

Thought leadership is the ancestor of innovation

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The ancestor of innovation is thought; without thought, there could be no innovation. In management while innovation attracts profound commentary, analysis, awe and cynicism, all at once, thought attracts less commentary. You can imagine what a business-ravaged veteran of fifty years like me thought when I got invited to a day-long workshop at an eponymous management college on the subject of 'Thought Leadership'. My company executive image about management faculty was shattered by an engaged and lively faculty, jousting and jostling, to extract the best out of discussions on a hot May. It was worth my time.

The workshop on 'Thought Leadership' was hosted by Mumbai's prestigious SP Jain Institute of Management Research (SPJIMR). Thought leadership at SPJIMR is the brainchild of dynamic Dean Dr. Ranjan Banerjee. In the workshop, he was ably assisted by his sister-in-arms (no pun intended), Dr Snehal Shah—an ardent yoga student with a doctorate in organizational behaviour from Carnegie Mellon University. Their credentials were serious enough for me to disguise my practising manager's sneer, though I must confess to the subdued presence of adipose tissues of well-camouflaged cynicism.

Collectively the faculty engaged on a journey—what is thought leadership, why is it important, what are the processes involved, what does a thought leader actually do? At the end of that day, it was not that the fifty assembled people had stumbled on to a revolutionary new idea; they had only emotionally engaged on a journey of self-discovery about themselves and their roles as teachers of management—a hugely worthwhile outcome with, hopefully, more to come.

Human connectivity with thought leadership is a no-brainer as well-chronicled by Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens: a history*. Humans are the only species--among 8.7 million created-- that think, reflect, act, discover and learn in a cycle of incessant learning. To do those five things is distinctively human and natural. This cycle leads to individual learning, what academics call implicit learning. It has to be converted into explicit learning.

You convert implicit into explicit learning through articulation. This is what teachers and managers do all the time, though managers and teachers do it differently, both efforts bring their own value. Articulation can be through speaking, writing, demonstrating or through the ubiquitous power point presentation technique. Teaching through articulation is a distinctively human event. Management teachers are in the business of converting implicit business knowledge into explicit, teachable learning. Teachers who don't think that thought leadership is their core business are in danger of being considered lazy or indolent. Thought is distinctively human: even intelligent animals like dogs don't conduct day-long seminars on thought leadership—only humans do such things in companies, universities and institutions!

I reflected on the origin of the expression, thought leadership. It was used for the first time in 1887 to describe Henry Ward Beecher, an American clergyman, social thinker and opponent of slavery. I encountered this expression in marketing literature of the 1980s when I was a marketer at Unilever. But it was the obituary notice about the premature death of Joel Allen Kurzman in April this year that brought the expression back into my consciousness. Kurzman edited *Wall Street Journal*, *HBR* and latterly *Strategy & Business*. It was at S & B that he is credited with coining the expression and of giving it literary visibility.

I have observed time-challenged faculty at management institutes debate about what they should aim for--thought leadership or teaching. Institutions need to emphasize that teaching and thought leadership are not a zero sum game, both are essential—just like you have two eyes, and while one may be stronger or weaker, the optician has to fit you with eye glasses that allows maximum usage of both eyes, singly and collectively. The same is true of operating managers; that is why GE runs Croton Ville, Unilever runs 4 Acres and Gulita, and Tata runs Tata Management Training Centre.

More strength to thought leadership and kudos to SPJIMR. I hope many more management institutes, indeed even operating companies, will join this fray of thought leadership—without it, no institute can innovate.