

Spring 2016 Semester Closing Note to My Students

By Don Sutherland

At the end of each semester, I provide my students with a closing note about the course. That note seeks to place the course, its content, and its requirements into a larger context. I do so, because I believe it is helpful for students to have one last opportunity to understand why they took the course and perhaps better identify what they might have gained from the course. Such understanding can perhaps reinforce learning for the long-term.

Below is the note to my spring 2016 students:

Dear Student,

With the semester nearing its conclusion, it is time to share some thoughts and insights to place this course into a larger context.

This spring, Lehman College adopted new institutional learning outcomes for its students. Among other things, Lehman College aims to produce graduates who utilize critical thinking skills, are information literate, and can work collaboratively as part of a team. All of these traits are valuable when it comes to the workplace and graduate programs, alike.

According to those new learning outcomes, those who think critically are “self-directed learners with a habit of asking ‘why.’” Critical thinkers “use evidence-based reasoning and logical argumentation” and they “synthesize information and knowledge across disciplines to their own perspectives, positions, and interpretations.” Those who are information literate “are capable of conducting primary and secondary research involving the collection, analysis and synthesis of data.” People who work effectively as members of a team are able to ‘build consensus and share their skills and knowledge’ in achieving team or group goals.

Although these learning outcomes and their definition are newly-adopted, they have long been among the intended outcomes of the BBA 407-Strategic Management course. They are prerequisites for effective management and essential to upward mobility within companies. Those principles are embedded in the group research project and the related information literacy sessions that were held at the Library.

Managers need to be able to explore societal and technological issues as they relate to their companies and industries. (Remember the Broad Environment?) They need to be capable of finding reliable and actionable information on a timely basis, even as the world is a dynamic place and uncertainty can never fully be eliminated. Informed conclusions and evidence-based choices give companies their best chance to build and sustain competitive advantages, maximize their returns to key stakeholders, and evolve before change triggers organizational crises.

Truly outstanding managers—transformational leaders—and highly successful entrepreneurs do even more. They are able to reinterpret problems or opportunities in a new fashion. In doing so, their organizations are able to create new knowledge and new solutions that give them a qualitative edge over their rivals.

Without strong social skills, managers cannot be effective and leaders cannot be transformational. Recent empirical data reveal that social skills have become highly valued in the labor market. Findings published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in August 2015 revealed that “jobs with high social skill requirements have experienced greater relative growth throughout the wage distribution” since 1980 and that “employment and wage growth has been strongest in jobs that require high levels of both cognitive skill and social skill.” Furthermore positive wage returns to social skills exist even after one controls for various determinants of wages, including but not limited to cognitive and non-cognitive skills. In contrast, jobs that entail high levels of quantitative or analytical reasoning but low social skills have seen much less growth.

Why has this been the case? Think technology. Routine and repetitive tasks can easily be automated. Many such positions have already disappeared and others are vanishing. Mathematical calculations can be performed more quickly and with greater accuracy by computers. Progress in artificial intelligence has even begun to push technology into fields that require judgment.

But why hasn't technology begun to disrupt social skill-intensive occupations? If one goes back to earlier course content, specifically explanations of traits that can help make competitive advantages sustainable, one finds a powerful explanation. In general, codified knowledge is not a good source of sustainable competitive advantage, as it can readily be communicated and imitated. That's where automation is easiest.

In contrast, tacit knowledge is difficult to describe and, therefore, cannot be imitated very easily. Such knowledge is associated with intangible resources such as creative processes that are great sources of sustainable competitive advantages. Strong social skills are more tacit than they are codified. As a result, technology cannot, at least at present, substitute for such skills. The end result has been rapid growth in social skill-intensive positions even as technology has disrupted and supplanted a growing share of occupations across industries.

All said, this course provided an opportunity for students to nurture the intellectual framework and capacities necessary for their long-term success. The research paper, which challenged students to apply course concepts to an actual company, was aimed at helping students begin the transition from management theory to the much more demanding practice of strategic management. It gave students exposure to important interpersonal processes including motivation and even conflict management. Its successful completion required establishing goals, delegating tasks, coordinating work, monitoring progress, seeking feedback, and making adjustments. The effort was, in substance, an early exposure to the realities of management.

Following the end of this class, it will be up to each student to build upon that framework from future study, career progress, and/or life experience. I hope that you will leave this class with some lasting knowledge and, even more importantly, expand upon that foundation in the years ahead.

Good luck and best wishes to all.