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## **Solving a Shortfall in Executive Education: Real Time Case Study Teaching**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Executive education by its very nature is designed to prepare the best performers in any organization for positions of higher responsibility in the organization. The path to higher levels of responsibility in an organization is usually as diverse as the backgrounds of the people in the organization. It becomes the challenge to those who develop executive education programs to take these promising executives and develop a program that will place them on an even footing in understanding the complexities of the strategic levels of their respective organization. In developing these programs, it is also desirable that the diversity of skills and knowledge that these people usually bring with them are used. This paper addresses the shortfalls in moving an educationally diverse group of individuals up the organization and ways to overcome these shortfalls.

**KEYWORDS:** Executive education, strategic leadership, strategic management, conceptual thinking, and case study teaching.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The traditional processes for developing managers and leaders through *management development* programs has evolved to more upbeat programs under the rubric of what is called *executive education* (Vicere and Fulmer, 1997). The switch in terms is more than just a play on words. Vicere and Fulmer relate that the switch moves the concept of development from the more bureaucratic management realm to the more desirable world of leadership. Although this paper is not about the differences between the concepts of management and leadership, these concepts certainly play a major influence in developing programs for executives as they move up the organization, especially in the environment of the twenty-first century. As organizations strive to prepare their managers and leaders for strategic challenges, they need to find ways to properly educate these people who normally come from a diverse experiential and formal education background. Thus this paper is about the way organization try to address this problem.

First, it should be noted that the word educate is used purposely to distinguish it from training programs. Review of the literature reveals that often these terms are interchanged. For the purpose of this paper, training programs are those programs that are, by their very nature, designed to transmit techniques and skills essential for middle and senior managers. The skills in these programs tend to be temporal often requiring updates as the skill base evolves or changes over time. Education on the other hand strives to focus on conceptual thinking in order to determine tendencies and patterns rather than the certainties of training-based program (Vicere and Fulmer, 1997). Lastly, also for the purpose of this paper, executive refers to those individuals who operate at the strategic level of an organization. With these distinctions in hand, the challenges of the twenty-first century seem best addressed by executive education programs.

A check with the Internet under the search words *executive education* will show a host of organizations ready to customize an executive education program for one's organization. Additionally, a review of the programs offered by traditional higher education institutions in the United States, reveals a rise in the number of executive education programs as these institutions also react to the demand for executive education. To control the entrance into these executive education graduate programs, the requirements remain somewhat traditional, namely, an acceptable grade point average from an accredited institution as well as a minimum grade on such test as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or the Graduate Management Achievement Test (GMAT). When one looks at non-traditional executive education programs, however, the obvious question is "What are the controls used to place people in these type of programs?" The answer usually is success within the organization -- with success, of course, being defined by the respective organization. To address the reasons why organizations other than the traditional learning institutions establish executive education programs, we can look at the work of Anthony J. Frisina, President, Executive Knowledge Works.

Frisina (1997) in his review of corporate universities executive education programs outlines three prototype models. They are:

**Prototype I** – To reinforce and perpetuate the current corporate paradigm – the present winning formula.

**Prototype II** – To manage change from the current operating mode to a mode in line with the strategic vision of the organization.

**Prototype III** – To drive and shape a new context of the organization. This prototype seems to focus on a transformational move for the organization.

Whether one buys into Frisina's models or not, he does point out the existence of executive education designed to enhance the thinking abilities of promising executives within a corporation. The point here is that in addition to the many traditional schools that offer executive education, corporations also find it necessary to provide a learning environment that will better prepare their young executives for future challenges within their corporation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the success of such programs but rather to address what are the problems inherent in such programs.

## **PROBLEMS INHERENT TO EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

As stated above, inherent to traditional institutions of learning, are processes that control the entrance into executive education programs. Thus a student not only has the requisite degree, but the necessary foundational courses needed to understand and appreciate the subtleties of an executive-level course that usually is taught at the graduate level of education. In this way, basic concepts in management, psychology and sociology have been addressed somewhere in the student's past. For the same reasons that universities require foundational courses before students move to higher level courses, the same should be true for executive education courses.

Zemke and Zemke (1995) caution us to not get too carried away with the traditional teaching methodology that is common to pedagogical ways of teaching. Many of the executive education models appear to be built around the adult learning model often referred to as andragogical learning. Learning that is marked by self-direction of the learner, use of the learner's experience as a resource, connectivity between learning and "real life" events, and lastly, pragmatic learning. Although the move toward adult learning seems logical and warranted in executive education, the need to have some mastery over content also appears to be an essential ingredient.

As an example, we can look at the practice of Executive Knowledge Works (EKW) and see how they apply their executive education formula. In their case study on Knight-Ridder, they use a four-step process (Larson, 1994). The process includes:

**Outward Bound Session** – designed to provide a leveling experience among the company executives. “By the time they finish those two days, they have a different sense of one another” (p.3).

**Interactive Session** – focus on Knight Ridder’s traditional and emerging values and to reexamine their own leadership styles. This session ends with facilitation by an EKW consultant who pushes the envelope of the students understanding the dynamics of what they went through and to challenge their lack of knowledge about the factors affecting their environment.

**Real Life Case Study** – forces the students to address real-world issues within the context of another organization. The point here is that the students not only interactive with individuals from another organization, but they also receive other conceptual models from which to view an organization's environment. This particular step will be addressed later on in the paper as a critical solution in shoring up one of the shortfalls in executive education.

**Content Expert Session** – Another critical event is to bring in experts who can provide a formal knowledge base to what the students have experienced as well as laying flesh on the conceptual models that they were previously given.

**Case Study of Client’s World** – It is in this context that the students are thrust into a case study of their own world with a new “skills tool kit” from the previous sessions.

It is the second last phase that addresses a key shortfall, namely the possible lack of a pertinent formal education base of the executive students. This statement is not designed to set up an elitism as to what educational foundation is best, but rather an attempt to understand the baseline of knowledge that is brought to executive education by the students. Remember students were selected for the executive education course based on their success in their respective organization. Thus the likelihood of the students having an educational background that will understand the subtleties of strategic issues may be minimal.

Through testimony of many senior executives in a variety of organizations, the road up an organization is not necessarily vested in one particular profile of an individual. Physical demeanor may be an attribute in sports, but less in other types of organizations. Additionally, the formal education path is just as slippery. A promising senior executive is just as likely to come from a history, natural science or education major instead of the business school route. This does not mean that one can dismiss the lessons learned from the business school curriculum. What it does mean, however, is that regardless of their formal education background, each promising executive has demonstrated excellence at the operational level of an organization and has been judged to have potential for positions of higher responsibilities.

It is at this point, that critical and conceptual thinking are at a premium in the executive leadership process. Zaccaro (1996) confirms this in his survey of leadership research where he suggests that there are four major conceptual perspectives of executive leadership, namely, conceptual complexity, behavioral complexity, strategic decision making, and visionary or inspirational leadership. Referring back to the EKW’s process, it can now be seen why they have designed their program to first breakdown the experiences of its students and reformat them into a conceptual framework that will serve them in re-addressing issues in the own world -- in Knight-Ridder’s case, the media world.

How did EKW bridge the educational shortfall gaps of some of their students? The answer is that they brought in content experts in order to fill in the formal educational gaps. What case did they finally work on to use these newly acquired concepts? The answer is an organization that they were most familiar with, the media industry. The point here is that students with educational gaps in their formal education had a better chance of understanding the nuances of these concepts in their own industry where they knew the operational environment, thus not having to learn another organization while understanding new strategic concepts.

## THE UNITED STATES ARMY WAR COLLEGE CASE STUDY

The executive education for the United States military is conducted at five senior service colleges. One of these institutions is the United States Army War College (USAWC) which is located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The mission of the USAWC is:

To prepare selected military, civilian, and international leaders to assume strategic responsibilities in military and national security organizations; to educate students about the employment of the U.S. Army as a unified, joint, or multinational force in support of the national military strategy; to research operational and strategic issues; and conduct outreach programs that benefit USAWC, the U.S. Army and the Nation. (Program for Joint Education, Academic Year 2000, p.8)

As is shown in Table 1., the profile of the USAWC student continues to be the same as that reported by Murphy, 1998. Specifically, the student body is comprised of approximately 320 students from various assignments throughout the U.S. military organizations (Active, National Guard and Reserve units). Additionally, the international students are senior officers, colonel or general rank, from forty different countries around the world.

**TABLE 1. USAWC AVERAGE STUDENT PROFILE**

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Age	44 years
Years of Service	22 years
Education	Masters* (80%)
Past Responsibilities	
# of people managed	600-1000
Size of budget	\$1-500m (est)

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\* **Note:** Education data refers to U.S. students only. International officers may or may not have a baccalaureate degree.

The student body is divided into twenty groups called seminars. The students stay in this configuration for the first half of the school year. During this time period, each seminar addresses specified topics through a series of four core courses. This part of the curriculum is designed to cover a wide range of subjects in order to give maximum breadth to the issues that will involve executives at the strategic level of the military and the respective governments of the students.

In some sense the sessions during this phase are designed to get the students to a similar point in their understanding of the issues facing strategic leaders and managers. It is here where the USAWC recognizes that although students have been in the military or working for the government for over twenty years, each has different educational and work experiences. Thus faculty are challenged to facilitate the various lessons in such a way to help each students fill in the possible shortfalls in their formal education and experiences. In essence as EKW did with the Knight-Ridder sessions discussed earlier, the USAWC finds it necessary to devise a curriculum mechanism to "level the playing field of its students." That is, to give them a common baseline of understanding as to dialogue about the complexities of strategic executive issues.

During the second half of the USAWC academic year, the curriculum is comprised of a series of graduate-level electives. It is important during these learning timeframes, that the faculty continue to build the bridge between the objectives of these courses and any shortfalls that students may have because of their lack of formal education. To determine the validity of this concern a sample survey was conducted at the USAWC during the Academic Year 2000.

The survey was primarily given to students taking a course in Strategic Management. Although this course is similar to the capstone course of Schools of Business in the United States, some modifications had to be made do to the limited business educational background of the students. In fact, of an enrollment of twenty-one students, one student had a doctorate in a social science, six students had a masters degree in management, two U.S. students never had a management course, four had a management course over 15-20 years ago and the remaining eight students were international officers. Of the international officers, two had management degrees, three never had taken a management course and two had no baccalaureate degree but rather extensive military education.

When responding to a question as to obstacles that may have hindered their learning, the answers were in line with their formal education. Review of Table 2 reveals that not only was their lack of management education a problem, but in the case of the international officers, the culture and language became a barrier. It should be noted that international students are required to pass a certain level of English proficiency before they are allowed to enter one of the U.S. Senior Service Colleges. Although they can normally handle normal English language, it was the technical concepts in management that became a problem to them.

It should be added that the international students were not the only ones understanding the subtleties of the management terminology. The U.S. military officers with limited management education were also having difficulties.

**TABLE 2. LEARNING OBSATCLES IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION**

<b>Obstacle</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Lack of Management Education	2
Years Since Management Course	4
Lack of Management Experience	3
Culture Differences	4
Language Difficulties	1
No Problems	7

A solution to this problem was to use military organizations to teach strategic management concepts. As is the case in a School of Business capstone course, strategic management courses (also called Business Policy), use of the case method approach is the norm. This was to be the case in the USAWC strategic management course. Not just any case, but rather cases that are involved in an ongoing military situation.

For School Year 2000, the cases involved the strategic plans and planning process of three organizations, The USAWC itself, the U.S. Army North Atlantic Engineer Division (NAD)and lastly Harley Davidson, Inc. In each case the students had interviews with or presentations from individuals from each of the organizations. In the case of Harley Davidson, Inc., it involved a tour of their York plant followed by a meeting with one of their managers. For the USAWC, it entailed surveys with students, faculty and administrators including the commandant and the strategic planners for the College.

Although the USAWC and NAD are not typical military organizations, the intent is to have the students understand the strategic management concepts discussed in class through their knowledge of military organizations. Thus it is not just doing case studies but case studies where the students have intimate knowledge of the organization, which aids greatly in bridging them to the learning objectives of the course and the subsequent terminology inherent to strategic management.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Executive education by its very nature is designed to prepare the most promising middle managers for increasing responsibilities at the higher levels of management of their respective organization, usually the strategic level. Review of the literature reveals that there is no formula to get to the executive leadership level of an organization (Hughes, Ginnett and Curphy, 1999; Zaccaro, 1996; Gardner, 1995). As a result, executive education programs need to find a balance between the potential shown by these promising executives and the diversity of their formal education.

This paper is certainly not taking the position that one cannot make up the lack of a formal course through outside readings, attendance at conferences or through introspection on one's experiences. What this paper is pointing out is the need to stay in touch with Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of learning when developing an executive education program.

Bloom in his six levels of learning recognizes that to gain competence at the higher thinking skills, one needs to have a degree of confidence at the more basic learning skills, namely, knowledge and comprehension. It is especially noteworthy in the comprehension level that the skill is demonstrated by being able to translate the knowledge that one has acquired to the context of the situation. Invariably those chosen for the executive level of management have demonstrated their expert knowledge to succeed at the lower levels of the organization but whether they are able to place that expertise into the context of the larger organization is the question. Just as important is to ask whether they have the conceptual ability to frame the context. It is for these reasons that the use of cases within the context of the student's organization becomes very useful. To some degree, they will certainly know the general situation of their organization and to some extent the "players" and the group dynamics that is generated in moving the organization to a viable future.

It probably is a generally accepted axiom that there is little time to develop a building-block executive education system as is seen in the normal university setting. Thus executive education students need to be given opportunities to bridge this shortfall through the use of innovative teaching techniques. Using cases that are very familiar with the students is a way to bridge this gap. Thus, these cases can be used to stretch the conceptual framework of the students as well as providing an opportunity for the teacher to formalize some of the terms, concepts and processes that the students have already used at the operational level of the organization. In essence, they may not have understood the strategic implications of the action or process they were doing at the lower level, but they will at least know the environment and context that that the concepts sprang from.

In the end one can say that the real purpose of executive education is to prepare students to have a reasonable chance to achieve Bloom's highest level of cognitive thinking namely, the evaluation stage. Using case studies from the student's organizations seems to give a reasonable chance of getting executive students to this level.

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