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Batuhan: Pulling apart (part 2)

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Foreign Exchange

HOW many times have we seen this before?

At the entry to our doctor's office, there, in proud bold letters, it proclaims his specialization — gastroenterology. Yes, that's all our doctor does, a very specific part of medicine. In this case, only things to do with the digestive system, and nothing else.

If we should happen to have a heart problem, then we need to go somewhere else for treatment. If it is headaches that trouble us, then we have to seek somebody else's assistance. Only if it is about our stomach can this particular doctor help us with our ailment.

Specialization — that's the name of the game. In medicine, as in many other fields today, the key to gaining mastery over increasingly complex fields of knowledge is to break it down into smaller chunks. Hence, doctors specialize only in certain parts of the body (e.g. gastroenterology, cardiology).

Likewise, managers, whose profession is getting more and more complicated, are also breaking down their field into very specific and narrow areas of expertise — supply chain, manufacturing operations, accounting and finance, sales, etc.

In certain respects, this breaking down of expertise into very narrow specialties has paid off well. Medicine has advanced that much faster in our time than it ever has over previous hundreds of years. So has management, which has accumulated a fantastic amount of knowledge about how to run complex organizations, that we now have sophisticated business models that we did not once think possible.

And yet there has also been a very steep price to pay.

In the physical sciences, we are discovering more and more the interrelatedness of things, rather than their dissimilarities.

The human body, for instance, is a very systemic and integral whole.

Problems in one part of our anatomy are almost always related to maladies in others.

What we are finding now is that treatment regimens are more effective when considered in terms of their overall effect on our well being. Consequently, holistic healing is once again in vogue, resurrected from its roots in ancient Ayurvedic and Chinese medical practice.

Can management be any different? Apparently not.

Look at the more current trends in management thinking, and the same thing is apparent. Peter Senge talks about "systems thinking." Eli Goldratt tells us about the "theory of constraints." And Kaplan and Norton are preaching "balanced scorecards," an integrated view of measuring how businesses are performing as a cohesive whole.

The problem is that the actual practice of management inside most organizations has been slower to adapt to this new way of working. Compartmentalized thinking and the old silo mentality still dominate, despite recent evidence suggesting that organizations cannot be managed simply as discrete functions.

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This has given rise to myopic ideas about how organizations should be improved, without considering how local efforts contribute to, or detract from, the improvement of the whole.

Consider the task of maintaining a car, for example. Suppose that your car has a major engine problem, and it looks like it may break down at any time.

You would think that you would give this problem 100 percent of your attention, right? Until the trouble is solved, you would probably not bother taking it to the car wash as regularly or having the alloys polished as much.

After all, what good are clean tires and shiny wheels, or even cheap gasoline, to a car that does not even run? More next week.

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