



The Indian **EXPRESS**

JOURNALISM OF COURAGE



THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS

www.financialexpress.com

Read to Lead

Disruption with execution excellence

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Jul 15, 2012

Several reader responses to my last week's piece on rote learning being a malaise in our country's education system has happily proved that there's high sensitivity towards this deficiency. Appreciating my comments on the contrast in rote learning between China and India, Professor Ananthakrishnan wrote he'd just returned from 8 weeks in China as a senior international visiting scientist to the Chinese Academy of Science: "It gave me an opportunity to closely look at their educational system and I must say I was very impressed. They too complain of rote learning, but many of the students I met knew their math very well and could understand advanced mathematical concepts far better than corresponding level students in my MSc class in India. Their engineering industry works closely with academics and produces very high quality engineering products although there's an impression, even inside China, that it is not high quality! In comparison to India, they seem to have surged far ahead. It would be total folly to compare India with China. Their focus and ability to achieve whatever aim they have set is certainly worth emulating, but I do not think that

our political bosses have the capacity or the required technical background to do it!"

With over 50% population below age 25, and more than 65% below 35 years, India's opportunity to drive the world's future is tremendous if only we exit the path of memorizing for recall. Most students enter India's mushrooming MBA schools directly after rote learning in graduation. They pay a hefty fee, but how can they become management professionals without any previous experience of how a company runs? Students of India's best B-Schools mostly read American case studies like rote learning as part of their MBA course. If an Indian case study is utilized, American cultural norms are used to come to conclusions. That's why these case studies often have no business connect or relevance in India's industry experience.

On a business visit to Europe last week I was shocked to watch a TV documentary on poor working conditions in fabric dyeing outfits in India and Bangladesh. They cater to the Western fad of washed-out looking denim jeans. Fashionable brands sell discoloured jeans, torn at the thighs exposing skin or with worn-out back pockets so a teeny bit of panty can peep out. This distressed, used effect in denim cloth is creatively crafted in developing countries. Using a spy camera, some journalists visited such workplaces and filmed people working in a highly toxic atmosphere using strong chemicals for tinting and fading fabrics. Most workers here had lung disease from poisonous fumes,

and many suffer from cancer. The objective of foreign media channels is always two-fold: to bash big business as irresponsible for importing and getting their dirty work done in poor countries from people with no health insurance; and secondly to supposedly protect their viewers by making them aware. The sensitive skin of the fashion conscious who wear these old-looking shorts and jeans could be affected by the toxic bath the fabric goes through. Slinky, sexy models were shown displaying the titillating trend for black lingerie. To prevent black cloth from bleeding colour, even more powerful, more toxic chemicals are used. That's certainly not good for the health of wearers of these itchy-bitsy inner garments.

MBA students should gather India-specific, practical knowledge and experience instead of learning from foreign case studies. If young professionals fail to understand quality or deficiency in Indian manufacturing areas, how can they be disruptive in deploying their learning to change nasty work conditions in future? In the construction industry, for example, do they know the procurement procedure, how a brick field operates, or whether there's life-threatening risk in iron ore and coal mines from where steel comes and people work hard without asking questions about their life and body conditions? Look at the supply chain of unorganized sectors such as staple food, fabric or footwear that's really among the biggest drivers of our economy. As an Indian, you are happy with rice and *roti* (bread), but as an MBA student, do you question the practices deployed to procure items from their source, produce them for consumption, transport and distribute them, so that your mother can easily buy the products in her neighbourhood *kirana* (mom&pop) store?

An eminent CEO in France was admiring India's contract labour or temporary workers system. He said it overtly seemed to exploit the

unemployed, but if managed well, professionals can have the advantage of working in areas and companies of their choice. Companies can be rid of keeping people on the bench by hiring trained professionals for peripheral jobs as and when required. This way the company can focus on innovation, marketing and sales and outsource everything else, even manufacturing in its own factory. He bemoaned that many Europeans have become bonded to their companies because they refuse to dislocate. People mobility in India is a great advantage for any business enterprise. He said any company would be willing to even share its values with contract professionals to upgrade their quality of life and competency.

It's clear that India requires disruption in business strategy to bring execution excellence at the workplace. Why disruption? On the one hand there's the massive unorganized sector with a totally undisciplined way of working. On the other are foreign brands changing people's perception in different livelihood and lifestyle domains. Without a disruption platform, what can you do between these two juxtaposed sectors? Young graduates in arts, engineering, commerce or science having minimum 4 to 6 years work experience need a professional teaching model that breaks the mold of the current rote learning process. They have to learn to disrupt and simultaneously bring excellence in execution in any industry domain. A practical, India-centric experiential professional education system is seriously required to equip young professionals to become disruptive in action while reflecting the art of execution to represent India in high value to the world.

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