



In this Point of View, John Beck considers how educational institutions might be able to help students to be more prepared for the real world of business.

During the last six months my team and I have conducted interviews with 100 CEOs and top executives around the world. We asked them to tell us what the business school of the future would look like. After twenty-five years of teaching in business schools around the globe, their A theme that has emerged over and over again—sometimes explicitly, sometimes between the lines—is ambiguity.

Executives told us that they need new graduates who can function in a world of uncertainty where the rules are not clear (and they were unequivocal: the rules are never clear). But instead, business schools around the world are producing a very uniform product: MBAs who expect certainty, and young managers who believe the world functions by strict models and absolute rules.

Throughout all of our young educational experiences, and even in our early careers, there are clear rules of proper behavior. There have to be, because that is how we learn to become adults. When the Japanese turn 20, they become official adults and are granted the moniker “proper person.” Dressed in colorful kimonos, they attend lectures at their local community centers on the official Japanese holiday of “proper person day,” and are told that as adults they need to adhere to the rules—both written and cultural—of their society. This responsibility is taken very seriously – at every level of society. Many decades ago, as a barely “proper person” myself, I rode with the bosozoku (“violent motorcycle gang”) in Japan as part of my thesis research. The day before a gangmember turned 20, he celebrated wildly with the gang and then was never seen again. The next day, he would be a “proper person” and expected to behave like one – even by his fellow gangmembers. (Oh, and did I mention the other incentive? After 20, his criminal record would become permanent.)

We are taught through our whole formal education to behave in uniform and predictable ways, and

this expectation accompanies us on our first jobs. But somewhere along the way, we have to (and are expected to) switch from student to professional. Apprenticeships used to help us make that mindset switch, but we abandoned that model of education long ago – now good students are expected to go to college instead of into trades—even though the vast majority of them end up in some form of business (which could be considered a “trade”).

We do find ways to learn how to cope with the real world. Young parents learn the unpredictability of the world from newborns and toddlers. Childproof your home all you want, and somehow the kid will find a way to put a fork into an electrical outlet. As parents we start to break out of the “uniformity mold” even while we are trying to force our children into it. And that is the proper order of things.

But the secure world of childhood has extended beyond the formative years—young people live at home for more years, marry later, and have children at an older age. We are graduating into the ranks of managers a group of people who have never had to deal with much uncertainty, if at all, and therefore do not make particularly good managers. They still expect the world runs by a rule book.

Executives are telling those of us in education that we need to break our students out of these certainty shackles and give them a very different way of looking at the world.

This is not just a lesson that needed in business schools. In an excellent Wall Street Journal [essay](#), Nassim Nicolas Taleb (author of *Black Swans: The Impact of the Highly Improbably*) points out that national economies and companies need to learn to be “antifragile.” It’s a clunky term, he admits himself, but appropriate. There are always big, unexpected events, so companies need to think of themselves more like cats and less like

washing machines, he implores. Apt metaphors. [make washing machine more clear, or drop out – another qualifying sentence?]

So how do we educate young people to be more like “smart cats” instead of well-oiled washing machines? We have to start by breaking down some of the basic contracts and configurations of education.

- **Get rid of grades or change them completely.** An academic grade can no longer be attached to achieving a highly specific set of activities. This just prolongs the myth that the world’s rewards are predictable and exact.
- **Out with the textbooks and the readings.** We can no longer assign specific readings (and only a limited number of them). There was a time when information was tough to come by and rather than have students look through the library book by book (an enormous waste of collective energy), we told them exactly where to go to find the specifics. Today, a well-designed Google search provides better and clearer immediate information than thumbing through a textbook.
- **No more lectures.** When I really looked into it, I realized that there are online resources that are better than anything I can say in front of the classroom. I determined that there are two topic areas in my field of strategy where I can articulate the concepts in a clearer way than anything I’ve found online, so I made videos of those lectures and posted them online. For everything else, I can send my students to YouTube and TED Talks.
- **Get the hell out of the classroom.** In the 1920s, when telecommunication was expensive and transportation more difficult, the Harvard Business School created a new technology to bring the world into the classroom—it was called the case study. And it has been the main staple of business education since. But as

one executive in China recently told me, even in a long, complicated case study, “it can’t take into account the way the world really works. The information is so clearly laid out that it doesn’t take into account the ambiguities of the world. It leads students to a “correct” decision. In the real business world you see lots of ambiguities and uncertainties.” He told me that he only? wants to hire business professionals who understand that at a very deep level.

- **Add wisdom through people.** Much of my consulting career has revolved around running “war games” for top corporate teams all over the world. When I first started, I had a computer that would determine outcomes of the war game. But a computer could never create the complex results of corporate action in the real world. Executives ended up trying to “game” the computer algorithms rather than trying to outsmart their competitors. Over time, I learned that if I put some really wise, experienced people in the room to “play” [not clear]the market result, the outcomes of the game were much more realistic than a computer could ever deliver.

The biggest take away from all of this, for me, is that the role of professor must change. We still need the wise, experienced, well-read “professor” in the room. But the professor of the 21st century must act more like a mentor or advisor than a lecturer and researcher advocating “high certainty mathematical models.” We need teachers with real experience in business who can guide professional students into a profession, rather than deeper into academic theory. The goal must be to structure the education experience loosely. Let student flounder, but provide a wise, human lifeline to give direction when the waters become too murky and ambiguous—so that emerging professionals can learn to become antifragile themselves. This is the only way we can create the corporations of the future that can generate the breakout growth opportunities we all need so badly.