

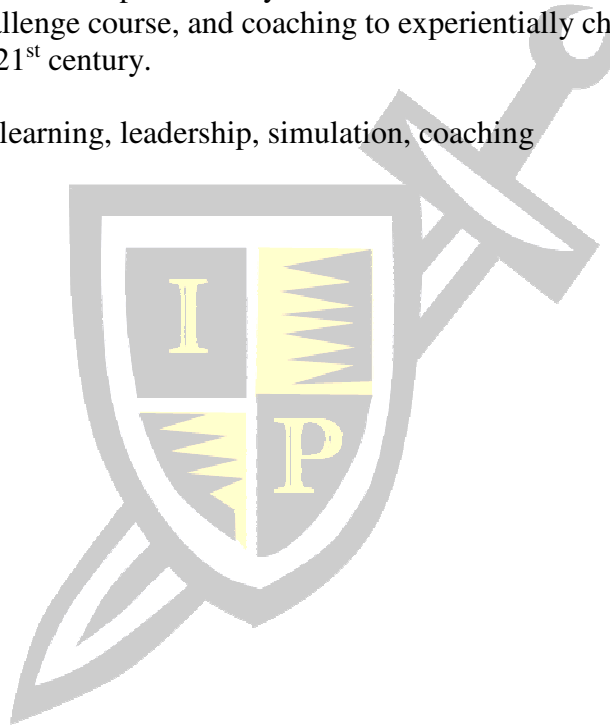
## **Designing a holistic experiential MBA course for 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the plethora of MBA leadership courses, schools are examining ways to differentiate their programs and to provide tangible learning outcomes. MBA graduates want the knowledge skills and ability to make them successful in their chosen fields of endeavor. This paper outlines one holistic experiential MBA leadership course that challenges the students to think of themselves and leadership differently. The course content combines simulation, assessment, outdoor challenge course, and coaching to experientially challenge students while creating leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Keywords: experiential learning, leadership, simulation, coaching



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## **INTRODUCTION**

Leadership is the path to success, money and power, and the leadership industry has been built on this idea (Kellerman, 2012). There have been ardent calls for improved leadership skills at every level in organizations, but business schools are still struggling with how to accomplish this effectively (Gagnon & Collinson, 2014; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006; LeBoeuf, 2011; Murphy & Riggio, 2003; Sinclair, 2007). Business schools are looking for ways to make the experience of learning “interesting, relevant to real world business management and marketing practices, and memorable to students” (Elbert & Cumiskey, 2014, p.1). How can educators, especially at the graduate level (MBA) help students challenge the way they think about leadership, not just by reading about it, but through the creation of a holistic leadership course that combines experiential learning both as individuals and in teams?

## **BACKGROUND**

Bloom’s taxonomy of learning objectives (1956) is the standard for education, and schools use it to assess learning in a myriad of domains, leadership is no different. The taxonomy is arranged into three domains, cognitive, affective and psychomotor, and six levels. As students move up the levels, the learning requires more critical thinking (Anderson & Sosniak, 1994). The goal for educators is that students move away from just the knowledge level (rote memorization) and progress to the evaluation level, the top level that requires assessing information and determining value of the idea. The intention is to facilitate learning that lasts, and to accomplish this, educators must incorporate the integration of “learning, development, and performance” (Mentkowski et al., 2000, p. 1). With these goals in mind, a plan was born to develop a holistic leadership course.

This MBA leadership course was originally based on an idea that there was going to be a leadership shortage (Freeman, 2006). The thought was that there would be a shortfall of leaders which would lead to talent wars for select individuals. That line of thinking also meant that individuals would move faster into top management ranks without the prior level of acculturation and experience. While the shortage of leaders may not be applicable today, the question still plaguing business schools is how to develop future leaders (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005). To combat these issues, a holistic leadership course was developed for MBA students. It was designed based on integrated assessment and development, coaching and mentoring, theory and best practice, and it was experientially based with cases, simulations team and group experiences, taking into account both Bloom’s taxonomy and learning that lasts. Almost a decade after these lofty ideals, the course is still alive and well, and it continues to serve as a cornerstone of the MBA curriculum.

## **COURSE DESIGN**

The course is predicated on the thought that active involvement through meaningful, facilitated experiences enhances learning (Luckner & Nadler, 1997). Not only are a myriad of experiences provided, the encounters are varied and seek to provide “learning that lasts” (Mentkowski et al., 2000, p. 1). The experiences range from real time simulation, personality and physical assessments, coaching by current business leaders, to outdoor and indoor challenge course activities.

Learning goals of the course include:

- Interpret data through personal assessments as it relates to followership and leadership
- Apply organizational behavior concepts and theory to leading in organizations
- Evaluate ethical decision-making models in leadership decisions
- Apply cultural frameworks to analyze leadership in a global context

The course is intended to provide students an integrative opportunity to discover leadership from different aspects, learning about themselves and others in the process.

## **SIMULATIONS**

Simulations have become a crucial part of today's business learning environment (Anderson & Lawton, 2008). Maharg and Owen posit that they are essential for learning all types of situations (2007). The Fast Start simulation is a business simulation that groups students in groups of approximately 10 students who comprise a corporation with every leadership position from the CEO to a management consultant. It is not a computer based simulation, but rather a working group where the students must operate together to produce a product. The students are organized to facilitate their learning and experience group dynamics in a stressful setting with other students whom they do not know. Many students are international and have just arrived in the United States. The simulation and group exercise for about 20 total hours and occurs over a weekend that students often call "MBA bootcamp." Each group of students are required to produce a product at the end of the weekend and present it to their peers and the faculty. Not only does this weekend experience allow the students to quickly get to know one another, it also provides them a common experience to reference when talking about individual leadership and group dynamics throughout the course.

After the Fast Start simulation, several groups are clustered for a class of students (always under thirty total). In class the students then get to know the larger group and discuss various lessons garnered from the Fast Start experience and start learning leadership theory, beginning with the great man theory (Carlyle, Goldberg, Brattin, & Engel, 1993) and continuing to present day theories.

## **ASSESSMENTS**

Students then move from leadership theory to comprehensive assessments. These assessments begin with emotional intelligence and progress through personality assessments of Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI), Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation – Behavior (FIRO-B). Each individual receives a personal individual report on each assessment and then a roll up of the reports combined. Their final assessment is a physical assessment followed by a class that links leadership to fitness.

According to Mayer and colleagues (1999, p. 267), "emotional intelligence refers to an ability to recognize the meanings of emotions and their relationships, and to reason and problem-solve on the basis of them. Emotional intelligence is involved in the capacity to perceive emotions, assimilate emotion-related feelings, understand the information of those emotions, and manage them." The goal is to identify the student's strengths and limitations and then work to improve them. Boyatzis et al. (2002) postulates that developing these competencies in an MBA curriculum is paramount, and even more importantly, it can be accomplished.

Students were tested with the Multi-dimensional Emotional Intelligence Quotient – Abridged, 7<sup>th</sup> Revision. (MEIQ-Ab) This appraisal consists of two sections, a self-report area and an ability portion. Individuals were then given a score, a break out of the results and a section that helps the students apply specific actions to improve. Research illustrates the importance of cultivating this interest in emotional intelligence and links the integration and knowledge that can improve performance in teams (Ashkanasy & Dasborough, 2003). Along with emotional intelligence, students need to understand the ways they are likely to engage in conflict.

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) provided the individual students with a profile and interpretive report on how they react in conflict situations (Thomas, 1974). The situation behaviors are described over two basic dimensions – assertiveness and cooperativeness, and these two dimensions can explain the five common methods of dealing with adversity. Students receive their assessment results then the next week they record how they deal with conflict and reflect on the styles they typically used versus the styles the report said they would use. The TKI is a common business tool that can help leaders learn about implications of these behaviors for work and also for negotiations (Shell, 2001).

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is another popular assessment that is often used with MBA programs, especially those wanting to develop “reflective executives” (Roglio & Light, 2009, p. 156). The analysis the students receive on their personality type is used to help them as individuals, but also helps in their work with class teams. The preferences allow them to understand their type and their teammate’s type. Having students communicate about their type and preferences in advance of working in a team is a helpful tool for all and helps in the learning process (Isabella, 2005).

The final personality and leadership assessment the students are exposed to is the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation – Behavior (FIRO-B). This personality tool assesses how a person usually behaves towards others and how an individual would like others to act towards him (Schutz, 1977). The results can help the students plan career development, increase job satisfaction, improve effectiveness on teams and identify the strengths and weaknesses of their leadership style. After the three personality and the emotional intelligence assessments, the students are then given a physical assessment.

The idea behind the physical fitness assessment is the latest research linking leadership to health and fitness (Mueller, Georgianna, & Roux, 2010; Pearce, 2007). Leaders often have high pressure jobs; the more physically fit they are, the more likely they are better prepared to handle the stress. An often over looked area of leadership development is preparing leaders to manage this to stress through fitness (Lovelace, Manz, & Alves, 2007).

For the physical assessment, individuals are tested in all five components of physical fitness including cardiorespiratory fitness, muscular strength, muscle endurance, flexibility and body composition (Medicine, 2013). The elements examined allow for an eclectic mix of fitness from coach potatoes to ultra-marathoners without highlighting any one individual as “poor fitness” or “excellent fitness.” An example of the cardiorespiratory part of the assessment is the Cooper test (Bernstein et al., 1994; Maksud & Coutts, 1971) a twelve minute run/walk at an individual’s own pace around a standard track which the results are then normed against executives across the nation who have taken the Cooper test in the past (Cooper Institute, 2006). This class allows individuals to evaluate their own fitness, whatever level, and determine if a physical fitness program is something that would benefit their leadership. The students are given the knowledge and skills to develop an individualized program to move from where they may be now to where they want to be in the future. Along with the physical assessment, there are other

physical challenges students are presented in the course, the leader challenge course (or low ropes course) is one of these challenges.

## **CHALLENGE COURSE**

Besides the Fast Start simulation and the assessments, students also experience an outdoor leadership challenge course and are encouraged to examine their behavior on the course with regards to their previous individual personality assessments and group theory dynamics that they observe within their groups. The leader challenge course is a “low ropes” type of course that gives groups real situational challenges that require team work and both mental and physical dexterity to ensure success (Cacioppe & Adamson, 1988). Using a challenge course for MBAs is not a new concept (Isabella, 2005; Judge, 2005; Prussia & Weis, 2003), but the application to their learning is a key outcome. Teams also learn from failure and are encouraged through certified facilitators to learn as they move from element to element, but it is more than just “learning by doing” it is learning through deepening the experiential pedagogy (Roberts, 2002). The facilitators ensure the students understand the learning occurring on the course is relevant and transferable to current work situations. The general goals for the application of an outdoor program include (Cacioppe & Adamson, 1988, p. 77):

- Help individuals achieve more of their potential by overcoming personal barriers and limitations
- Improve individual and group planning, decision-making and problem solving processes, especially in unclear and uncertain circumstances
- Learn to manage stress and to function effectively in difficult situations
- Develop team cohesion and team effectiveness
- Improve interpersonal communication, cooperation and trust
- Analyze and manage challenging activities and to take risks safely
- Enhance participants’ ability to innovatively deal with the new and unexpected
- Contribute to organization development and change

Students take their experiences from the challenge course, their assessments, the simulation, and develop an individual development plan (IDP) of how they can become an improved version of a leader. Individuals evaluate their strengths and their challenges looking at four specific domains, themselves, their work, their community and their family. These IDPs must be specific and measurable, containing steps for students to reach their goals and become their vision of a leader.

## **COACHING**

Once a student completes his/her IDP, s/he is afforded the opportunity to be linked with a certified coach from the local business community. Coaching has been exalted as the panacea as a major developmental tool for students from undergraduate to executive level (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007). Kilburg’s (2001) eight component coaching effectiveness model matches up well to the conditions of the program. Using the student and coach, they include: 1&2) commitment of the coach and student to the same path of development 3) characteristics of the issues and problems of the student 4) structure of the encounters 5) relationship of the coach and student 6) quality of the coaching 7) adherence to predetermined boundaries of sessions and 8) the student’s support from the program for coaching.

These business leader coaches, many whom are professional coaches with their own certifications, have also attended to a daylong certification class held at the university, and understand what the leadership course for students entails. The coaches are given a coaching book, *Co-active Coaching: Changing Business and Transforming Lives* (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2011) and are linked with individual students based on their bio and the student interest. The University has trained over 100 community leaders who serve as these coaches. The coaching is at least a three month process, spanning often beyond the length of the semester long course. Some students stop the coaching after the three months, but personal experience shows that many continue with their coaches and some have continued with their coach for two years, the entire length of the MBA program.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The course has been in place for almost a decade, but it remains a work in progress. Professors are not satisfied with status quo and regularly discuss changes and enhancements. According to the “essential elements of a dynamic curriculum for learning that lasts” the following are required in a dynamic process (Mentkowski et al., 2000, pp. 314-316):

1. Learning experiences organized as frameworks for learning
2. Consensus on content and assessment
3. Integrated interactive contexts and cultures
4. Articulated conceptual frameworks of assumptions and principles
5. Clarifies mission, aims and philosophy
6. Ongoing curriculum scholarship

The holistic MBA leadership course contains these elements and the professors constantly revise and update to reflect current issues affecting leaders of today. Experiences including simulations, assessments, challenge courses, and coaching enhances students' education through active involvement in meaningful experiential learning – learning that lasts - that improves their understanding of leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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