

Educating for personal strength and well-being

Business schools face increasing calls to expand their focus to educating for personal strength and well-being. **Jeroen Kraaijenbrink** outlines a nine-step programme that helps students—and staff—deal with the stress they face in today's society



Ever since their creation around a century ago, business schools have had a strong focus on helping students develop their careers and generate wealth—for themselves and for the organisations they work for. This has been, and still is, a key attractor for MBA students and one of the sources of the MBA's extraordinary growth and success.

But the landscape is changing and a new generation of MBA students is putting less value on traditional careers and wealth. Instead, they place more emphasis on making a difference, personal growth and well-being. They still want to be successful but in different ways than they did in the past and while doing so they also want to feel good and do good.

At the same time, realising these ambitions is challenging. While students apparently face unlimited opportunities, global competition, information overload, peer pressure and social media stress can make them feel overwhelmed and anxious.

Two effects stand out. The first is performance stress. Students feel a strong pressure to perform from their programme, from other students, from their family and friends, and from society at large. One indicator is the increasing burnout rate among students that we witness. Just talking to students and watching them carefully tells the same story: many of them are seriously stressed.

On top of that is conformation-based, or social, stress. Alongside performance-based stress, students also experience pressure to stay abreast and conform to what others are thinking, seeing, feeling and doing. In today's social media society, students—and not only students—look around increasingly and feel pressured to fulfil others' expectations.

They "have to" pay attention to all their WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram friends and messages, "have to" live the fun and fantastic life that everyone else seems to be living, and "have to" share that life with the world. Being so connected and oriented towards other people makes it very hard for students to stand out as confident individuals following their own intuition and goals.

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One of the most important, if not the most important, goals of education is preparing students for life. Helping students develop the attitude and skills to survive and prosper in today's society is an educators' responsibility. This means that helping students deal with the stress they experience is also laid at educators' doors.

While this applies to all types of education, it is particularly relevant for business schools. After their MBA programme, students are expected to be leaders in organisations. It is exactly in those roles that the pressures to perform and conform to what others want are strong. And it is exactly the kind of people that can deal with this stress that we want as our leaders of the future: strong individuals who dare to stand out and can lead their organisations confidently towards a bright future.

The nine-step programme

Over the past two years I have developed a programme that can help people face the performance and social stress that they experience and reclaim their calm and confident self.

The programme is called "No More Bananas" (from the American slang expression "go bananas") and draws on a book of that title plus a variety of disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, religion and martial arts combined with experience gathered on my personal journey developing the necessary mindset and skills for myself. Because, let me openly admit here, I certainly needed that and still need it. Every day.

The basis of the programme is a nine-step personal self-help journey. Developing the attitude and skills to withstand the stress you are facing is very much a personal process. Others can help but the whole point is that you develop the personal strength to face this world and withstand all the madness it contains. The nine steps are:

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Step 1: Calm down

The first step is to calm down your mind. If you are stressed, you are too full of thoughts and feelings to act sensibly. Therefore, before you can make any progress, you need to calm down. The way to do this is to shut off the noise and notifications and drastically reduce your information intake.

Step 2: Let go

The next step is to stop trying to control the many things that are beyond your control. Stress is also a result of keeping too many balls in the air. Once you drop a significant number of them, you will calm down further and free enough brain space to continue your journey.

Step 3: Take responsibility

Once you have calmed down a bit and let go a number of things, the third step is that you take responsibility for the fact that you are stressing out—and for your life in general. You can only make further progress if you accept that there is nothing and no one else to blame and that you are the only one responsible.

Step 4: Dethrone yourself

The next step is a bit of a nasty one—at least for me. Getting rid of your stress also implies that you have to “dethrone” yourself. This means realising that you are not as important as you think you are and that anything you do, say, feel, think or worry about is not so important either.

Step 5: Build character

After putting both feet back on the ground and taking responsibility for your journey, you can start reclaiming your own individuality. That is what the fifth step is about. It helps you to ignore your inner call to conform to what others think and do and live your life in your own way—even if that goes against accepted norms.

Step 6: Detox yourself

Going through Steps 3 to 5 helps you develop the right attitude to face stress. These three steps are emotionally the hardest ones since they imply reconstructing yourself. Once you are that far, it is time to start detoxing yourself. This means that you start cleaning your mind of all the clutter about what you are supposed to believe, aspire, say and do.

Step 7: Get organised

In the previous steps, you have mainly worked on your mind, on improving the way you think. That is the most important part of the journey. However, you also need to work on the way you work, on how you plan and organise things. This helps you reduce the chances of falling back into your old behaviours. Accordingly, Step 7 is to evaluate how you work and get organised.

Step 8: Think sensibly

After the first seven steps you should be able to stand firm against the never-ending flow of expectations thrown at you. Now, you are ready to take in information again. When you do so, put on your researcher’s hat, challenge what you hear and the source it comes from, and start thinking sensibly.

Step 9: Pay attention

In the last step, you make yourself fully ready for today’s world of too much. Step 8 taught you how to think and act more sensibly so that you can separate the important from the non-important. In this final step, you actively seek to take in new information and connect to others while also staying calm. This means carefully paying attention to the things that matter, thereby using all your senses.

While these steps could be executed in parallel and in random order, there is a clear logic in the suggested order. The **Steps 1 and 2** help you disconnect from the world to create enough room and silence in your head to embark the rest of the journey. Subsequently, in **Steps 3 through 7** you deconstruct and reconstruct yourself so that you replace your old mindset and behaviours by new, more effective ones. Finally, in **Steps 8 and 9** you reconnect again. After all, the goal is not to end up as a disconnected hermit withdrawn from any interaction with others. Not at all. The goal of this programme is to help people function as full human beings with both feet in reality and in society.





To facilitate applying the nine steps, the programme offers five directly actionable remedies for each step. This means that, altogether students are offered 45 concrete things they can do immediately to reduce their stress levels and reclaim their calm and confident selves.



Podcast: a series of 10 podcasts (one generic and one for each step), recorded for UvA Radio (U of Amsterdam): <http://bit.ly/NMB-Podcast>

Kraaijenbrink, J., *No More Bananas*, Effectual Strategy Press, 2019

What business schools can do

The nine-step journey outlined above is very much a personal journey. Because it focuses on one's individual mindset it needs to be deeply internalised before it can be effective. It is for that very reason that taking responsibility is singled out as a separate step (Step 3).

Therefore, much more than the average subject taught at business schools, this learning journey requires students to take ownership. Furthermore, because it implies changing habits, it also requires an action-oriented learning process in which repetition and persistence are emphasised.

Taking that into account, business schools can do a lot to effectively facilitate students' learning. The traditional "teach and tell" approach obviously does not work nor does simply making the book mandatory reading.

Embracing state-of-the-art insights into learning and education, educators need to see themselves as facilitators of a 24/7, location-independent learning process. Accordingly, business schools can create a learning context and learning experiences that help students understand, apply and internalise the nine steps and they can serve as a motivator for students to actually embark and persist on the journey.

Finally, students are obviously not the only ones experiencing performance-based and social stress. What applies to them, also applies to business school staff. Fierce competition, publication pressure and tenure systems are significant sources of performance-based stress, and the social norms to conform to the academic system and behavioural codes are strongly present.

Therefore, to make a difference not only to their students but also to their staff, business schools could start adopting the insights from the programme in their HR practices.



About the Author

Jeroen Kraaijenbrink is an independent strategy writer, speaker, trainer and consultant, lecturing at the University of Amsterdam Business School and TSM Business School in the Netherlands. He authored several books on strategy and is a Forbes.com contributor. *No More Bananas* is his most recent book