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Professional Business Education for Canada

Advanced Training should be Adjusted to Requirements of Business—Much Wasted in Present System—Many Valuable Studies Omitted from University Curriculums

By R. J. McFALL

DOES Canadian business need any special training for its leaders other than that acquired in practical experience?

Canada has entered a new era in her history; an era which her wealth of natural resources, her fortunate geographical situation and the staunch character of her citizens promise to make a period of wonderful prosperity. The full measure of prosperity in the coming years, however, can no more be ours without proper training for leadership than we could have secured victory in the war without generals and training camps. Had we known the war was coming we would have had more leaders trained and more training camps in readiness. We do know, however, that there is a campaign of trade and commerce at hand from which we can win wealth if only we succeed in getting the proper leaders and executives in our business community. Shall we trust merely to the random training and selection of our commercial life to supply the proper force of business executives or should we inaugurate a scientific system of instruction for our young men who aspire to the profession of business leadership.

One thing has been forced home to those who have had some part to play in the war-time regulation of trade and manufacture; the efficiency and acumen of our business executives are, in some cases, not of such an exalted character that there is room for any argument against scientific training of the on-coming generation for economic efficiency. In fact, the only word to describe the lack of efficiency and acumen in some prominent quarters is the term appalling. If lapses which have manifested themselves in certain cases had been uniformly favorable to the industry in question we would be ready to join the fetishism of the man in the street who exalts the ability of our captains of industry while he envies their wealth. The lapses, however, have not been uniformly favorable to the parties involved. Canada has prospered and her industrial life these last few years has been peculiarly fortunate, but we hope not to have another war-bought prosperity again. All evidence points to a period of keen competition ahead when all the efficiency, all the foresight obtainable in our industrial life will be necessary to bring to Canada the share of prosperity she deserves.

We would not for anything suggest that the business ability of Canadians is one whit behind that of other nations. There is not sufficient ground for argument on this score to advance the overwhelming facts of recent experience to establish the contrary. It is true, however, that we have not yet seriously undertaken the means of improving the education of executives for our business world as some other peoples have. We cannot afford to? The question is rather whether or not we can afford to neglect this means of successfully meeting oncoming economic competition and enlarging our prosperity.

The chief objection raised against professional schools of business administration is that the best way to prepare

for executive positions in the business world is to grow up with the business. This method of education is supposed to save the novitiate from impractical theories and keep him continually in touch with actual conditions. True, the young men entering business should be kept constantly in touch with actual conditions and will not gain much from impractical theories. It is also true that some great business men have been, and will be, produced by the practical mill of experience alone. But, is growing up with the business the best method, or have men succeeded in spite of its shortcomings? Men of great natural capacity will succeed and perhaps be greater on account of the very difficulties of this system. Men lacking in natural ability cannot be trained into able executives. But will we get anything like an adequate number of able business leaders from the mill of experience alone? There are many men whom proper education would develop from mediocrity into men of real executive capacity. It is highly detrimental to Canada to have an unnecessarily limited number of men qualified for positions of leadership in our business world.

The time was when our lawyers, our doctors, our chemists, our architects, our engineers and all our other professional men were trained solely in the school of practical experience. That time has passed, and now almost no professional men are so trained. What chance would a man trained only in the old school of experience, unless he happened to be a rare genius, have in competition with men of modern professional training? Even the farmer is coming to appreciate the value of a professional training to fit him for his chosen calling. And yet we hold to the archaic method for the profession of business.

Failings of Present System

The method pursued at present for training our business executives is extremely wasteful; it leaves each individual to learn from costly experience what others have discovered over and over again; it takes fifteen to twenty-five years for any young man (unless the son of the owner, who usually learns some other business) to pass through his period of instruction; it gives little or no opportunity to know anything at all of the methods pursued, and their results, in other firms than the one in which the candidate for leadership has served his time. It gives absolutely no opportunity to benefit from experience in foreign countries. By the time a man has passed through the ordinary mill of learning by experience he is usually reduced to a creature of routine, lacking initiative, resourcefulness and enthusiasm, and he is so busy that he has had no time for the study of other organizations than the one in which he works. We have, as the result a flock of so-called efficiency experts, some very few of them rare souls of genius and talent, who continually hover over the heads of the untrained and unwary business men. We have men running large businesses with no