

Education answers the Euro crisis

Looking for the bright side of crisis

A man wakes up one morning and realizes that he hates his job, his wife doesn't love him anymore, and he hasn't gone on a golfing holiday in over ten years. The man promptly quits his job, packs up the belongings in his grey cubicle, and sets to work establishing a golfing consultant shop. His midlife crisis becomes the best thing that ever happened to him.

Any crisis can be viewed in two ways: ruin or opportunity. The word often conjures up images of a cartoon character with frantic, bulging eyes and beads of sweat leaping off the page. In fact, the word "crisis" in its original Greek meaning, κρίσις, can be translated as "assessment" or "decision" despite the negative images with which it became

associated later in history. How crisis is dealt with is up to those it may affect.

Swiss Style spoke to Dr. Bert Wolfs, academic dean of SBS Swiss Business School, to gain an educational perspective on this notion of "crisis." Dr. Wolfs describes our society's development from an agriculture economy via industrialization to a service-based economy and, simultaneously, into the current knowledge economy. "We must be able to understand and analyze the complexity of our present-day environment to evolve ourselves within this world."

Take the European Union, for example. In such an interconnected economy, there is no longer one single dominant force (previously, the United States) that can survive a potential blow no matter

what. As the economies of Ireland, Iceland, and Greece collapsed and those of Italy, Spain, and others follow, the discussion is not anymore centered to the question of how we deal with those countries as individual entities, but also how the collapse will affect the European Union at large, and finally – the world.

In a modern crisis, Dr. Wolfs states that "education is of substantial assistance in explaining how things are working and connecting to each other. It also lets people use their creativity to develop new products and solutions to a problem. At the beginning of the third millennium we are living in the most innovative era in human history, and within this constantly changing global culture we need to make adjustments."



Dr. Bert Wolfs
Academic Dean,
SBS Swiss Business School

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One such adjustment is an increasing call for transparency. Recently, some businesses have been moving towards values of honesty and openness by implementing codes of ethics. In tandem, SBS Swiss Business School has adjusted its curriculum accordingly, adding a course called Ethics and Business Values to its MBA program in 2002. "People laughed at me when I introduced the course. They are not laughing anymore," Dr. Wolfs says, laughing. So, what has changed? "Ethical terms in business as honesty or corruption are more apparent in our times thank to our global and time-independent connection to each other. Through technology, things are surfacing much faster than, say, twenty or thirty years ago, when you could hide certain issues of potential negative impact. To be open, to be transparent, to be more competent – this is what we as global citizens want."

Indeed, people are going to extreme lengths to foster transparency. Organizations such as WikiLeaks have made it their sole purpose to expose all of the inner workings of businesses. Hackers are able to more easily access information and expose it to the public. New methods of revelation such as these, as controversial as they might be, will force businesses to be completely open, so as not to be eventually exposed and therefore humiliated for secrecy.

However, it is not that simple as it may seem. Do "ethics" ever hurt a job

candidate? Past instances have proven that whistleblowing can cost employees their job and any future prospects. Richard Ceballos brought a case to the Supreme Court in 2006, claiming his criticism of a search warrant's legitimacy had cost him a potential promotion. Regarding the situation, Ceballos was later quoted saying "I think government employees will be more inclined to keep quiet."

Thus, can honesty be a hindrance in the business world? People are unprotected at this point, and until these codes of ethics turn into a common standard, the responsibility falls on the legislators. It is necessary to protect those willing to point out flaws in the system, those who often have minor influence within corporations.

There is indeed corruption in certain businesses, and there is a need to combat this legally. But, as Dr. Wolfs points out, "At times legislators have admitted to having to vote on an issue without the necessary knowledge." And so the real responsibility falls on the educators, who must adequately prepare future and current stakeholders and players in the world of business and politics to represent the general public. It is a chain reaction. The general public is calling for transparency, which will be facilitated through legislators giving those willing to be open the necessary protection, and these legislators will need to be educated.

But sitting in a classroom is insufficient. Theory serves as a foundation, but what is ultimately beneficial for this process is practical knowledge, and the ability to apply the theory to real world crises. Dr. Wolfs stresses this, and cites the New Venture Creation course as a way to learn this application. The course teaches how to set up a company and what to know about a business model. It stresses application over simply theory, answering to the industry's demand for "practical orientation."

Has Europe reached its own midlife crisis? And if so, how will it respond? "We have to start working again, better, and longer," Dr. Wolfs says. "In Europe we might not be able to retire at 65 anymore in the future." In all methods of solving crisis education is paramount. For both those who have the capability to make changes as well as those the changes will affect. It is imperative to have an understanding of what has happened and why, and what needs to happen to use uncertainty as opportunity.

"A crisis is an opportunity riding the dangerous wind." (Chinese proverb) ◀◀◀

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