests

While I was in my early twenties, a good friend, who had studied romance languages and Dante, told me that he had a great breakthrough in deciphering the structure of Dante's work. He had been searching for months for new mathematical structures in Dante's poems, when doing the Sunday Times crossword puzzle suddenly made him wonder if Dante might not have used a form of linking letters like a puzzle. Eureka! There was such a structure, and my friend published a paper on his new insight. It was simple and elegant and would not have occurred to him if he hadn't loved crossword puzzles as well as Dante.

When I was a young working mother, I found that I didn't have enough time for job and family. I took a highly recommended time management course and was shocked to hear the instructor tell us to take up a hobby. The instructor explained that we are more productive when we work smarter rather than harder. Sticking only with what we know each day can make us more efficient in a narrow sphere but does not make us more productive or valuable. The most valued employees are those who know what's important and who can bring flashes of insight and new thinking to the job. Hobbies or other outside interests are great sources of these creative ideas, and so the instructor recommended them as a way of cutting through the clutter that comes with too narrow a focus on one issue.

While deciding whether to accept this counter-intuitive advice, I recalled a business professor of mine telling me that he got his best ideas in the shower when he let his mind roam freely – from movies to books to his usual course work. He invested in a larger hot water heater and felt it helped his creativity and career. So, I decided to take the time management instructor's advice. I still felt too busy. But, by continuing to make time for my family and outside interests, I was forced to focus on what was truly important at work and to find creative ways of getting my job done.

One of my main tasks at work was to translate and transmit marketing practitioner thinking to marketing academics and vice versa. In searching for ways to save time, I decided to schedule meetings to bring the two types of people together instead of acting as their go-between. Ola! This saved me time but also allowed the people to collaborate in ways that would not have been possible if I hadn't created the shared interest group

meetings. We all enjoyed ourselves more and were proud of what we were able to accomplish with this new process.

The Marketing Science Institute Model of Connecting Academic and Business Thinking

In the 1980's, I was privileged to work for the Marketing Science Institute (MSI), which is an excellent organization based on the power of connecting business and academic thinking. Founded over 40 years ago by Thomas B. McCabe (the long-time Chairman of Scott Paper Company), MSI was created to encourage academics to advance the science of marketing by working on issues of importance to marketing executives. Over time, MSI has evolved into a powerful force for the best and most creative marketing thinking, with a sizable percentage of the articles in the leading marketing journals evolving from work sponsored by MSI. It brings business people and academics together face to face on a regular basis to share their insights, and I was able – as Vice President of Research for MSI – to see the power that resulted from merging their points of view.

When I joined MSI, very little academic research focused on services marketing. However, as the service industry began to boom in the 1980's, the services marketing executives began to ask for insights into how to measure and improve service quality. Three academics from Texas A&M (Len Berry, Parsu Parasuraman and Valarie Zeithaml) agreed to see if they could find a way to measure service quality. This was a risky decision for them they had to strike out into uncharted areas instead of expanding on previous research. However, their pioneering work, which they called ServQual, became the basis for most of today's customer satisfaction and loyalty measurement. They were able to show businesses how customer perceptions of services differed from perceptions of products and how expectations played a major role in satisfaction. In the process, they have all received recognition and awards for their work. Voila! Business has benefited, and the careers of all three academics have prospered because they were willing to bring their academic thinking to bear on a practical, unstudied business issue.

Crossing Thought or Departmental Boundaries at Work

While I was at MSI, the issue arose of how to improve the product development process. In order to develop hypotheses, we encouraged the marketing executives who were our members to bring their counterparts in their firms' operations, supplier relations, quality improvement and manufacturing to some MSI meetings on new product development. Two men from Harris Corporation – one in marketing and one in manufacturing – reported that this ended a history of suspicion and made them both heroes in their firm when they were able to find quicker and more effective ways of developing new products. A quality expert from Armstrong and a marketing researcher from DuPont, who were asked to speak on an MSI panel together, found that they learned so much from each other that they became more valuable to their firms. And a researcher from Marriott reported that she learned to speak the same language as her operations team, which meant that the operations team was finally willing to act on the information she provided.

Bingo! Bringing together different mindsets, languages and approaches to shared issues broke down silos, created lasting friendships and led to breakthroughs in work processes. These improvements could not have happened if people had not crossed their comfortable thought or departmental boundaries.

Connecting Different Mind Sets and Academic Disciplines

My husband, an economist, worked early in his career on the issue (raised by an FTC case) of why consumers were not buying a cheaper squeeze lemon juice made by Golden Crown instead of the more expensive Real Lemon brand, which dominated the market. It was contrary to economic theory to find consumers paying more for a brand that tests showed to be comparable in quality. When he told me he just couldn't understand those pesky, unpredictable consumers, my experience as a household purchasing agent and user of lemon juice suggested an explanation. Consumers don't always have perfect knowledge about quality and may be reluctant to try something new just because it is less expensive. Since the difference in the prices of Real Lemon and Golden Crown was less than a penny a meal and the risk of ruining a meal was high if Golden Crown did not taste as good, I knew that I was personally reluctant to try Golden Crown. My husband was able to use naïve but real world consumer experience in the case to explain the seemingly inexplicable consumer behavior.

Similarly, around 1987, a marketing academic at University of Texas, Austin asked one of his finance/accounting colleagues to work with him on the problem of how to measure brand equity and how much to invest in building a brand – a high priority topic at the time at MSI. The combination of marketing with accounting and finance led to some of the best early work on brand equity and made breakthroughs that would not have been possible by relying on marketing knowledge alone. The connection of academic disciplines advanced both disciplines and careers and created an exciting research stream for both men that continued for a decade.

A final example is the collaboration at MIT of economists, atmospheric chemists, climatologists, oceanographers, biologists, statisticians and political scientists in working on the global climate change issue. They began by meeting regularly for lunches and then held Global Climate Change Forums once or twice a year to bring business and government representatives to the discussion. As a result of this merging of many viewpoints, they have ended with many important publications and with the ability to influence public debate on this hot topic. One conclusion from their work together has been the realization that temperatures naturally fluctuate and that it is difficult to tell what is a trend in the midst of so much fluctuation. Another result has been the need to bring scientific evidence to bear on what has become a very political issue. What has become apparent to this team is that, with a topic as difficult and complex as climate change, no one discipline could have the impact that the collaboration has been able to achieve.

Learning a Second Discipline to Increase Individual Value

In the late 1980's, Curt Reimann of the Department of Commerce and I began to correspond about how customers evaluate quality and how to increase customer satisfaction. He was in charge of developing a national quality award (now known as the Baldrige Award for Performance Excellence) and wanted to integrate the concept of customer satisfaction with other quality improvement concepts. While I feared the correspondence might not be time well spent, the subject was one I knew and cared about and so I continued the process.

When the award was finally announced, Curt asked me to become an early examiner. The training course took nearly a week and revealed that I was quite different from the other examiners. Most of them were quality engineers, who **used process design, flow**

charts, and statistical process control approaches and terminology that was completely new to me. I told Curt that I felt I should resign because I didn't fit the usual mold, but Curt said that he had asked me to join the group because I was from a different discipline. He felt the engineers and I could learn from each other. How right he was! The eight years I've spent as a Baldrige examiner and the ten or so years I've spent with the Massachusetts quality award (MassExcellence) have been among the most productive and exciting of my career. The merging of the quality and marketing disciplines has given me insights I never could have had if I had stayed in my comfortable marketing zone.

For instance, the Baldrige model focuses on how a whole organization is managed. It draws on many disciplines to do this, including engineering, organizational development and management as well as marketing. As a marketer I could never understand before I learned the Baldrige model why top managers didn't eagerly act on the valuable marketing advice we marketers provided. By adding the Baldrige perspective on how to manage an organization, I was able to see that executives must weigh the needs of employees and shareholders in addition to the needs of customers. I also learned that a firm's incentive structure has a big impact on what gets done. Based on these insights, I was able to write an award-winning article with a long-time marketing colleague entitled "From Information to Action". Drawing on the quality improvement, change management and marketing literatures as well as the experiences of many marketers and top executives, the article seeks to expand marketers' view of why firms do or don't act on customer information and how to increase the odds of action.

Another example is the perspective Baldrige has given me on leadership. Years ago, I attended an executive gathering at Wharton on the nature and development of leadership. We spent a great deal of time discussing whether leadership was more than charisma. Although the meeting was interesting, I didn't feel that management science had all the answers. Once I began to study Baldrige's leadership category (which draws on learnings from organizational theory and management science), I began to see that leadership was a process rather than a personality trait, and this has allowed me to help executives and organizations develop their leadership skills.

I think it is safe to say that the "Information to Action" article could not have been written and I could not have helped boost company leadership if I had not added the things I learned from Baldrige to my skill set.

What Can We Conclude?

I hope that my personal examples have brought to mind similar examples from each reader's own experiences. And, I hope that the examples have been sufficient to show that there are many ways in which disciplines can connect – when individuals develop more than one interest or skill set, when academics and business people collaborate, when different academic disciplines work together on a topic of mutual interest, or when business people from different departments cooperate. Regardless of how the disciplines connect, I believe the connection releases a creativity and power that would not be possible if people had remained rooted in their original mind set.

Why is this connection of disciplines so powerful? I can hypothesize several reasons.

- The connections often provide a tool for solving problems or offer alternative solutions for problems that can't be solved using the usual methods. The Dante puzzle, the brand equity collaboration and the new product development cooperation are examples of this.
- The connections allow us to view our own disciplines' concepts in a broader context, in the way that the Baldrige view of company management helped me put my original marketing viewpoint into a broader perspective.
- The connections foster communication among people with different but tangential backgrounds. MSI is an excellent example of mixing business and academic backgrounds and of encouraging different academic disciplines to talk in order to produce innovative publications and insights.
- The connections encourage creativity by taking us out of our single discipline ruts and moving us into the excitement that comes from mastering something new or seeing something in a new light.

How can we best encourage the connection of disciplines? My own experience suggests that connections between people from different disciplines work best when the people meet face to face – preferably on neutral territory – to discuss a topic of mutual interest. When people from different disciplines can listen with respect to the others' points of view and make the effort to learn the others' language (which may well be very different), they can create new learning and discoveries together. This was the case at MSI, within the firms, and for academics from different departments: They met face to face, held discussions around topics they all found important, and found ways to communicate with each other in spite of their different terminology.

Connecting disciplines within individuals as they add new skill sets could occur through outside forces (as Curt Reimann invited me to join the Baldrige team), through a hobby (as with the Dante puzzle) or when a person consciously decides to study a new subject. Regardless of the cause, the results are almost certainly best when the individual invests enough time to really understand the new subject well.

It takes time and planning to connect disciplines, but I believe that the results are well worth the effort.

A final question is whether the effort of connecting disciplines and mindsets is always worth the effort? Might there be times when the results do not justify the effort? From my own experience, I think not. But, I recommend this question as one worthy of further study.

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