

Eulogy to management guru CK Prahalad

by Aradhna Krishna

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Think of the red carpet at the Oscars. Pierce Brosnan is surrounded by journalists and television cameras. Then, another black limousine drives up, there is commotion, and Pierce suddenly finds himself alone. Sean Connery has just arrived. Many years ago, I felt just like Pierce in this scenario. My MBA section of pricing for the Fall had been fully enrolled at 70 and had a waitlist. I was two days away from starting to teach the course. But, the next day, I noticed that my enrolments were down to 48. Clearly, a system bug. I called administration to sort the bug out and the person at the other end was equally perplexed. I mentioned the problem to a colleague and he smiled – well, smirked is more like it – “didn’t you hear? CK suddenly decided yesterday to offer a course and all spots were taken in 10 minutes. Let’s see. Yes, his class meets at the same time as yours – too bad!” He was talking about CK Prahalad, the visionary management guru of the core competency and bottom-of-the-pyramid models, who passed away on Saturday.

One can divide the year into months, or seasons, or work and vacation periods, but here at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, we also divided the year into "these are the times CK teaches" and "these are the times that CK does not teach". When he is teaching, the enrolments in all the other classes drop. All rookie professors learn the hard way to teach at a time when CK is not teaching, or they don't get any students in their classes.

While CK is extremely well-known as a corporate consultant, a true guru, he is less well-known as a faculty member at the Ross School of Business when he spent nearly his entire working life. As a fellow chaired professor and colleague of CK at Ross, I want to bring some perspective on him as a faculty member, teacher and researcher. His magnetic personality and visionary outlook were insightful not just to corporate managers but also to MBA students, PhD students - think of Hamel who is a corporate guru himself- and other faculty members.

Wherever he spoke, he drew a crowd. In Ann Arbor, where he was a resident, you cannot throw a stone without hitting a faculty member. But, even here, when he gave a speech, hundreds of people vied for a spot to listen. And I am not talking about the general public, not just the Michigan students. He used to fill Hill Auditorium, the largest auditorium in town, where last year’s lineup included Ravi and Anushka Shankar.