What You Didn't Learn in Business School: Why the Humanities Count

Excerpts

Preface

So here's my preface, as short as it can be, to set the stage for the book you are about to read:

During your undergraduate years, you likely encountered humanities courses as part of a core curriculum, a structured program designed to equip all students regardless of their major, with a broad intellectual foundation and essential skills. Whether it was writing, literature, or another discipline, these courses aimed, at least in theory, to sharpen your ability to think critically, communicate effectively, and engage with complex ideas. These are precisely the skills that are presumably invaluable in leadership and business today.

Perhaps at the time, however, you struggled to see the connection between the lofty plays of Shakespeare, the poetry of Goethe and T.S. Eliot, the novels of Herman Melville and the philosophical abstractions Nietzsche. And once you entered the workforce, those lunchtime discussions with colleagues rarely touched on how to apply their ideas to everyday business challenges. Yet this book reexamines that intersection, arguing that the humanities are not merely an academic obligation but a vital, often untapped, resource for navigating the complexities of modern business.

Like many undergraduates, I entered college with youthful ambition—naïve, perhaps, but determined to pursue law school. Early on, I encountered a charismatic European history professor with a strong Hungarian accent, whose personal journey had been shaped by exile from eastern European intellectual rigor. His influence led me to major in history and literature, and for a time, I wrestled with a crucial decision:

pursue law or follow the path of academia? In the end, I applied to both law school and Ph.D. programs. Despite receiving an offer from a top law school, I chose to pursue a doctorate in European history.

Four years later, I graduated into an oversaturated academic market of humanities Ph.D.'s—many were called, yet few were chosen, including me. Purely by luck and connections, I eventually landed an entry-level job in technology as a software account manager (a polished term for "salesman"). From there, I worked for several tech companies, progressing from account manager to sales manager, and eventually, to entrepreneur. Along the way, I also found myself in an MBA program, deepening my understanding of corporate strategy.

Yet during my career in corporate America, I learned something surprising: my humanities training was as valuable (if not more so) than my MBA studies. I decided not to retreat into ivory towers but to illuminate boardrooms with the practical business value of the humanities. That realization was the seed that eventually led me to write this book.

So, listen up and pay attention: I'll tell you everything I learned.

Introduction

College Professors of the humanities watch the growth of humanities majors unable to get hired with the appalled fascination of an anxious French aristocrat catching his first sanguinary glimpse of the guillotine. Frequently graduates majoring in the humanities seeking employment openings in the private sector get doors slammed in their faces. But, rather strangely, in moving toward upper management and later on in career progression, the skills taught by the humanities can be of great value. Too many companies in America are beautifully managed but poorly led, avoiding error rather than seeking opportunity. The art of leading is the art of being human and what can be more useful than the humanities? Those in the world of business should make it their business to study the humanities later after they've

established professional skills. People who are employed struggle to pursue a humanities education not just because they have busy schedules, but because the material can feel so disconnected from daily reality. This book might change your mind. Perhaps, I might rashly suggest, a master's in liberal studies combined with an MBA would make an ideal CEO for an employee seeking top admission to the corporate suite. An MBA program offers courses in a wide array of business concerns. Regardless of whether you're gunning for a chance in the corporate workplace or looking to launch your own idea, the core units of a structured business education are immense and well-documented. Going through an MBA gives a proper conceptual and theoretical grounding in business operations and an actionable understanding of handling finances, scaling a business, accounting, managing diverse teams, marketing effectively, and more. You'll be hard-pressed to find anyone in business who denies the positive effect of such an education. My goal is two-fold: to offer to CEOs, upper and middle management insights from the humanities that they did not learn in business school and, after this, to get this group to learn more, read more and think more about the utility and beauties of the humanities in life.

Students should be encouraged to study the liberal arts later in life, after establishing professional skills. It's never too late. For many employed individuals, pursuing a liberal arts education is challenging—not just due to demanding schedules, but because the material often feels detached from the realities of daily business life. But if students had the opportunity to read the humanities later in life, a far greater number would engage with the material both for its utility and the sheer joy of learning. The religious metaphor remains apt: no church expects its congregants to study theology and never pick up the bible again. Yet that's precisely the model colleges impose for undergraduate business majors. A few courses on the humanities. A few semesters. That's it. Over and done.

I have adopted a business school strategy to introduce the business community to the humanities. We will be examining humanities books from a practical perspective used in business school: the case study. This narrative prestidigitation is necessary

because many in business associate the humanities with abstruse academic meanderings about deconstruction, Freudian imagery, feminism, Marxism and other observations unrelated to the pragmatic world of the marketplace. Case studies, on the other hand, are familiar tools for management education. In using books from the humanities and liberal arts as case studies, I want to provide practical examples of how to read, analyze and incorporate their themes into business practice for those upper and mid-level managers who may not have thought much about the utility of the humanities in their work in business and introduce the humanities as something that is useful to them as well as meaningful if read correctly. Some of the writers of selected achieve an eloquence that sems foreign to our time but have achieved lasting stature and writers of lasting stature make the best teachers. They understand principles that are powerful, permanent and useful, even if their principles must be adopted, as I have done, to new situations. The goal of this book is to provide valuable C Suite lessons and observations that have proven effective over time and can be applied to business issues. In addition, I hope to give you the opportunity to read books you might or might not have otherwise read and read them from a new perspective. Let's start with whales.

What You Didn't Learn in Business School: Why the Humanities Count is a practical guide for CEOs, corporate directors, and senior managers who seek
deeper insight into leadership, decision-making, and the human side of enterprise. Structured around a series of provocative questions that span the arc of business and life, each chapter invites reflection and reorientation: how to learn organizational behavior from Moby Dick, how to beat your competitors from Clausewitz, how to deal with work situations and moving up the hierarchy from Balthasar Gratian, how to get to know your inner business self from Montaigne, how to cope with business problems from Marcus Aurelias, how to deal with tricky business issues from Sophocles, as well as the surprisingly practical business value of poetry. Drawing from literature, philosophy, and history, the book offers a rich blend of analysis, commentary, and actionable strategies for the humanities into your leadership practice.

Expect a mix of sharp advice, memorable anecdotes, and a touch of humor and whimsy—designed not just to inform, but to awaken. Whether you're navigating a present boardroom crisis or contemplating your future legacy, this book helps you see more clearly, think more deeply, and lead with greater insight. The humanities will challenge you to think differently, lead more wisely, and rediscover its power—not as academic relics, but as living tools for a more meaningful professional life.

Sample Chapter Excerpt

Chapter One

Moby Dick: Do I Have the Right Vision?

Old Ahab could teach us a valuable lesson
The one thing he wanted escaped his possession
The crew he recruited
All died in pursuit of
The meaning of life: the impossible vision.

"What the whale was to Ahab has been hinted at; what, at times he was to me remain unsaid," Melville writes. What remains unsaid is: Is Moby Dick a business novel? To the untrained eye it is as if Moby Dick as business novel is laying beneath a thin coat of ice, frustratingly blurred but tantalizing. Let's blow a little warm breath across that layer of frost and see what lies beneath. A novel steeped in symbolism and drenched in mythology, Moby Dick is always a fertile place to turn for a little poetic inspiration and business advice, as I hope to convince you. It is a book we can admire for its grandiosity but become intimidated by its verbosity. Although oftentimes as impenetrable as the prose of James Joyce's *Finnigan's Wake* or the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Melville's story of the hunt for the great white whale tells the story of a bold and perilous adventure through the dark waters of leadership and the human psyche.

Moby Dick, despite being a book of burdensome length, has been written, staged televised, performed on stage as opera and play, made into comic books and cartoons, become a sea food restaurant chain, indirectly incorporated into a chain of coffee shops (Starbuck's) and turned into dinnerware adorned with etchings of a crazed Ahab, his ship Pequod, and his hated whale. It has even been eroticized. In the Belgian city of Ghent there is a brothel with the enticingly named: "Moby Dick Fun Club," where, one supposes, you can have a whale of a time.

When Google celebrated the 161st anniversary of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* the book held an important place in English literature. A survey of one hundred authors from fifty-four countries named Moby Dick as one of the top one hundred books of all time and rating it alongside Homer's Odyssey and Dante's The Divine Comedy. Today the novel is now celebrated and has attained the status of an American classic along with Huckleberry Finn and Gatsby. It is the one book Faulkner wished he had written, and which Hemingway was proud to have read. In 1949, Hemingway, always competitive, even wrote to his publisher that he considered Melville to be one of the handful of writers he was still trying to beat. Quite a kudo today but in the past, this was not always so. initially Moby Dick had really horrid reviews. His book was ignored in Melville's lifetime and his first edition never sold out and the remaining copies went up in smoke at an 1853 fire in the publisher's Manhattan warehouse. Overseas sales were equally depressing, dreary and dismal. Moby Dick only sold 500 copies in England compared to 6,700 for Melville's first book Typee.

The book was inspired by a real event in the 1820's when the whaleship Essex was cruising near the equator and was attacked by a large sperm whale striking and the vessel directly with such force and opening up a huge gash in the hull. The bridge pumps failed, and as preparations were being made to abandon ship, the whale struck again. The few who made it to lifeboats were set adrift with little food, eventually starving are the hungry crew resorted to murder and cannibalism. Melville's re-imaginative verbal reconstruction of this event was quite exceptionable. The patience of his readers is, however, sometimes quite otherwise. It is, after all, a very long book. Here is the book People Dread. So copious, so boring, so canonical. But in an age of instant gratification, time is so short so today we will be viewing Moby Dick less

erotically and more prosaically as a study in organizational behavior with Ahab as its CEO and the ship Pequod as a corporation. Moby Dick then is more than a past story about whale hunting. Good literature written in the past is always contemporary, and Moby Dick contains elements of something heavier and more hidden than the superficial reading might suggest. Let's use the book to excavate some of the deeper lessons behind the mask of the story that reveals a portrait of the corporate soul. Moby Dick can easily be seen as a transfiguration story of a visionary leader, perhaps a high-tech entrepreneur, searching for a "unicorn", a start-up seeking a billion dollars—and how he failed.

One reason the novel has so thoroughly entered our popular imagination is because it is not just one novel. Moby-Dick has inspired artists, frustrated students, enthralled mariners, and even lent itself to the world of action-packed storytelling. It is expansive, daunting, and entrenched in literary canon. Melville happened to be a splendid storyteller and fascinating reporter with a penetrating eye, accurate ear and--perhaps surprisingly --a deft direct sense of humor. But beneath its surface and far deeper inside of Moby Dick lies something weightier, something elusive. The book extends far beyond the ocean, is more than a tale about fishing. It intricately explores corporate leaders and corporate business strategy and is a significant metaphor for running a business, with profound implications for decision-making that apply to many organizational settings. An imaginative reading of Moby Dick as a business novel transcends its aquatic environment offering practical insights into strategy, team selection and team work as well as risk management, business ethics and communication. Melville's Moby Dick literally provides oceanic reach and endless sources of inspiration and interpretation by one Captain's mad, idiosyncratic, egotistical pursuit of one weird, enraged and dangerous whale. Studying Melville's masterpiece, though it seems like just an adventure story, shows how running a business and reading Moby Dicki is as inseparable as -–well, as Ahab is from his White Whale. By the end of this chapter, perhaps you'll agree.