

It is one of the oldest and most common complaints – management schools are great at giving good advice to others but themselves rarely practise the management skills they preach. But it can be done. **Loick Roche** and **Sabine Lauria** explain how

# WALKING THE TALK





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Back in 2007 Robert Sutton, professor of management science at the Stanford Engineering School in America and a researcher in the field of evidence-based management, wrote an award-winning if rather explicitly titled book (*The No A\*\*hole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*) explaining how workplace bullying and other misdemeanours can destroy morale and productivity.

No one is suggesting that management school faculty and staff are as bad as that but it is often the case that our industry has a reputation for not ourselves following the organisational advice we so lavishly bestow on others.

If we are to overcome this poor image of our profession, it is vital that we address this issue – and the human resource (HR) department of a school can play a key role.

Most business/management schools and similar institutions have HR departments but their role is often confined to organising occasional training programmes and preparing the odd document for validation committees. HR needs to be much more than that and at Grenoble EM in France we have made a great effort over the past few years to bring HR into the heart of managing the school.

It is an attempt to have a much more proactive organisation in managing people's expectations and careers and providing greater opportunities for staff mobility. This strategy, it is felt, increases well-being within the organisation, reduces staff turnover and improves overall efficiency. In fact, the school has a very low absentee rate and staff stay for an average of seven years, which is quite high for the sector.

Senior management has tried to set the tone for this. For several years, the motto of the school has been that it is our role to make Grenoble EM "an exceptional place to exercise our profession". In a healthy working environment, people will naturally want to take on projects and will not need to be controlled. Some estimates even suggest that motivated staff will work three times as hard as demotivated ones.

This is not unique to higher education. Vineet Nayar, vice-chairman and joint managing director of leading India-based IT company HCL, is convinced of this. With a global workforce of 55,000 the company's motto is "employee first, customer second".

In Grenoble, several concrete initiatives have already been put into place. These centre on the idea of creating opportunities for people to learn, to engage and to progress within the school. In introducing such a policy care has been taken to look at all levels of the school's organisation.

There are a multitude of possibilities for faculty, managers and general administration staff. Too often it is this last group that has been forgotten within the development of management schools, yet they play a vital and important role in ensuring a school's efficient functioning.

### Growth through opportunities

#### *Opportunities to learn*

Faculty and researchers at Grenoble EM undertake a series of training sessions throughout the year. These can be in the form of conferences or workshops with particular emphasis on research and teaching skills. This ensures that newer members of the staff benefit from the skills of more experienced members.

Notably, it has resulted in a sharp increase in research output in the past ten years and a perceptible improvement in overall teaching. In the same vein, managers are also offered workshop and seminar opportunities.

One current initiative is a five-day training course over three months to enable all managers within the school to share some of their difficulties and to give them the necessary tools to improve their managerial competences.

This initiative has been highly praised and there are now several new projects in place as a result. Other initiatives for all staff include training on social networks and developing technical skills to reflect the requirements of different jobs.

One simple, but highly effective, initiative has been a series of short breakfast seminars with different departments giving a 20-minute presentation on what they do. It is amazing how much you learn during these seminars, even from departments you think you know very well. Perhaps this should not be surprising, given that the nature of academia is bright, autonomous people working on very specific and detailed tasks.



#### *Opportunities to engage*

The overall ethos of the school is that staff at all levels are responsible for its development. One large current project has brought together people from all parts of the school in an effort to rationalise certain processes. The degree of autonomy within the school has led to many entrepreneurial initiatives but at times this has meant that people in different parts of the school are working on different projects where the processes are not necessarily aligned.

This initiative is in line with Andy Grove's famous saying that an entrepreneurial company should know how to "let chaos reign and then rein in the chaos". Many companies that have undergone rapid growth have come up against such challenges.

At a recent EFMD meeting, Adrian Wooldridge, better known as the Schumpeter columnist of *The Economist*, criticised European business schools for assuming that innovation had to be on a large scale and involve considerable financial investment

We understand this position and have made efforts to stimulate small but often significant innovation from within. Indeed, the management team actively encourages individual initiatives and invites staff members to start new projects in line with the school's overall strategy. This gives the feeling that everybody within the school can innovate.

#### *Opportunities to progress*

The school also actively offers various opportunities for job mobility. Nearly half (45%) of staff at Grenoble EM have changed positions since arriving at the school.

The rationale behind this is that corporate culture is much more difficult to acquire than the technical skills needed to do a job. By using and developing its own talent, Grenoble EM believes people will be far more efficient, particularly when carrying out projects that involve several departments.

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## Sharing and developing talent

### Internal mobility

At an internal level, staff are encouraged to spend one week in another department within the school. By shadowing colleagues, they get a better understanding of what other departments contribute to the overall workings of the school and their involvement in the school's advancement. This is an opportunity for an exchange of best practices and to create greater professional links within the school.

### International mobility

Management schools have been very active in encouraging international mobility for students and staff. And this has led to massive increases in international teaching and research over the past 20 years. However, some management staff have been left behind in this development. Hence Grenoble EM has introduced a policy encouraging individual staff members to spend at least a week abroad every year at one of the school's international partners.

The HR department and the Centre for International Affairs select a number of candidates each year, identify their needs, and then choose an international partner that can best satisfy those needs. Staff members then spend one to two weeks with the partner institutions, meeting a variety of staff and faculty. On their return they write a short report and give a presentation on their experience. This ensures that it is a collective as well as an individual learning experience.

### Promotion mobility

The school believes strongly in internal promotion. Nearly half of current staff members have changed jobs since arriving at the school. This is highly motivating since it offers a clear indication that hard work and initiative will be rewarded.

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Again, this is a borrowing of best practices from organisations as diverse as Procter & Gamble, Marks & Spencer and Barcelona Football Club. As management schools it is important to look at a variety of different industries and try to integrate some of their methods.

In two new initiatives this year, Grenoble EM launched a collaborative community project and Pro bono Marathon. The community project allows each staff and faculty member to work for a local association for five days and the one-day Pro bono Marathon, which takes place at Grenoble EM, allows faculty and staff to work directly with a host of local associations to help them in different fields such as marketing, communication, HR and strategy. This has a two-way positive impact.

First it helps the association concerned (with the hope that many people continue to be involved long after their five days are finished) but, second, it also stimulates the staff member. And by giving something back to the local community, it is thought that staff members will feel more attached to it and may even bring back some practices that they can use in their roles.

Grenoble EM also offers a wide range of optional sporting activities for staff. These include yoga, rowing, jogging an annual charity marathon event, and of course, the inevitable skiing activities, given the city's Olympic heritage.

### Practising what we preach

These are just some of the initiatives that have been taken by the school, given its logic of creating a healthy working environment so that people will remain more engaged in their jobs. Does this mean that everything is perfect in the school? Of course not. The very nature of our profession is based on confronting conflicting ideas, and so of course there are differences of opinion. And, of course, effective talent management is a process rather than a one-time event.

However, by giving the HR department a very central role within the school, it is hoped that, as a management school, we really are practising what we preach.



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