



Business Schools

Why We Can--And Should--Teach Leadership

Ken Blanchard 10.05.07, 11:30 AM ET

Fred Cuen already occupies the coveted C-suite. As president of the Americas for Avnet, one of the world's largest technologies distributors, he oversees a staff of 2,000. But even as an experienced leader, Cuen wants the Phoenix-headquartered company to expand its situational leadership training class, now in its second year, into an established leadership management track.

He also believes he could improve his own leadership skills to make Avnet even more successful.

In years past, Cuen has turned to leadership books and seminars to further his knowledge and enhance his skills. This is all well and good. But finally, in January 2007, he enrolled in an Executive MBA program that emphasizes a particular kind of leadership: servant leadership, focusing on helping people and organizations achieve their goals.

When the EMBA was created 32 years ago, developing management skills for high-potential executives was its main focus. Today, leadership is an increasingly taught "soft skill," and the most effective EMBA programs are focusing there.

Still, only 24% of U.S. executives agree that an MBA "provides excellent and adequate preparation for a leadership position," according to a 2007 Dow Jones MarketWatch survey of international executives. Thus, EMBA programs must realize teaching leadership at the executive level effectively calls for an approach that places a premium on real-world learning, instead of theory and case studies.

Whether one is born a leader or not, I have no doubt that leadership can be taught. And, most importantly, it can be learned. The transformation of EMBA programs now focusing on real-life leadership scenarios has taken the degree from a launching pad for success to a simulation of real-world challenges, preparing executives for the day-to-day operation of a business.

But EMBA's cannot teach how to effectively implement what students learn. That has to be done on the job, and requires coaching and continuous support. Unfortunately, students receive little, if any, leadership training on the job. To help bridge this gap, EMBA's should assign students a coach they can reach by phone.

As part of the EMBA program I teach at Grand Canyon University, where Cuen is a student of mine, the coach spends 45 minutes, once a week, reviewing what was learned and encouraging the student to apply this new knowledge to their everyday life.

Following up, and having a plan for putting new knowledge into practice right away, is key to successful implementation of these skills, which can be applied to all facets of everyday business, from motivating staff and managing budgets to satisfying clients and delivering results.

EMBA programs also face the challenge of demystifying the concept that the key to corporate success is strategic leadership.

One of the primary mistakes EMBA programs make--and as a result, many leaders make--is that when leaders are called to lead, they spend most of their time and energy trying to make improvements at the organizational level before ensuring they have adequately addressed their own credibility and level of leadership.

Most business schools tend to jump right to organizational leadership and focus on strategy. Very seldom do business schools get personal with their students and really help them take a hard look at who they are and why they're leading. You can only lead somebody else, a team or an organization, if you have your own act together--effective leadership starts on the inside.

Successful EMBA programs begin with lessons on self-leadership. Once students understand themselves and develop their own leadership point of view, the next phase of their transformational journey should be leading others.

Business schools like Stanford University's Graduate School of Business put students through leadership simulations and development exercises. During their first year at Stanford's business school, students are mentored by second-year leadership fellows, faculty advisors, leadership coaches and alumni to help drive home the practical development of leadership skills. Throughout Stanford's program, students will go through a number of self-assessments to measure their progress in becoming more effective leaders.

When you look at yourself, you gain perspective. When you learn to lead another person, you learn about building trust. Without trust, it is impossible for an organization to function effectively. Trust between leaders and their people is essential for working together. As leaders develop a trusting relationship with people in the one-on-one arena, they become trustworthy. This is great preparation for managing a team. Leading a group is more complicated than leading an individual, because the focus becomes building a community.

Whether a leader can function well as an organizational leader--someone supervising more than one team--depends on perspective, trust and community. The key to developing an effective organization is creating an environment that values both relationships and results.

Looking ahead, I believe EMBA programs will also need to place an increased emphasis on ethics. In the wake of recent corporate scandals, such as Enron, leaders are now

required to build an ethical, value-driven community that also makes an organization the provider of choice, employer of choice and investment of choice.

Everyone realizes the credibility of a company depends on values-based leadership. When asked to assess executives on characteristics other than their professional qualifications, 97% of U.S. executives, 86% of U.K. executives and 85% of German executives said ethical behavior was extremely or very important, according to the MarketWatch survey. For U.S. and U.K. executives, ethical behavior topped the list of key attributes for an executive, the survey reveals.

Successful leaders have mastered the art of increasing their bottom lines, and simultaneously creating a great human organization. A significant advantage of EMBA programs built on a leadership foundation is that people will retain leadership capabilities that will allow them to make stronger contributions to their current employer.

The best EMBA programs are teaching students the skills to do just that.

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