

History students see the big management picture

Talking point



Richard Craig

A knowledge of history produces more skilful and well-rounded business people, who are more likely to bring a big picture and mature perspective to the issues they face. As well, they are likely to be better business decision makers.

There is also much that can be learnt from the lessons of history to lift business productivity.

British business has for decades hired graduates and executives who did not have traditional backgrounds in such fields as engineering, accounting, law or business management – but rather in such areas as arts, history and philosophy.

The emphasis was on getting people with good degrees, as evidence of sound intellect, who could then be “taught the business”.

The number of history graduates in top business positions is remarkable. Bob Reid headed up Shell’s global downstream oil operations, covering exploration, refining, logistics and

transportation. Reid didn’t have an engineering PhD to manage this highly technical area, but a history degree from St Andrews University.

Brian Moynihan, CEO of America’s second biggest bank, Bank of America, is a Brown University history graduate. Former Hewlett Packard CEO, and US president aspirant, Carly Fiorina, American Express boss Ken Chenault and IBM chief executive Sam Palmisano are all history graduates.

Ian Thomas, former Boeing Australia president, has, no less, a PhD in history. MBA courses today are emphasising the need for executives to have a broader perspective and to think beyond the bottom line.

Critics say that recent business graduates are trained to solve single problems, but often miss the big picture. The grand sweep of history provides a broad, over-arching viewpoint that adds a macro perspective or dimension to a business person’s skill base.

This maturity and astute perspective makes for better decision making, which is central to the successful running of a business. Specific examples from history also provide excellent case studies for business

executives in how to respond to the diverse issues they face.

The victor of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington, said the secret of military success was “attention to detail”. Persistent scrupulousness is vital for continuing business success.

Abraham Lincoln’s two-minute 1863 Gettysburg address is an example of concise communications that has resonated over 160 years. The two-hour speech of his predecessor on the day has been forgotten.

Likewise, executives should motivate and arouse by the choice of crisp written and oral communications which strike a chord, resonate, increase morale and thereby lift unit productivity. People want to be inspired.

Eighteenth-century Empress Catherine the Great of Russia was a big picture person, who declared: “I like to praise and reward loudly, to blame quietly.”

That’s a variation on the business maxim that you criticise verbally and praise in writing.

Charles Rolls and Henry Royce had vastly different but complementary skills that produced a stellar business team which founded auto icon Rolls-

Royce. Look to team formations where each member is not the same.

Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and her “love of the why of things” showed a persistently inquiring mind. Executives should not be reluctant to question. The adverb “why?”, meaning “for what reason”, is not a declaration of stupidity, but a prophylactic against corporate group think where hearty, mutually agreed positions on issues can lead to lemming-like outcomes.

Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca said: “Things that were hard to bear, are sweet to remember.” This speaks of the pleasure of successfully completing a tough assignment.

A difficult job when brought to fruition will bring lasting satisfaction. As with Bismarck and his brooding on issues, team members should be encouraged to be constantly reflecting on the business matters before them, such that new and better ways of doing things can rise to the surface, be reviewed and potentially implemented.

Napoleon’s maxim to his generals against “forming a picture” acknowledges that business conditions also are always fluid. Inflexibility in the face of a constantly variable market

and other business conditions invites pitfalls.

Executives must not assume that success in one venture immediately guarantees victory in all others. Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps was internationally acclaimed over the Suez Canal, but his involvement in the vastly different Panama Canal was a disaster.

History is replete with charismatic figures who inspired fierce loyalty and commitment and exceptional unit performance. Business people should work on their charisma. Such that their operating units produce at peak capacity, because the people in charge have inspired a willingly provided commitment and determination by those who report to them.

The great figures of history were dynamos. Churchill’s war-time motto of “Action this Day” and BHP’s Essington Lewis and his desk sign “I am Work” is a philosophy of continuous output which should be at the heart of all high-achieving businesses.

Richard Craig is publisher of historywow.com and advises on learning from history at historywow.com/



HistoryWow

Knowledge of history can put you at top of the corporate class

RICHARD CRAIG

A KNOWLEDGE of history produces better, more skilful and well-rounded businesspeople, who are likelier to bring a big picture and mature perspective to the issues they face. There is much that can be learned from history to lift business productivity.

For decades British business has hired graduates and executives who do not have traditional backgrounds in fields such as engineering, accounting, law and business management — but rather, in areas such as the arts, history and philosophy.

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finding people with good degrees, with a sound intellect, who can then be taught the business.

The number of history graduates in top business positions is remarkable. Bob Reid, who headed Shell's global downstream oil operations — a highly technical area — has a history degree from St Andrews University.

Brian Moynihan, chief executive of Bank of America, the second biggest bank in the US, is a Brown University history graduate. Former Hewlett-Packard chief Carly Fiorina, American Express boss Ken Chenault and IBM chief executive Sam Palmisano also are history graduates.

MBA courses now emphasise

the need for executives to have a broader perspective and to think beyond the bottom line. Critics say recent business graduates are trained to solve single problems but often miss the big picture.

History provides a broad viewpoint that adds a macro perspective to a businessperson's skill base. Historic examples also provide excellent case studies in how to respond to diverse issues.

The victor of Waterloo, Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, said the secret of military success was "attention to detail". Persistent scrupulousness is vital for continuing business success.

Abraham Lincoln's two-minute Gettysburg Address is an

immaculate example of concise communications.

Executives should motivate and arouse by their choice of crisp, written and oral communications. People want to be inspired.

Charles Rolls and Henry Royce had vastly different but complementary skills, producing a business team that founded Rolls-Royce. Look to build teams where each member is different.

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ally agreed positions on issues can lead to lemming-like outcomes.

As with Bismarck and his brooding, team members should be encouraged to reflect constantly on the business matters before them. New and better ways of doing things can then rise to the surface, be reviewed and potentially implemented.

Napoleon's maxim to his generals against "forming a picture" is relevant as business conditions are always fluid. Inflexibility in the face of constantly variable markets invites pitfalls.

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History is replete with charismatic figures who inspired loyalty, commitment and exceptional performance. Businesspeople should work on their charisma.

The great figures of history were dynamos. Winston Churchill's wartime motto of "Action this day" and BHP's Essington Lewis's desk sign "I am work" represent a philosophy of continuous output, which should be at the heart of all high-achieving, peak productivity businesses.

Richard Craig advises on learning from history at historywow.com/business.

Think it through

Drawing lessons from the Gallipoli landings, contemporary wisdom and hindsight 100 years on.

BY RICHARD CRAIG

THE GALLIPOLI LANDING

during World War I is sacred in the history of both Australia and New Zealand.

On 25 April 1915, thousands of young men stormed the beaches of the Gallipoli Peninsula, in what is now Turkey, as part of the Dardanelles campaign.

For eight gruelling months, men and women from Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, Ireland, France, India and Newfoundland endured terrible conditions during hostilities against Ottoman forces desperately fighting to defend their homeland.

When the campaign ended more than 130,000 men had died: at least 87,000 Ottoman soldiers, and 44,000 Allied soldiers, including more than 8,700 Australians and 2,779 New Zealanders.

Compared to the other campaigns of the cataclysm that was World War 1 in which many millions of men were killed – France, for example, lost 1.358 million men and over four million were wounded – Gallipoli and the Dardanelles

was to be described by Britain's official historian of the war as ranking among the world's greatest tragedies.

Gallipoli has played a pivotal role in forging the national identities of both Australia and New Zealand. The battle confirmed ideas of mateship, endurance, self-sacrificing courage, and humour under pressure as national characteristics of both countries.

Australia's contemporary Prime Minister Billy Hughes said: "Australia was born on the shores of Gallipoli."

His compatriot in New Zealand Prime Minister William Massey said that the country had sent "the best and brightest in this community".

There is much that can be learned from the lessons of history. In reflecting on the heroic yet tragic events of Gallipoli and the Dardanelles, it is not, I think, being profane or disrespectful to look at this campaign through the prism of what business can learn, or draw from those events. This can be done while being deeply respectful of the

Strategic vision

Firstly, what was the reason for the Gallipoli landing as part of the Dardanelles campaign?

World War I began in August 1914, some six weeks after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

Thirty years before, German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck said: "One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans."

He was tragically right. Any executive with a global, big-picture perspective who could foretell the future like that would possess a formidable skill.

By early 1915 the first fury of the war had settled into the trench warfare stalemate on the Western Front that was to last another three-and-a half years and lead to millions of casualties.

Here we must turn to Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill. For he is perhaps the principal player in the Dardanelles campaign.



was First Lord of the Admiralty in charge of by far the largest navy in the world. He had achieved this exalted post in 1911 aged just 36.

Churchill, the son of a Lord and grandson of a Duke, had had a stellar career.

Bumptious, restless and fiercely ambitious, Churchill had become internationally famous at 24 for escaping from a prisoner of war camp during the Boer War.

At 34, Churchill, then President of Britain's Board of Trade, had lamented to Violet Bonham Carter at a London society dinner in 1909, that his career was not progressing fast enough, concluding "we are all worms, but I believe that I am a glow worm".

Churchill was keen to replicate the great achievements of his forbear John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough. For his military successes in Europe he had been made a Duke and had the magnificent Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire built by a grateful nation.

Prodigiously hard working and

regularly showing coruscating flashes of brilliance, Churchill was an exemplary individual on a fast track.

Britain's War Council, created in November 1914, was indecisive and the choice to force the Dardanelles was stumbled into largely at the energetic instigation of Churchill. (British Prime Minister David Lloyd George later said that the combatants to World War I just "stumbled into the war".)

Churchill's grand vision was to break what had become a stalemate.

He, in particular, argued that the Dardanelles Strait leading from the Mediterranean to Constantinople, now Istanbul, was the answer.

A successful attack on this area could open a sea lane to the Russian allies through the Black Sea.

This would create a base for attacking the Central Powers – primarily Germany and Austria-Hungary – through what Churchill termed "the soft underbelly of Europe". The end objective was to divert enemy attention from the Western Front.

Agreement on the strategy was aided

by a general consensus which rated Turkish military competence as low. For business the lesson here is not to underestimate the competition.

Execution and failure

General Sir Ian Hamilton was made commander-in-chief of what was called the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force of around 70,000.

Hamilton was appointed on 12 March and left the following day. So the executive in charge on the ground did not have sufficient time to prepare for the assignment.

The campaign began with an abortive naval attack on the Dardanelles Straits. The operation, therefore, began very badly. The first of what journalist Keith Murdoch later reported was the Dardanelles "many crises".

Under Hamilton, landings were made at Cape Helles, Kum Kale, and a small bay known as Anzac Cove.

Because of navigational mistakes the Anzacs landed about two kilometres north of the intended site. Instead of a flat ►

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stretch of coastline, they came ashore at a narrow beach overlooked by steep slopes, dense undergrowth and high cliffs.

The land campaign failed completely to achieve its aim.

By July 1915 the position was a stalemate. The battleground soon resembled the Western Front, both sides facing each other from fortified trenches.

The Turks were under the command of German General Liman von Sanders. On the ground, Turkish Colonel Kemal Atatürk was to prove a decisive and successful leader presaging his later role as Turkey's first president.

For the Anzacs, water was often in short supply and the troops were ravaged by dysentery. One soldier famously described the battlefield as “looking like a midden – or rubbish dump – and smelling like an open cemetery”.

After great hesitation, the troops at Suvla Bay and Anzac were evacuated in December.

Attention to detail

The plan was, in theory, visionary and if successful could have transformed the course of the war.

It fell down in its pre-planning and execution. Here one recalls the Duke of Wellington's maxim that the secret of military success is “attention to detail”.

Despite Hamilton's role as operational chief, sufficient confusion existed for the General Officer Commanding Egypt Sir John Maxwell to exclaim: “Who is coordinating and

French Marshall Foch said: “The will to conquer is the first condition of victory.” Did the allied commanders have this? Perhaps their Turkish opponents had the requisite will to repel.

Expert opinion

The brilliant, yet eccentric, Admiral Lord Jackie Fisher had grave misgivings about a naval engagement in the turbulent waters of the Dardanelles Strait.

In his early 70s, however, he was no match for Churchill's forceful personality and powers of persuasion. Business, likewise, must always yield to rational assessment no matter how impassioned and enthusiastic is the support for a project.

Frederick the Great said he could understand being defeated, but not being surprised. Were the allies surprised at the military competence of the Turks? In particular, officers of the calibre of Colonel Kemal Atatürk?

One observer said that the Dardanelles was “largely a gamble upon the supposed shortage of supplies and the Turkish army's inferior fighting qualities”.

Instead, the Turks fought with epic courage and success.

Austria's Empress Maria Theresa said she “loved the why of things”. Did those planning the project ask continually: “Why will this succeed and what are the dangers?”

Bismarck reached his decisions after what one historian termed “quiet brooding”. Was there sufficient brooding or deep reflection on the issues facing

embarking on it? This brooding is to be recommended to executives in responding to the significant issues before them.

Decision making

Good managers are decisive. Historian AJP Taylor talks about the “dilatoriness” of the Dardanelles' commanders. Hamilton was criticised for not taking personal charge, nor command of the situation.

In June 1915 a Dardanelles Committee took charge – a sure sign of a project off the rails that should be abandoned.

Napoleon declared he wanted generals who were lucky. Mismanagement aside, luck was not with the allies.

Lloyd George said: “Expeditions which are decided upon and organised with insufficient care generally end disastrously.” The same applies in business.

Fallout

It was many years before the shadow of Gallipoli was lifted from Churchill's reputation.

While the failure of the Dardanelles nearly broke Churchill at the time, he was to achieve his career highlight aged 65, as British prime minister during World War 2. So for older executives, or for those who may have had career pitfalls along the way, persevere. The best may yet be before you.

Churchill was to say that happiness is not mostly pleasure, but mostly victory. For business people, work offers the chance of regular victories.

During World War II Churchill would memo his staff “action this day”. Another relevant maxim for business.

Because of the failure of the Dardanelles campaign, on 28 December 1915, the British cabinet resolved that the Western Front would be the decisive theatre of the war.

The stage was set for the vast killing matches to come. ●

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The Australian Financial Review – May 5, 2016

History holds lesson for subs deal

BUDGET TALKS...

TWELVE SUBS AT
\$60 BILLION - THE
ELEPHANT IN
THE ROOM?

LONG TIME BEFORE
THEY'RE IN
THE ROOM...

IF
EVER...

CLEMENT

Before World War I, Turkey commissioned Britain to build two state-of-the-art Dreadnought battleships. Turkey enjoyed friendly relations with Britain at the time.

The ships costs £2 million – a staggering sum then – and were largely paid for, in a patriotic gesture, by the small donations of tens of thousands of ordinary Turks in villages across the country. The completed ships, paid for and named Sultan Osman-ı Evvel and Resadiye, were about to be delivered to

Turkey when World War I started.

Correctly assuming that Turkey would side with Germany, British First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill commandeered the ships, keeping the £2 million. The ships were renamed HMS Agincourt and HMS Erin, and sent out to wage war on Germany and its ally Turkey, which, of course, had paid for them.

Naturally, nothing could happen in 15 years – the time it will take the French to build our submarines – to

affect the cordial relations that exist between Australia and France. But, as Mark Twain said, history doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

On related matters, at the start of World War II, the fastest and by far deadliest fighter plane in the world was the Japanese Zero, made by Mitsubishi, the Japanese company whose submarines Australia has rejected.

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The Australian Financial Review - 29 March 2016

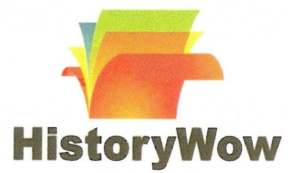
Churchill was a saviour but not a saver

Oh dear, the trend in history today is to revise and condemn much of what was previously accepted as historical fact. Who among us is perfect?

Whatever Winston Churchill's failings ("Winston Churchill - great with war, bad with money, especially his own", March 24-28), during World War Two he saved Britain from becoming a Nazi slave state, a fate that befell much of Europe. In the 1930s he was probably the highest paid journalist in the world. In the 1950s he was offered a dukedom. (He didn't take it, as it didn't come with a great spread of land.) Living until 90, he was also a pretty good advertisement for a drink and a smoke. But then, you can't say that today.



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Media Report

Richard Craig, publisher of historywow.com, was interviewed by Alan Kohler for the October 2013 edition of the Qantas In-flight 'Talking Business' program. The subject was 'What Business Can Learn from the Lessons of History'.