

Staying F.O.C.U.S.E.D. in a Complicated World

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The real world is complicated! It is filled with the buzzing, blooming, confusing, complex problems of our times. Yet many business schools continue to educate their students using simple models and frameworks, creating an unkind disconnect upon graduation. The important issues and challenges of our time require new ways of thinking and doing if we are to make an important and meaningful impact in dealing with them as we look to the future.

This article aims to provide a different perspective in helping our future generation of thought-leaders better prepare for the real world, based on a strategic initiative undertaken by MM through the support of our Head and a special Task Force on Work Integrated Education (WIE). In the summer of 2009, MM developed a set of key behaviors to help guide our students' thinking and doing, rendering them better qualified for the real world. We surveyed 400+ students in the business school and conducted focus groups with practicing managers and executives on what they look for and expect in graduating students. The end product is an amazing set of competencies we call "**Staying F.O.C.U.S.E.D.**". Each letter represents a key behavior that is much needed in today's business world, but not often advocated. Since 2009 we have also pilot-tested the idea over 5 consecutive semesters in several selected subjects with students in our BBA programme, MSc HRM, and with MBAs with over 15 years' average work experience. Feedback from students and practitioners has been encouraging, and we thus want to share these key competencies with more of our students, so that they can demonstrate them in their learning, internships and careers. Learning to "**Stay F.O.C.U.S.E.D.**" in a complicated world means:

F – Bringing a fresh perspective

Tell us something new. How do your ideas provide a fresh perspective to what we already know? These are key qualities senior executives look for in their people. Learning to take a different perspective can bring new and interesting insights to the issues at hand. A good way to help develop this important skill is to first know what a fresh perspective looks, sounds and feels like. One way of doing this is to take the time to read books, magazines, and research reports, and talk to people who have redefined, reinvented and reinterpreted the way we see things. Reading *The Economist*, *Harvard Business Review* and the *McKinsey Quarterly* will definitely help fine-tune your ability to see things from a different perspective. Another example you will notice on every floor of our business school (and in our MMRC computer lab) is the flat panel TV screens that are strategically placed near the lift lobbies, showing BBC World News around the clock. We have particularly chosen the BBC because their reporters ask different questions following in-depth analysis and commentary. Training yourself with a regular dosage of this award-winning organization will help you develop deeper insights and new perspectives on the issues of our time.

O – Thinking, feeling and acting like an owner/manager

Too often, students walk into a classroom thinking "student"! As such, a lot of the discussions (if any) and solutions end up being neither serious nor inspiring. Instead, getting our students to THINK, FEEL and ACT like owner/managers brings a whole new perspective to our learning with real-world issues and challenges. From this perspective, we have found discussions becoming more



Dr Robert Wright (8th from right in the front) engaged with Mattel's High Potential Managers on the importance of "Staying F.O.C.U.S.E.D." at Mattel's Asia Pacific Office on 27 June 2011

engaging, thought-provoking and meaningful. Students should take full responsibility for their own learning (and in their internships), making every class and assignment count. Just as our PolyU Motto advocates: To learn and to apply, for the benefit of mankind; thus should we treat our education and careers. Ask questions on how the theories and research can help managers make better decisions. Think more critically about what you are learning and how you can put that learning to good practical use. Also, bring your internship / overseas exchange experiences back into the learning environment to enrich the development of ideas – about the success stories and lessons learned. Similarly, real owner/managers know the value of time and limited resources; everything they do must add value and make a contribution to the overall goal.

C – Developing connected-thinking

It's all about joining the dots and making connections in order to see the links between the causes and the consequences and thus to foresee future opportunities and dangers. Connected-thinking advocates holistic thinking; about differentiating and integrating, of interdisciplinary research and cross-functional teams, and about networking at different levels in and outside of our fields. More often than not, these connections may appear unrelated and have nothing to do with the issues at hand, yet, paradoxically, they have everything to do with the issues. It encourages a “both/and” mentality for today's complicated world, rather than trade-offs between “either/or” choices that can sometimes prove costly. Indeed, time and time again, we see that the best ideas come from outside of our fields. Similar to how successful companies and managers join dots, students should also learn to integrate their learning by making connections within and between subject disciplines. Marketing problems may require human resources solutions that need to be addressed from a financial perspective, which in turn is connected to broader issues. Learning must be integrated because real-world problems are complex! In fact, developing this integrative thinking is not just confined to our present, but can, must and should also connect with our past and future in generating new ways of thinking and new ways of doing to help deal with the burning issues of our time.

U – Demonstrating a sense of urgency

Having a sense of urgency is very different to being busy without a set objective. A sense of urgency is when you enter a class of 42 students and by the end of that lesson you walk out of that room with 42 different ideas, every time! This is world-class learning. It's making everything you do count toward an over-arching purpose. It's about being conscious of time and resources in order to do more with less! It's about writing down your “to do list for the day” and learning to prioritize that list and then crossing items off one by one as you complete them. The sense of achievement you gain from a sense of urgency can be profound. If more managers and students alike committed to a schedule with a purpose, imagine how productive we could be! At the end of the day, know that in life, there is so much to do, so much to learn, so much to achieve, so many people to meet... yet, so little time.

S – Showing team spirit

In this world, no one ever gets anything done by themselves. Rather, it's all about getting things done through people. An African proverb says, “If you want to go fast...go alone; if you want to go far...go with others”. Hence it is important to identify and understand team members' differences in personalities, strengths and weaknesses, yet still remain able to work together in harmony to achieve the common goal. Team players must stay open-minded, respectful and patient. This is the same in work teams as it is in student project teams. Learning to perform effectively with others is important for success and survival. In a world in which everyone is so preoccupied with their own goals and self-interests, it brings hope and meaning to us all when we share and take the time to care so that we can all benefit. Being a team player makes one a true professional.

E – Engaging with the task at hand

Successful organizations and managers are always engaged in what they do! They are passionate, excited, deeply involved and devote time and energy – they are in the “in-zone”. The more they do what they do, the better they get at doing it and the more they love it. Learning to engage requires time, patience and an attitude to make things better. It's very much like “gardening”. If you want a beautiful garden, you must spend time in it in order to understand the soil, the plants, what tools and ingredients you need to look after it, and so on... All great gardens, just like all great ideas, are not created overnight; they take time, knowledge, skills, love, care, commitment, discipline and devotion. Similarly students can really take their learning to a whole new level if they engage more in their learning and in class discussions. Remember, it is never about being perfect, rather it is all about progress – about getting better. If you are not a believer in such engagement, see how the students at Harvard Business School learn through class discussions. We can do this too at PolyU. Watching BBC programs like HardTalk is an excellent platform for getting our students up to speed in terms of what it takes to engage at a professional level.

D – Exercising deliberate practice

Unlike “practice makes perfect”, deliberate practice is more about doing something, then taking a step back to reflect and seeing how you can improve the next time. It's really about taking the time to reflect more deeply – something most managers do not do well because they are too busy dealing with urgent issues(!) By getting our students (and managers for that matter) to reflect more on things (and with others), we begin to encourage and develop deeper thinkers with broader perspectives, better ideas and more reflective practices to address the challenges of our times. Getting students to reflect more on important questions rather than seeking quick answers can be the key to unlocking complex issues. Some examples could be the following:

- What are we doing now that we should not be doing?
- What are we not doing that we should be doing?
- Why is this interesting?
- Why is this important?
- What does this tell me that I didn't already know? What's the contribution here?

We believe “**Staying F.O.C.U.S.E.D.**” as a habit-of-mind will help nurture a whole new generation of thought-leaders that will improve the practice of management and in the process make this world a better place...

