

The Economist

## Schumpeter

# Philosopher kings

**Business leaders would benefit from studying great writers**

Oct 4th 2014 | From the print edition

IT IS hard to rise to the top in business without doing an outward-bound course. You spend a precious weekend in sweaty activity—kayaking, climbing, abseiling and the like. You endure lectures on testing character and building trust. And then you scarp home as fast as you can. These strange rituals may

produce a few war stories to be told over a drink. But in general they do nothing more than enrich the companies that arrange them.



It is time to replace this rite of managerial passage with something much more powerful: inward-bound courses. Rather than grappling with nature, business leaders would grapple with big ideas. Rather than proving their leadership abilities by leading people across a ravine, they would do so by leading them across an intellectual chasm. The format would be simple. A handful of future leaders would gather in an isolated hotel and devote themselves to studying great books. They would be deprived of electronic distractions. During the day a tutor would ensure their noses stay in their tomes; in the evening the inward-bounders would be encouraged to relate what they had read to their lives.

It is easy to poke fun at the idea of forcing high-flying executives to read the classics. One could play amusing games thinking up titles that might pique their interest: “Thus Spake McKinsey”, or “Accenture Shrugged”, perhaps. Or pairing books with personality types: “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” for a budding Donald Trump and “Crime and Punishment” for a budding Conrad Black. Or imagining

what Nietzschean corporate social responsibility would look like. Or Kierkegaardian supply-chain management.

Then there are practical questions. Surely high-flyers are decision-makers rather than cogitators? And surely they do not have time to spend on idle thought? However, a surprising number of American CEOs studied philosophy at university. Reid Hoffman, one of the founders of LinkedIn, was a philosophy postgraduate at Oxford University and briefly contemplated becoming an academic before choosing the life of a billionaire instead. Anyway, executives clearly have enough time on their hands to attend gabfests such as Davos, where they do little more than recycle corporate clichés about “stakeholders” and “sustainability”. Surely they have enough time for real thinkers.

Inward-bound courses would do wonders for “thought leadership”. There are good reasons why the business world is so preoccupied by that notion at the moment: the only way to prevent your products from being commoditised or your markets from being disrupted is to think further ahead than your competitors. But companies that pose as thought leaders are often “thought laggards”: risk analysts who recycle yesterday’s newspapers, and management consultants who champion yesterday’s successes just as they are about to go out of business.

The only way to become a real thought leader is to ignore all this noise and listen to a few great thinkers. You will learn far more about leadership from reading Thucydides’s hymn to Pericles than you will from a thousand leadership experts. You will learn far more about doing business in China from reading Confucius than by listening to “culture consultants”. Peter Drucker remained top dog among management gurus for 50 years not because he attended more conferences but because he marinated his mind in great books: for example, he wrote about business alliances with reference to marriage alliances in Jane Austen.

Inward-bound courses would do something even more important than this: they would provide high-flyers with both an anchor and a refuge. High-flyers risk becoming so obsessed with material success that they ignore their families or break the law. Philosophy-based courses would help executives overcome their obsession with status symbols. It is difficult to measure your worth in terms of how many toys you accumulate when you have immersed yourself in Plato.

Distracted bosses would also benefit from leaving aside all those e-mails, tweets and LinkedIn updates to focus on a few things that truly matter.

Looking for answers

The business world has been groping towards inward-bound courses for years. Many successful CEOs have made a point of preserving time for reflection: Bill Gates, when running Microsoft, used to retreat to an isolated cottage for a week and meditate on a big subject; and Jack Welch set aside an hour a day for undistracted thinking at GE. Clay Christensen of Harvard Business School was so shocked at how many of his contemporaries ended up divorced or in prison that he devised a course called "How will you measure your life?". It became one of HBS's most popular courses and provided the basis of a successful book.

"Mindfulness" is all the rage in some big corporations, which have hired coaches to teach the mix of relaxation and meditation techniques. Big ideas are becoming as much of a status marker in high-tech hubs as cars and houses are in the oil belt. Peter Thiel, a Silicon Valley investor, holds conferences of leading thinkers to try to improve the world. David Brendel, a philosopher and psychiatrist, offers personal counselling to bosses and recently penned a blog for the *Harvard Business Review* on how philosophy makes you a better leader. Damon Horowitz, who interrupted a career in technology to get a PhD in philosophy, has two jobs at Google: director of engineering and in-house philosopher. "The thought leaders in our industry are not the ones who plodded dully, step by step, up the career ladder," he says, they are "the ones who took chances and developed unique perspectives."

Inward-bound courses would offer significant improvements on all this. Mindfulness helps people to relax but empties their minds. "Ideas retreats" feature the regular circus of intellectual celebrities. Sessions on the couch with corporate philosophers isolate managers from their colleagues. Inward-bound courses offer the prospect of filling the mind while forming bonds with fellow-strivers. They are an idea whose time has come.

From the print edition: Business