

Thanks to Wick Skinner

Harry Strachan, January 31, 2019

News of His Death

Today, thanks to Jim Austin, I received from Dean Nohria of the Harvard Business School the following:

To: HBS Faculty and Staff

From: Nitin Nohria

Re: Sad news -- Wickham (Wick) Skinner

I am very sorry to let you know that Wickham (Wick) Skinner, James E. Robison Professor of Business Administration, Emeritus, died on Monday of congestive heart failure at his home in St. George, Maine.

Wick received his Bachelor of Engineering from Yale University in 1944 and his MBA (with distinction) and DBA degrees from Harvard Business School in 1948 and 1961, respectively. He served with the Army from 1944-1946. Before pursuing an academic career he worked as a chemical engineer on the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos and then spent a decade at the Honeywell Corporation. Wick joined the HBS faculty in 1960 as a lecturer and was promoted to professor in 1967, remaining on the faculty until his retirement in 1986. His research on manufacturing and operations strategy gained him international renown, with Harvard Business Review articles like "Manufacturing—Missing Link in Corporate Strategy," "The Productivity Paradox" (the 1986 McKinsey Award winner), and "The Focused Factory" creating a new vocabulary in the field. The extent of his influence can be seen in the Production and Operations Management Society's decision to make Wick the namesake of its annual awards to encourage POM scholarship and publication, promote significant research in the field, reward academics who have achieved unusually high accomplishment early in their careers, and facilitate the sharing of innovative new ideas about teaching POM. Wick also was named a Fellow of the Academy of Management.

Wick was an imaginative course developer at HBS, including the Manufacturing Policy course that was a staple in the MBA Program for many years. Long before globalization was a phenomenon, Wick was studying international manufacturing, and he oversaw the School's

international activities during the late 1960s; he also served as the faculty chair of the MBA Program in the early 1970s. He was a well-loved mentor to a number of junior colleagues, many of whom -- especially in the TOM unit -- went on to play leadership roles at the School themselves.

Wick served as a trustee of Babson University and on the boards of organizations ranging from the National Resources Council of Maine, the Mass Audubon Society, and the Maine Public Broadcasting Corporation. He also served as a director of nearly a dozen organizations. Retirement did not slow him down; his commitment to teaching took him to colleges and universities around the world. Additionally, he combined his passion for education and Maine through work as Chair of the Board of Trustees of the University of Maine and President of the Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, among many other activities.

He was predeceased by his wife, Alice Sturges Blackmer Skinner, and is survived by his children, Charles Barry Skinner and Jacqui Gay Skinner.

Plans for a service in Maine are being developed for the summer; we will share more information as it becomes available.

Our hearts and condolences go out to family, as well as the many friends and colleagues, of Wick.

INCAE's and my personal debt to Wick

Wick was a key player in the founding of INCAE, providing support on the HBS faculty, coming to Nicaragua to teach as part of the very first faculty, serving on the INCAE Advisory Committee and perhaps most importantly, serving as a mentor to many of us on that early faculty.

He was also a role model. I've always wished that more of the INCAE family could have known both Wick Skinner and George Lodge personally. They were true giants! In the excerpt from *Memories of INCAE 1970-1981* I describe some of the reasons why I so admired Wick.

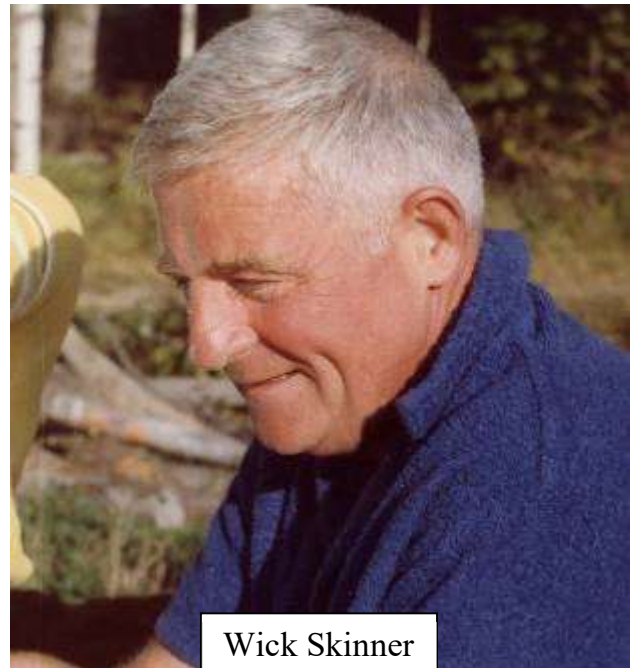
*Another key leader from Harvard was **Wick Skinner**. Wick's area of work was production. In the critical years when INCAE was getting started, I*

*believe he was also Dean of International Affairs. INCAE and the Harvard start-up program required lots of money from USAID. When USAID's regulations and requirements came into conflict with Harvard's way of doing things, a great financial mess ensued. It fell to **Wick**, working with an entrepreneurial ROCAP official, **Jack Moscatelli**, to resolve the issues and work out budgets and financial processes that served the needs of both.*

***Wick Skinner** was also one of the best teachers of the case method I ever saw. Early in my tenure, he came to INCAE to help some of us new professors. He would sit in the back row of a class charting how I managed the discussion the way scouts at a basketball game note the exact spot on the floor from which shots are taken. He would write down where and on whom I called. He would watch the sequence of my questions and how they were worded.*

Afterward we'd have a debriefing session. In a shrewd Socratic manner, he'd go through his notes asking me why I'd done this or that. Had I considered doing something different? His questions would open up possibilities I had missed. We talked about alternative techniques that I'd soon be trying in other sessions. Although I should have been depressed by how much I had missed, I always left a coaching session with him feeling exhilarated. Somehow in all his feedback, most of which had to be about mistakes, he made me feel that I had great potential as a teacher, was in fact already a hell of a teacher and could become even better.

He was also a skillful counselor and would have made a great psychiatrist. In the period after the trauma of the earthquake we needed team building and wound-healing in the faculty. Wick came down to help us, talking individually with each person and then all of us together. When he left we were a united team once more.



Wick Skinner

*Years later after I had left Harvard to work at Bain, he was the mentor I most frequently called on. When as a family we were facing tough decisions and needed wise advice, we'd call **Wick and Alice Skinner** in their Maine shore home and get an invitation to come up and have some counseling sessions and great meals. From Wick I learned that mentoring is mainly about "cheerleading". He was discerning. He was not fooled about mistakes or weakness. But you felt he saw gold in you that you were unaware of; he saw potential you didn't know you had.*

Now that I occasionally get calls from young people wishing a sounding board, I try to be as generous as he was and follow his example and style: listen carefully, ask good questions, avoid giving advice, but give lots of positive feedback.