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The Masters as Servants: Reflecting on the radical change required in the Executive MBA market

An interview with Des Dearlove and Stuart Crainer, co-founders of Thinkers50 by Henley Business School Professor Ben Laker

Feedback I’ve gathered from hundreds of Executive MBA students suggests they’re delighted with the ‘status’ element of the qualification, but less so with the tangible benefits such as remuneration and job prospect prosperity. Many feel this no longer occurs, which may be the case given the MBA market is highly saturated.

I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Des Dearlove and Stuart Crainer founders of Thinkers50 to discuss the Thinkers50 Executive MBA they’ve just launched.

As journalists, authors and editors, there is no question that the co-founders of Thinkers50 have a deep understanding of how our management landscape has evolved over the last 25 years. Through visiting professorships, associate fellowships and extensive programme delivery in multiple Business Schools, Des and Stuart have been close to the beating heart of executive education for over two decades. However, despite their personal input, both feel that beating heart has slowed and without resuscitation of a radical nature, our future management thinkers will not be given the inspirational launch pad they need to change management thinking for tomorrow.

Des quotes Bob Chapman from his book Everybody Matters: ‘A traditional business education will teach you to view people as functions and objects rather than human beings with hopes, dreams, fears and aspirations every bit as legitimate as your own’

He has real clarity when describing how both he and Stuart were inspired when launching their own programme. ‘Rather than learning by rote from tired text and theory, we feel the answer lies in a new brand of Executive MBA that delivers inspired modern thinking and practical application at the core of the programme’ says Des. ‘We also believe that servant leadership should be studied, understood and implemented as part of this practical application. Too long, existing hierarchical structures have stifled the thoughts and opportunities of future leaders and managers by suffocating the inclusive, supportive and hungry minds championed in the work of the Thinkers50 network’.

He adds, ‘In fact, placing more than one employee on this revolutionary Executive MBA programme, allows a business to build their own collaborating cohort of managers, exhibiting new behaviours and leading change projects to conclusion through the programme.’

‘It has always been a consideration at the back of our minds to bring such a revolutionary project to life. However, it was essential to find the right partner with whom to collaborate’, commented Stuart.

As it turns out, that partner materialised last year when Des and Stuart met the founders of the recently formed National Centre for Leadership and Management (NCLM).

‘I think the fact that we are innovating together is the real cement behind the collaboration’, says Philip Ayling, Managing Director of the NCLM. ‘Our guiding principles are innovation, collaboration and excellence. The Thinkers50 Executive MBA sits at the pinnacle of all three.’
Thinkers50 have an inspiring network that incorporates the brightest management minds in the world today. However, when you dig a little deeper, it is how they believe curating and mobilising that network can have impact that really helps you understand their calling. A glance at their website will give you the words behind their mission: *Ideas have the power to change the world. Management is essential to human affairs. New thinking can create a better future.*

At this point the passion in the room is palpable. Having read through the course content and the stellar names of management thinkers who will be delivering on each of the 6 residential weekends, I understand their excitement.

‘Eventually you have to practise what you preach, or the criticism of the establishment becomes a stone throwing exercise that serves only to diminish credibility’ says Stuart. ‘What has both pleasantly surprised and greatly inspired us, is the passion and positivity exhibited by those joining us on this journey’.

Both are looking forward to welcoming the ‘management thinkers of tomorrow’ onto the first Thinkers50 Executive MBA programme (Registrations now and the course starting in September 2019).

And I find a natural conclusion to our conversation as Des answers the opening criticism I referred to from Executive MBA alumni in the last 10 years. ‘Once you join the Thinkers50 family, you are part of our network for life. If you study on our Executive MBA, we will not only set up a profile on our website, we will ensure you are constantly kept in touch with the latest in management thinking worldwide. Hopefully your own original thinking will form a part of that communiqué one day’.

It is with considerable anticipation that I await the first alumni of the Thinkers50 Executive MBA. If they re-engage with their management world with half the passion, knowledge and inspiration displayed by Stuart and Des, we will be seeing some phenomenal new thinkers re-shaping the world of leadership and management in the near future.