

MUSINGS ON FOOD AND RENO PORN

BY

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My wife is open-minded about food and reno. So we see at least one season of most cooking and do-it-yourself television, which are often entertaining and educational. Even this old dog has learned a few tricks, though I hardly expected insight about education, career, entrepreneurship, and the economy. But inspiration comes at the least likely times.

Each host has skill and charm, but the content gets repetitive. Only so many times can you be told about the cook on Beef Wellington (which I'll never make) or proper tiling (for which trial and error has harshly educated me). So I focus elsewhere, like at how these wo/men created commercial empires *plying a trade* — ick. Gordon Ramsay's interests allegedly run to the billions. Notably, only Bryan Baeumler earned a university business degree (like Garth Brooks...) and was headed for law school before donning a hardhat.

When Ramsay ritually humiliates a home cook, I mentally contrast these guys with the likes of Jobs, Branson, Page, and so on. While the Titans possess and marshal orders of magnitude greater wealth, none is a professional manager. In fact, only two of the lot completed any post-secondary, university education.

What is very much consistent among them and I would bet across the vast majority of entrepreneurs that became commercial lions, is that *each can and does do something*

practical. It might be swinging a hammer, whipping cream, typing code, or designing. All these people create tangible things.

Think about that. There is no denying that all these exemplars represent astute business people with trained-in or natural selling and (self-)promoting skill. Still, they do *something* — or at least they did before running multi-thousand person juggernauts. Business skills were developed on-the-job; not usually through schooling.

This is a defining distinction. To build anything, one must manifest something from something else. What elevates them is the capacity to turn an idea — theirs or somebody else's — into a valuable thing that didn't exist before. Consider law-, engineering-, or accounting-trained executives. At the end of the day, they can ply a trade to create value. As it turns out, each of those skills is fundamental to a business. And conducting a business is the raw material to building a corporate empire.

So what does this say about professional management: about the MBA? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps a lot. A professional (say, engineer) who pursues an MBA to move into management may accelerate acquisition of business acumen that would come with experience and tutelage by a mentor. One hopes the training would augment the engineer's value where the practical skill is paramount — like managing engineering teams and maybe running a business that engineers raw material into valuable output. Same goes for a (computer) scientist or farmer.

On the other hand, the analyst or marketer a couple years past an undergraduate degree who returns for an (executive) MBA to fast track his/her career still has no practical value *in the business* unless the business is analytics or advertising. I'm not saying the person has no value. I'm saying that in a construction firm value depends on construction ability; in liquor as a brewer or distiller, in transportation as a logistician, in software as a

product creator and coder, and so on. The rest is administration, which has a purpose and value, but is not practically fundamental to the business.

Absent the practical background and skill, the result of a professional management program (e.g., MBA) is a clever individual who knows how something *ought* to be without having ever made it so. Strategy — a favourite soft-skill value of MBA-*types* — is a limited value perspective and mindset without practical understanding of and skill in the practice and the environment. Parenting, planting, or plumbing: the tricks of the trade *are* the trade.

Time's arrow goes one direction, which is a way to say (with a flourish) things properly happen in a particular order. That's why an entrepreneur or commercial Caesar arises only out of special birth or on the back of a practical ability. The reverse is and cannot be true. Discounting pre-existing natural talent, rarely can a professional manager be a real or viable designer, baker, or carpenter without training and practical experience. I added the qualifier '*real or viable*' because we've all witnessed senior executives who consider their B-School-fuelled corporate ascensions as proof they are also software or product designers or construction engineers.

But what of the visionary? I don't know. Nobody does. They are anomalies and defy easy definition/explanation, no matter what guru-authors argue in 250-page tracts. Besides: (1) You either are or are not a "visionary." MBA education and \$30 "How To Be a Visionary" books will not change that. Practical education and experience provide context for your vision. (2) The visionary's vision is not primarily of a business empire but of a business. More narrowly yet, it's for a product or service or other practical "thing." The business and ensuing commercial empire are secondary outcomes. Following time's arrow, this works only one way: product/service → business → empire. You can harbor "empire" as ambition, but it is a dream, not a vision, without going through the other two steps.

Were I making bets on a stronger economy and progressive (national) future, I would not fund ventures anywhere unless a key person, ideally the CEO, had fundamental, practical skills *for that business*. (That bias would probably linger even into larger, more professional enterprise organizations.) If the person running the business doesn't have the wherewithal to personally address its most critical parts, and guide experts to supply the support for his/her goals, why would I get involved? Funding a *restauranteur* with concepts who can't cook or create an inviting dining atmosphere is a recipe for *Wealth Flambé in a White Wine Sauce*.

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