Interview with Daniel Forbes

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Daniel Forbes is a professor of Strategic Management and Entrepreneurship at the Carlson School of Management. In 2011, he formally joined the CIL steering committee and has been a valuable member ever since. We took some time to talk to Dan about his current research and its connection to integrative leadership.

Can you tell me a little bit about the research that you are currently conducting?

I am interested in how groups of people come together to start new ventures. And then once they have started, how they interact with the various parts of their organizations—board of directors, customers, staff, etc. Given my interest in the formation of new ventures, I have also been identified in the field of leadership and how strategy gets done across different groups of people. I did not set out to study leadership or integrative leadership but the kind of things I study give me some perspective on integrative leadership.

What makes you so passionate about entrepreneurship?

The field of entrepreneurship has grown in the past few years. In particular there has been an interest in understanding more fully what happens at a firm in its earliest stages. Previously, researchers tended to look at databases of information about firms that had already passed through several key stages of development, but that is just the tip of the iceberg; there is a lot more that happens before they get to those later stages. Candidly, a lot [of organizations] end up in failure. What I am trying to do is to get at an organization before it would show up on many scholars’ radar screens. This involves more qualitative research. It generally involves looking more carefully at individuals and small groups of people.

What interested you to join the CIL Steering Committee?

What I think is interesting about CIL is that it has a focus on solving problems that might otherwise be overlooked, issues that might fall through the cracks of a particular sector—even within the private sector. When someone is interested in entrepreneurship, they are inherently interested in issues that haven’t been solved. When I study entrepreneurial industries and firms, I find myself looking at things that large established firms have, for various reasons, not been able to address. CIL is a place that we get to meet people from all different backgrounds. Each of us can see that there are problems that are not being solved well in our particular sectors and often times in order to solve these problems we must facilitate interdisciplinary work. I appreciate CILs ability to recognize that problems exist and its efforts to reach across boundaries to make solutions.

Is there any aspect of your current research that integrates cross-sector leadership?

Yes, a couple of things. I’ve recently studied team formation among academic entrepreneurs, and that process involves cross-sector leadership. In addition, I am working on a project with Professor Paul Vaaler on migrants’ social remittances. It is easy to track financial contributions to migrants’ countries of origin but becomes more complicated when we try to explore intangible contributions like knowledge, perspective and other aspects on life and business. What we are looking at specifically is, do migrant remittances (both social and financial) help cultivate stronger corporate governance practices in their home countries? One of the things people discuss in development is the process by which organizations...
are governed. If you are a business that wants to grow and you want to attract international investors one of the key questions you will be asked is, what is the process by which you are governed? Do you have certain practices in place like financial planning, a functioning board of directors, etc.? Can I have confidence in you? We are exploring those practices to see if they take place more strongly in countries where there are a lot of migrant remittances. Thus, we’re looking at activities that span a variety of national, sectoral and organizational boundaries. Another thing I am interested in is entrepreneurial cognition. There is widespread interest right now in the kinds of knowledge that enables individual people to become entrepreneurs. What I’d like to do is bump our attention up to the collective level and ask how much do large groups of people know about entrepreneurship? How is the increased dissemination of information about entrepreneurship affecting—good or bad—the quantity and quality of the ventures that get started in a society? Here again, understanding that requires us to look beyond what is happening in any one sector.

That all sounds very interesting! Is there anything else you want to share?

I enjoy being able to interact with people in other areas. It is a hard thing to get all these separate units in private sector and academia to communicate and cooperate well, not because of a lack of effort but because we have different thought worlds and we respond to different demands and pressures. Cross-boundary leadership is hard but that is all the more reason to encourage the work that CIL does to draw us out of our silos.