

A Liberal Approach to Business

written by **CHRIS ALLISON**

BECAUSE YOU STUDY ANYTHING and everything at a liberal arts college, you might say that it resembles an episode of *Seinfeld*, the observational comedy show about nothing. And because nothing really prepares you for a business career, the liberal arts might make the best choice.

Late one night in 1992, my father phoned, asking me to take over the reins of his nascent Pittsburgh telecom equipment business. That conversation set me on a 16-year odyssey through the wilds of the tech sector and Wall Street.

I didn't immediately think of Homer's Scylla and Charybdis, though I soon discovered I'd sailed between a rock and a hard place. No, being a graduate of Allegheny College, I headed directly to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. When presented with a problem, that's what liberal arts majors do. They read. They read everything.

I checked out books on management, finance, accounting, electrical engineering and manufacturing. I pored over telecom trade rags. Heck, I even bought a set of Tony Robbins's motivational tapes. I was trying to teach myself how to function as a technology company CEO.

Three years after my dad's phone call, our company mounted a successful initial public offering on the NASDAQ exchange. Our angel investors realized anywhere from a three- to 14-time return, depending upon when they invested. We opened at a share price of \$14. In the year 2000, our stock blasted off to \$300 a share, then split, catapulting our market capitalization to

more than \$2 billion.

Nice story, huh? It wouldn't have happened without my liberal arts training.

A 2018 survey of hiring managers and executives by Hart Research Associates found that oral communication, teamwork skills with diverse groups, critical thinking and analytical reasoning, complex problem solving, and information literacy were among the top skills sought by employers.

According to the June 28, 2016, edition of *The Atlantic*, "Businesses want workers who have the ability to think, the ability to write, the ability to understand the cultural or historical context of whatever business decision they're making."

An August 21, 2017, article in *The New York Times* argues that liberal arts colleges "are the most appropriate institutions for training future business leaders." In other words, businesses are seeking employees who graduate business programs infused with the education that liberal arts colleges offer.

As a result, we're seeing a philosophical change in the way colleges and universities teach business, which has remained big business for colleges for 40 years. Of the 1,895,000 bachelor's degrees conferred in 2014 and 2015, the greatest number of degrees—364,000—were conferred in the fields of business.

While still popular, pedagogical approaches to business education must adapt. As Charles Darwin wrote in "The Origin of Species," "It is not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change."

The viral nature of social media forces executives to become more nimble communicators. Global marketplaces mean managers must understand various cultures to adapt strategies to fit disparate markets, while communicating their corporate vision to employees and stockholders alike.

Throughout my time at the tech company, I needed to reduce complex business models to PowerPoint pitches that lasted no longer than a standard television situation comedy.

In the tech space, leaders embrace the notion that "speed kills," meaning that you need to stay ahead of the market. Just think of what tasks your cell phone could do 10 years ago compared to what your smart phone can do today.

Business leaders must keep up. So the ability to teach oneself—the true gift of a liberal arts education—is paramount.

And those pesky philosophy courses? Well, they can come in handy, especially the ethics of Aristotle, Plato and later, Thomas Aquinas.

With a flurry of business scandals from Enron to WorldCom to Me Too, ethical business leadership appeared to be in short supply. In response to financial scandal, Congress enacted the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. Commonly called SOX, the act requires CEOs to certify the accuracy of financial disclosures. SOX also placed added emphasis on "tone at the top," a corporation's ethical climate.

Business leaders of the 21st century must deal with worldwide issues to make ethical decisions that often affect people and their health, the environment and geopolitics. They must also manage employees from different cultures with sometimes-conflicting worldviews.

When our telecom company entered the global marketplace, we acted like many "Ugly American" companies. We learned quickly enough that national pride plays a big part of business. We weren't able to establish a beachhead until we either partnered with or acquired companies already doing business overseas.

The school where I teach, Allegheny College, has "reverse engineered" its business program by studying the top-rated university business programs and conducting a gap analysis between its offerings and the "best in class" business programs.

After the analysis, Allegheny created a new liberal-arts-based business major that incorporates core economics coursework in microeconomics, macroeconomics, managerial economics, financial accounting and economic statistics. It offers business electives in money and financial institutions, finance, marketing, advertising, human resource management, entrepreneurship, nonprofit management and social entrepreneurship, international business and accounting.

The liberal arts element of the business major comprises electives in rhetoric and communication, advanced public speaking, reading literature, French, Spanish, ethics, business and management ethics, and three other philosophy courses.

In addition, the Center for Business and Economics enables students to participate in business-focused, co-curricular activities. It simulates a stock trading floor using a trading lab outfitted with Bloomberg terminals, hosts an intercollegiate business pitch competition, has noted alumni talks each month, offers major-city exploratory trips and assembles nationally known experts to discuss timely business issues an annual executive roundtable panel discussion.

"Learning current business practices within historical, political, sociological, anthropological, literary, scientific and artistic contexts provides a richer, more nuanced, and more meaningful platform for understanding the specific business content," said Allegheny College President Hilary Link. "The general skills students hone in a liberal arts curriculum—writing, speaking, analyzing problems from multiple perspectives, collaborating, creative thinking—are all essential skills for success in business and pretty much every career. Wouldn't you want your CEO, marketing manager or sales associate to know how to do that?"

Nothing better prepares you for the changing demands of a complex, inter-connected world economy. **P&Q**

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