

Educating Ourselves

On the role of professional development in business Schools

By

Ulrich Hommel, Director of Business School Development & Associate Director Quality Services, EFMD GN

Open positions: leaders for unsettled times





An overwhelming abundance of narratives by now suggests that the future of business schools (or universities for that matter) will not be like the past – not by any measure. The flood of concepts describing the drivers of change is certainly massive: Industry 4.0, Internet of Things, Artificial Intelligence, Virtual/Augmented Reality, Gamification of Learning and Work, Blockchain (as provider of trust and educational access) and so on. As business schools transition into this still fuzzy future, professional development of executives and staff will become an even bigger strategic priority and will demand different approaches. What it entails is the focus of this article.

Business schools within the wider eco-system

New technologies will have a multi-faceted impact on every aspect of a business school's business model from the way education is provided and what it consists of, what role research can and needs to play in this context, and how a business school is linked to the outside world to maintain its academic and financial viability. There is an emerging consensus that higher education has entered a process of unbundling and business schools will most likely be early adapters.

Unbundling implies that the provision of management education will increasingly happen

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within ecosystems of potentially very diverse players. Integrated, traditional business schools will have their place next to technology providers, freelancers, corporate talent managers and potentially many more.

As business schools will be forced to absorb the disruptions of technological change, so will their leaders need to deploy a different skill set to chart the course through, what seems, much rougher waters ahead. While, so far, a “steady hand” and the “ability to say no” were appreciated leadership attributes, these will need to give way to leadership styles that embrace change as the new normal and accept “trial and error” as a guiding principle for institutional development.

Business school professionals will in the future need to interact within ecosystems on all organisational levels and in non-traditional ways. Most obviously, their schools will become transactional contributors to educational value chains largely sitting elsewhere. As more of the current learning content becomes technologically commodified, schools will probably put more emphasis on specialized training that can for instance be produced in cooperation with others within self-organizing networks. It appears that business school professionals are currently not adequately prepared for these and similar emerging challenges.

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Professional development in a traditional context

Organisational charts of business schools are in the majority of cases fairly uniform. There exist vertical management trajectories in teaching and learning, research, executive education/stakeholder management and possibly international relations interconnecting the different organisational layers.

Professional roles exist each step of the way and are often filled by pairs of academic and non-academic staff. Faculty move initially into managerial positions by taking on assignments as part of their service commitments; for example, as programme directors or department heads. Administrative staff dominate the backbone of institutional operations such as marketing and communications, placement, or student support services. But this often presents contested space between business school and parent university.

The dominant model of professional development is still “learning on the job” and, as experience and track record builds up, expanding the portfolio of managerial responsibility within teams or by moving up to the next organisational layer. Targeted development offers may help along the way to prepare for the next bigger assignment. They are organised in-house, offered by the parent or outside organisations such as EFMD. They may also come in the form of peer-based mentoring networks (as for instance found in quality assurance). Hence, professional development complements a dean’s effort to set up succession pipelines by ensuring the smooth transitioning of people between roles.

The current approach to professional development is not sustainable if the institutional context is changing as suggested above. It tends to replicate the *status quo* in terms of managerial competencies and solidifies existing silo structures that hinder the immersion into surrounding eco-systems. In contrast, business school professionals would ideally aim for acquiring the skill to invest institutional slack (resulting from an abundance of resources or over-compliance



of existing rules and norms) into targeted deviations from the status quo, even if this involves breaking with existing conventions.

Targeting the competencies of the future

Eco-systems can be extremely disorderly, but at the same time amazingly versatile to produce refined, customised outcomes. It is therefore the wrong question to ask whether the sector will eventually move from one state of educational provision to another. The future will be one of multiplicity with the co-existence of many different educational experiences. These will certainly include traditional degrees, stackable qualifications acquired from one or several suppliers, but may also involve different forms of evolutionary credentialing with a broad variety of educational experiences.

Business models will change as a consequence. Business schools may, for instance, increasingly assume the role of global talent seekers, while other agents in the network lead in talent refinement. Revenue models may become more fragmented





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and diverse ranging from fee-paying students, management talent farmed out by companies, HR angels financing students in exchange for a share of future income to specialised education needs funded with smart contracts sitting on a blockchain.

In this new environment, the leaders of business schools (thought of very broadly) need to become experts in scanning the environment for emerging opportunities (which is a matter of picking up and aggregating weak signals appropriately). It requires, first of all, a greater readiness for critical self-reflection and also thrives on a bottom-up attention to detail (as opposed to top-down simplification based on the glories of past achievements). Upon further reflection, the reader will understand that steadfast leadership is gaining a very different meaning in this context.

Pairing situation awareness with creative and explorative leadership gets us only half the way. It must be supported by the engagement of faculty and staff (and other stakeholders) to augment the understanding of existing challenges and opportunities. Fostering faculty and staff

empowerment with greater control delegation can be an important step in the right direction. The challenge is formidable – to move the typical professional out of a siloed mode of work and to challenge the belief that the bureaucratic formalization of processes is an essential ingredient for the provision of quality. Targeted professional development can help to meet that challenge.

Business school organisations must ultimately acquire a proactive posture. It needs to be practiced, stress tested, linked to a unity of purpose and, to cite Nassim Taleb, embedded in incentive structures ensuring that decision-makers have actually “skin in the game”. Networks will logically play a key role in dealing with disruptive change; it will allow business schools to leverage knowledge and capture synergies via co-creation.

What is conjectured here is nothing short of a fundamental make-over of organisational culture. Business school professionals must be prepared to drive this process in a measured and deliberate fashion. Professional development will be a vital ingredient to make this happen.

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Realigning professional development with future development needs

Organised professional development so far targets mostly functional roles, focuses on tool boxes that make the person effective on the job and augments the training with leadership experiences that make the interactions with others more effective, be it superiors, colleagues, people managed directly or indirectly, as well as third party agents connected to the school on an arm's length basis.

While this continues to be relevant, it needs to be supplemented with more generalist-type training that enables individuals to analyse the issue from different perspectives, which will also grant a deeper understanding of the context. To borrow from the business schools' medicine cabinet directly, professionals need to acquire the ability to deal with "dirty puzzles" that are ambiguous and complex.

And the context is eco-system based. To use the analogy of an automobile, business school leaders from the top down have to understand whether they can contribute best to the driving experience as the steering wheel, the suspension or merely the motor oil that ensures the smooth functioning of the engine. Maybe all of these and more in different relational arrangements. Probably better to be versatile as steering wheels may become redundant rather quickly.





Business school work is also likely to become more transitory, implying that professional development should address the individuals' mobility needs. This is not a negative, but actually a necessary element to strengthen a school's linkages to the eco-system. Individuals from diverse backgrounds need to be initiated to business school work and enabled to bring to bear their non-academic experiences and competencies. Equal attention must be devoted to advancing their career until they can be sent off to more lucrative assignments of their choosing. To pick up on a thought originally developed by Peter Lorange, business schools have to be managed as learning organisations. In an eco-system world, this also involves creating tentacles to the outside world. Professional development can help to strengthen the in- and outward connectivity.

Just as the business school community is searching for the way forward - hoping for a gradual evolution of change but bracing itself for jumps and jolts along the way – so must the breadth and structure of the professional development offer be advanced step by step. We will need a competition of ideas how to advance the skills of managing ourselves. Experimentation will be desirable; riding behind the wave of change will be most dangerous.

EFMD as a provider of professional development

EFMD has a long-standing track record as a provider of leadership programmes (see in particular Cornuel/Marinkovich and Burquel/Creagh in this volume). Future expansion and refinement of the offer will see a much more explicit link to the disruptive challenges facing business schools. This will meet demand needs but will also provide an opportunity to activate communities with the EFMD membership that can ultimately strengthen institutional support networks.

This article outlines a vision, a point or better a corridor on the horizon that we are targeting when developing training offers. Specific offers will still be grounded in the now and then so that participants can meet and thrive on the professional challenges of today. The visionary focal point helps to create the edge that charts the way ahead.

By going beyond the simple creation of issue awareness, EFMD Professional Development delivers learning points for the wider business school community on the ways quality can continued to be improved and assured in this more fluid future. After all, this is the very core of EFMD's mission.