

The smart manager

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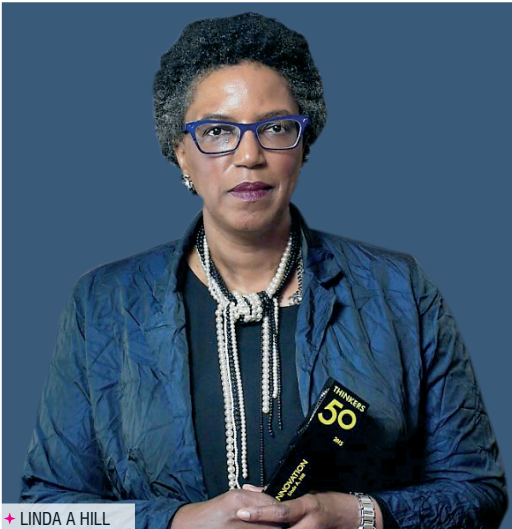
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FUTURE OF MANAGEMENT



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INSIGHTS FROM AWARD-WINNERS OF 2015 THINKERS50, GLOBAL RANKING OF MANAGEMENT THINKERS

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SCAN THIS TO STAY CONNECTED



illustration by Nilesh Juvalekar

the balancing act

‘Multitasking’ used to be a term in computing—it stood for a computer performing multiple tasks over a certain period of time by executing them concurrently. Over the years, the concept assumed a wider dimension—in the world of business, everyone is expected to handle more than one task or activity at the same time. This is part of a bid to increase productivity and decrease costs. But does multitasking drive the desired results? Our experts explore the various facets.

multitasking: only when done right



SURESH LULLA

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Think of a craftsman. The craftsman that built the Taj Mahal, Konark Sun Temple, Pyramids of Egypt, etc. What attributes do you associate with this craftsman?

The craftsman understood customer needs; translated these needs into design; benchmarked design features to be best-in-class; defined the process/activities/tasks to achieve this design; and finally delivered outputs that delighted the customer.

According to me, the craftsman is 'the' icon for quality.

So what happened to the craftsman? Industrialization happened. Work that delivered delight to customers got divided into silos. These silos were given names such as: purchasing, finance, manufacturing, marketing, etc. The aim of industrialization was quantity. What happened to quality? It deteriorated. As a result, waste and customer dissatisfaction increased. This gave birth to the inspector... the first cost of poor quality!

Then came the First World War. Factory workers were called to the battlefield. With the kind of weapons of war prevailing in those times, most of the factory workers did not return. The elders who did not go to war had to now run factories with widows and children who were not well educated. Work got further divided where the elders did the 'planning' and the widows and children did the 'doing'. In modern parlance, this is known as 'staff' and 'line'. What happened to quality? It went further down. Waste and customer dissatisfaction spiraled further up.

Post the Second World War, Japan was a devastated nation. As we all know, at that time it had no resources and no buying power. Only broken and burnt factories. On the other hand, it had a great desire to survive and succeed. So the Emperor of Japan invited industry leaders to explore the options available to them. The solution lay in exporting 80% of what they produced, and competing in the British colonies with quality as the differentiator.

In order to accomplish this, the focus was on work processes that delivered products free from deficiencies. In other words, they had to eliminate the chronic waste in their processes. Chronic waste was over one-third their total costs. The Japanese leaders and managers had to become adept at problem solving: problem definition; problem diagnosis; problem remedy; locking the improvement.

The problems these leaders and managers addressed were on the fences of functions. Cross-functional teams were required to diagnose and remedy these problems. The improvements were locked in systems that articulated processes, activities, and tasks. They assigned ownership of processes, activities, and tasks. The fewer the owners the better. Multitasking was a norm for reducing waste and, therefore, improving productivity.

Consequently, in the mid-1960s, unknown brand names in entertainment electronics emerged from Japan. They took on the world heavyweights. These brands—Sony and Panasonic—won the trust of customers. They were produced 'better, faster, cheaper' than prevailing established brands.

In the 1970s, post the OPEC crisis, when the cost per barrel of oil grew multifold, the Japanese quickly realized that customer behavior had changed. Customers no longer wished to purchase in bulk quantities. They needed to reduce their own costs by reducing inventories. They wished to purchase one of a kind, in multiple combinations. They expected suppliers to be as flexible as the craftsman.

Although deeply impacted by the oil crisis, the Japanese manufacturers saw this as an opportunity. They engaged with their suppliers to solve their chronic problems and improve their efficiencies. They also solved chronic problems relating to set-up time of machines. Further, they worked on fuel efficiency of products. They now produced 'better, faster, cheaper, and different'. The science of just-in-time was born. Multitasking evolved to a new level.

As a result, in the late 1970s, fuel efficient sub-compact cars emerged from Japan, namely, Toyota Corolla and Datsun 510. The rest is history. Detroit was the hardest hit. Remember, the auto industry was the backbone of the US economy!

Desperate, the auto industry in the US approached the Secretary of Commerce, Malcolm Baldrige, to save their economy from Japanese economic aggression. As a result, the criteria for business excellence were born...where quality was non-negotiable:

- Quality is the responsibility of executive leadership
- Quality is an integral component of strategic planning
- Quality is defined by the customer, who has a right to change his/her mind
- Quality management depends on data, information and knowledge
- Quality is made by people
- Quality is delivered through effective and efficient processes
- Business and operational results are a function of: customer/people/societal satisfaction.

This meant a total paradigm shift. Businesses needed to adopt a holistic understanding of the criteria. It involved understanding the interdependencies of processes: manufacturing/operations, support services, supplier.

Consequently, multitasking is in the DNA of all business excellence models—Baldrige, EFQM, Deming, etc. In India, the corresponding models are: IMC Ramkrishna Bajaj National Quality Award and CII-EXIM award for Business Excellence.

In essence, these models seek effectiveness and efficiency of processes across functions; and, since education levels between staff and line are not different, the line people should do their own planning. QED.

Is this the craftsman-like skills on scale?

Over the past decade we have experienced numerous disruptive approaches to businesses. Virtually, everything is available at your doorstep 'much faster and much cheaper' without compromising on quality and innovative design. Multitasking is the name of the game.

Multitasking is now on steroids. ■

