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Section B Passage 2

Different strokes for similar folks PICTURE a typical MBA lecture theatre twenty years ago. In it the majority of students scribbling away furiously will have conformed to the standard template of the time: male, middle class and Western. Walk into a class today, however, and you'll get a completely different impression. For a start you will now see plenty more womenthe University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, for example, boasts that 40% of its new intake is female. You will also see a wide range of ethnic groups and nationals of practically every country. It might be tempting, therefore, to think that the old barriers have been broken down and equal opportunity achieved. But, increasingly, this apparent diversity is becoming a mask for an insidious new type of conformity. Behind the differences in sex and sexuality, the varying skin tones and mother tongues, there are common attitudes, expectations and ambitions which risk creating a set of clones among the business leaders of the future. A future in which the methods and motivations of hotshots in Bangalore, Beijing and Boston are impossible to tell apart. Many of the corporations which led us into the current economic mess were also the most enthusiastic hirers of

MBAs. Diversity, it seems, has not helped to address fundamental weaknesses in business leadership. So what can be done to create more effective stewards of the commercial world? According to Valerie Gauthier, associate dean at HEC Paris, the key lies in the process by which MBA programmes recruit their students. At the moment candidates are 0selected on a fairly narrow set of criteria such as prior academic and career performance, analytical and problem solving abilities and numeracy. This is then coupled to a school's picture of what a diverse class should look like, with the result that passport, ethnic origin and sex can all become influencing factors. But schools rarely dig down to find out what really makes an applicant tick, to create a class which also contains diversity of attitude and approacharguably the only diversity that, in a business context, really matters. Professor Gauthier believes schools should not just be 0selecting 'usual suspect' candidates from traditional sectors such as banking, consultancy and industry. They should also be seeking individuals who have backgrounds in areas such as political science, the creative arts, history or philosophy, which will allow them to put business decisions into a wider context. Unless at least some students on a programme have this sort of groundingand the open mind that hopefully goes with itthen the increasingly fashionable focus on ethics and social responsibility is unlikely to have a significant effect in the long term. Indeed, there does seem to be a demand for the more rounded leaders such diversity might create. A study by Mannaz, a leadership development company, suggests that, while the bully-boy chief executive of old may not have

been eradicated completely, there is a definite shift in emphasis towards less strident styles of managementat least in America and Europe. Perhaps most telling, according to Mannaz, is the increasing interest large companies have in more collaborative management models, such as those prevalent in Scandinavia, which seek to integrate the hard and soft aspects of leadership and encourage devolved responsibility and accountability.

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