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Teaching leadership for change in the business school

Margaret Andrews 27 May 2016 Issue No:415



If any part of the university should understand leadership, it would be the business school. Not only do the faculty research leadership, they also impart this knowledge to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as participants from across the globe in a variety of executive education programmes.

While estimates for the amount spent on leadership development vary widely, leadership education and development is big business.
TrainingIndustry.com



This article is part of a series on Transformative Leadership published by University World News in partnership with The MasterCard Foundation. UWN is solely responsible for the editorial content.



estimates that [corporate spending on training](#) (including both insourced and outsourced spend for all types of training, not just for management and leadership education) was US\$356 billion in 2015.

In a [recent McKinsey article](#), Stanford University's Jeffrey Pfeffer estimates the amount spent on leadership development in the United States alone ranges from US\$14 billion to US\$50 billion per year.

But what is leadership? The definitions of leadership are many, reminding me of an utterance by US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in a 1964 case about obscenity. When asked whether he could define obscenity, Judge Potter said that he couldn't define the type of material that would be considered obscene, but I know it when I see it. Leadership can be a bit like that.

Type leadership into Amazon.com and you get 183,316 listings (strategy gets you 230,338). Do the same with Google and 753 million listings for leadership come up in 0.4 seconds. There's a lot of talk and ink devoted to leadership so what, exactly, is leadership?

Business News Daily offers [33 Ways to Define Leadership](#). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines leadership as a position as a leader of a group, organisation, etc; the time when a person holds the position of leader; and the power or ability to lead other people.

BusinessDictionary.com defines transformational leadership as a style of leadership in which the leader identifies the needed change, creates a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executes the change with the commitment of the members of the group. This site also says that Unlike management, leadership cannot be taught. Hmmm.

In their 2010 book, [Rethinking the MBA: Business education at a crossroads](#), authors Srikant Datar, David Garvin and Patrick Cullen note that virtually all of the top business schools aspire to develop leaders, yet their efforts in this area are widely viewed as falling short.

Part of the problem may be that we know very little about what constitutes good leaders or how to develop transformational leadership and the prevailing forces in business schools are unlikely to get us there.

In his 2007 book, [From Higher Aims to Hired Hands](#), Rakesh Khurana from Harvard Business School quotes management expert Professor Ralph Stogdill in saying, an endless accumulation of empirical data has not produced an integrated understanding of leadership, and notes the probability that leadership studies will make significant strides in developing a fundamental knowledge base is fairly low. The reality is that inside universities and research-based business schools, leadership research has relatively low status.

Lots of activity, but few results

Many business schools as well as companies have picked up the challenge of leadership development. However, Pfeffer notes that the enormous resources invested in leadership development have produced so few results.

Pfeffer goes on to say that the problem with the vast leadership industry... stems from the oft-unacknowledged tendency to confuse what people believe ought to be true with what actually is and that the moral framing of leadership substantially oversimplifies the real complexity of the dilemmas and choices leaders confront.

A [Financial Times article](#) discussing Pfeffers book, [Leadership BS](#), paraphrases the main themes as bosses are not modest, leaders are bound to lie (even great leaders such as Abraham Lincoln or Nelson Mandela), authenticity is overrated and the gap between aspiration and reality is one reason that trust in leaders and leadership gurus has evaporated.

Anne Lytle, professor and director of leadership at Monash Business School in Australia, puts it this way: I think the vast majority of business schools do a completely insufficient job at developing transformational leaders.

"When we think of what we mean by a transformational leader, it is someone with character and in the

old terminology charisma. Someone who is a role model, who creates vision and motivates energy and identity, who inspires trust, loyalty and admiration of followers in the pursuit of higher goals, such as promoting greater social equity.

Probably a number of the business schools who claim transformational leaders as their products have not necessarily created them, but intelligently selected applicants who are already far along or primed for that journey.

Deborah Ancona, professor of management at the MIT Sloan School of Management in the US, cautioned a too-narrow view of leadership, emphasising that leadership, particularly the type that involves large-scale change, is needed at all levels.

She says: Too often we associate transformational leadership with the charismatic leader at the top of the organisation who provides the vision and everyone else just follows. However, any kind of leadership effort of this type in today's fast-paced, complex world really needs distributed leadership at all levels.

That would mean input and consultation with people inside and outside of the organisation who have fresh information and insights about customers, markets, new technologies, competitive challenges and future trends, creating synergies among people driving existing initiatives and those excited about creating something new, and letting others throughout the organisation drive change in their own part of the organisation with simple rules guiding alignment across initiatives.

The world is too complex for a one-person show, although you certainly do need great leadership at the top to provide the guidance, safety and passion to enable others to lead and act, while avoiding chaos.

Lata Dhir, associate professor at the SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, India, recognises how difficult it can be to teach leadership effectively: Teaching leadership is complex; therefore how it is taught has to be creative.

Guy Pfeffernan, CEO of the [Global Business School Network](#), puts it this way: Successful management education prepares students for tough challenges they will encounter in the real world. Well-run experiential learning programmes do just that. They offer students unique opportunities to dive into unfamiliar territory, work as a team, yet think independently, and for many, to hone their leadership skills."

Innovation

Leadership means different things to different people and is considered, researched and taught quite differently at business schools across the globe. This said, most business schools teach leadership and some of them have created some innovative approaches to the content. Here are a few examples:

- **Monash Business School:** Monash is using brain science and evidence-based research to create a platform that helps students develop and practise core leadership behaviours and apply them in their daily lives. Students at Monash devote 25% of their curriculum load each term to focus on their leadership development, such as self awareness, sense of identity and purpose, resilience/growth mindset, empathy and mindfulness. According to Anne Lytle, director of leadership at Monash, a great deal of the focus in Monash's [Leadership and Personal Development Program](#) is on the fundamental skills, such as having good self-awareness, self-management and empathy, which means that a student will have the foundations for having difficult conversations and making an inspirational presentation about a meaningful vision.
- **SP Jain Institute of Management and Research:** According to Lata Dhir, associate professor at SPJIMR: Our pedagogy is rooted in our philosophy of promoting value-based growth and influencing practice. SP Jain students take a course, [Personal Growth Lab](#), that gives them deep insights into themselves and helps them to identify their core strengths and areas of development. According to Dhir, they make use of various tools like feedback and psychometric tests, outbound activities and leadership assessment, and the results of the lab exercises are

crystallised to help them create a leadership development plan to help them chart an effective roadmap for personal development.

- **MIT Sloan School of Management:** MIT, a long-time proponent of action learning, uses a series of [Action Learning Labs](#) to allow students to put classroom theory into practice.
- **Stanford Graduate School of Business:** Stanford offers [Leadership Labs](#), a required course for first-year MBA students, that teaches students the fundamentals of decision-making, critical thinking, organisation behaviour, as well as a series of exercises and simulations designed to create the urgency and ambiguity that frequently accompanies real-life leadership challenges. Among the most popular leadership-related courses at Stanford is [Interpersonal Dynamics](#), aka the touchy feely class that has been voted the most popular elective for 45 years.
- **The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill:** UNC has created [an app on leadership](#) that guides students through their leadership journey using the very latest interactive technology and plays a role in the schools [Leadership Immersion capstone course](#). It includes interactive content about UNC's leadership methodology, as well as a leadership library of articles and insights on leadership.
- **The Yale School of Management:** Yales [Leadership Development Program](#), which covers a students entire programme, focuses on four levels of leadership: at the individual, interpersonal/team, organisational and global levels. The school recently announced a [Global Virtual Teams course](#) that is now part of the core curriculum.

As Colm Kearny, head of Monash Business School, notes: Business schools dont have a monopoly on leadership. This is increasingly true, with a variety of players from specialised companies (eg, [Fullbridge](#)), new units of consulting firms (eg, [McKinsey](#)), continuing education units (eg, [Harvard Division of Continuing Education Professional Development Programs](#)) and a variety of MOOC players (eg, [Udemy for Business](#)) getting in on the game.

Given all of the action in this area, leadership development will continue to be a growing, evolving, more competitive business well into the future.

What does transformational leadership mean at your school? What are you doing to equip students to be effective leaders when they leave your programme? Please email me at the address below and, if there is sufficient response, Ill do a follow-on article including more information or debate.

Margaret Andrews is a seasoned academic leader with over 20 years of experience in higher education, executive development, business and consulting. She has held leadership positions at MIT, Harvard University and Hult International Business School and has a track record of creating and launching successful programmes and turning around underperforming programmes and units. She teaches a variety of leadership and strategy courses at Harvard Universitys Division of Continuing Education, and is also president of Mind and Hand Associates, a boutique consulting firm serving a global higher education clientele. You can reach her at margaret@mind-and-hand.com.

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