

## **Time Again for the Liberal Arts?**

*Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW*

As we move further into a high tech economy, we need people who can connect pieces, find common denominators, and assemble collective information to create new ways of doing things. Now is not the time for linear thinking and a collection of silos. We need an ability to negotiate across silos and create from this assimilation new concepts and new approaches.

Let's look at what many would consider unthinkable. I offer as an example Irving Hockaday Jr. Irving held a degree in English from Princeton and law degree from University of Michigan Law School. One would immediately ask: "What does any of this have to do with running a business?" Answer: the ability to assimilate and interrelate new knowledge.

Irving's first CEO position was at Kansas City Southern Industries, a railroad conglomerate. He bought Kemper Funds, one of the first money market funds in this country. He went from KCSI to become the CEO of Hallmark Cards where he served with distinction. He has served on boards ranging from the Kansas City Area Life Sciences Institute, Crown Media Holdings, Estee Lauder Companies, Ford Motor Company, Aquila Inc., Dow Jones & Company, Sprint Nextel Corporation, and Kansas City's prestigious Midwest Research Institute.

His civic contributions included the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City, Chairman of the Board of the Tenth District Federal Reserve Bank and the Civic Council of Greater Kansas City.

How can an English major with a law degree become proficient in so many diverse roles? I lived in Kansas City where Mr. Hockaday was one of the most admired businessmen in the region. I remember a news interview in which a reporter asked Mr. Hockaday how he could transverse such a broad universe with such success. He answered: "My success was made possible by my degree in English." He explained further: "My English degree taught me to think."

The liberal arts have long been out of favor, being seen as having no commercial value. That attitude grew as we looked increasingly for technological skills, but at a cost. Individuals schooled in technology tend to be linear thinkers, unable to step outside the box. Irving was not so constrained. He using his analytic skills to assimilate and interrelate new knowledge and use it as a base for innovation and business success.

Needless to say, I have great respect for the liberal arts. During my 17 years as a CEO, I repeatedly used skills from my training in philosophy to analyze and problem solve. I know I will never be able to persuade anyone of that, but I believe it to be true.

At the risk of a little crowing, let me cite another personal example. I met a former Peace Corps volunteer who was sent to Kansas City to study the feasibility of starting an HMO. As we conversed, he suddenly commented: "I have this group of business leaders and union managers on my board. I need someone who can think. Mike, by the way, held a degree in romance languages from Bowdoin College. His frustration was that these board members could not hear one another. Time and again I heard people agreeing using different idiom, not realizing they were in agreement. I broke the stalemate by saying: "If I'm hearing us right, are we saying.....?" Around the table exasperated board members would exclaim: "That's exactly what I was saying!"

When my wife and I were leaving a celebration of our opening, the board's attorney pulled us aside and pointedly said to me: "You are the one who made all this possible." I demurred, but he came back even more strongly. I was both embarrassed and puzzled. After all, there were eleven board members. Eventually, the light bulb came on. The board attorney attended all board meetings. He watched me helping the board over many impasses, identifying common denominators that led to board action.

As Mr. Hockaday so amply demonstrated, it's the ability to acquire, assimilate, and use new knowledge that counts, not the package of knowledge that comes with a degree.

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