



Even senior execs can benefit from training to cope with the modern business world. MATT SYMONDS looks at advanced management programmes

“**L**eaders need to find a way to gain honest feedback. The closer you get to the top, the less feedback you will get.” So explains leadership guru Rob Goffee, professor of organisational behaviour and faculty director for executive education at London Business School. Without the mental preparation or the ability to reflect, people can find leadership a very lonely place to be, so Goffee suggests that executives “find a third place – somewhere away from family and away from work that allows you time to think, reflect and gain perspective”.

If you are a senior manager looking to progress to boardroom level, then you’re probably a suitable candidate for the flagship of executive education, the general manager programme, otherwise referred to as the advanced management programme (AMP) or senior executive programme (SEP). These programmes guide high-potential senior managers through the transition required to take on a strategic leadership role for their business. Participants have at least 10, but often 15 or more years, of management experience, often spanning public and private sector roles.

Tim Morris, COO of Oxford Executive Education describes the typical participant in their four-week AMP: “The typical Oxford AMP participant is a senior executive. We often see functional or technical experts joining a company in their twenties and then following the AMP as an alternative to the executive MBA. If you have been selected for an AMP, it is a clear signal from the company that they are going to invest in you to build your human capital. Companies want to hold on to top talent, and are looking for ways to build loyalty. To achieve this, companies need to offer a suite of programmes through your twenties, thirties and forties.” This carefully selected peer group will spend from two to nine weeks engaged in an interactive, intensive and truly international programme.

Demand for such programmes is showing signs of an increase. Ethan Hanabury, associate dean at the Columbia Business School,

reports that applications for the most recent Columbia SEP was up by over 30% on last year and had a waiting list. He says: “They [the participants] can get out of the day-to-day, away from the urgent, and focus on what’s important.”

Though it sounds too good to be true, the testimonial from worldly wise programme participants is resounding. For Steve Quinn, the benefits of the month spent on the SEP at the London Business School were clearly dramatic, both personally and professionally. “I came away with unbelievably good information and insight and I returned to work with a much greater understanding of all the subjects covered, particularly leadership. In the four months since I attended the programme I have probably referred to my materials about 30 times.”

Certainly the current emphasis on leadership training and concerns about ensuring the succession of the organisation is filling business school classrooms. Many programmes are booked several months in advance, and a number of schools have even taken their AMP course on the road to satisfy demand in developing markets. The investment is not insignificant (*see table opposite*), ranging from €15,000 to €45,000 for a month or two of learning. So what are participants and institutions getting for their money?

For Alan Kingsley, a partner at KPMG in London and alumnus of the AMP at the Wharton School, it was invaluable to be away from the workplace and think about how to meet the challenges of increasing complexity and organisational transformation. “It is important to have a five-week spell to step out of the office. The programme is very broadly based and genuinely international. It has given me the confidence and knowledge to discuss issues at a higher level with clients.”

The pragmatic approach to learning combines the theory of the business school with the practice of the company’s future agenda. The learning style is resolutely interactive, including debate and shared experience with a group of high achievers, and involving the leading faculty and business leaders. Students are engaged for up to 14 hours a

day, five or six days a week. Even lunch can provide the opportunity to share the perspective of prominent business professionals who lead an exchange of ideas with participants.

As with all executive education, organisations want to see tangible results and a return on the training investment. Participants are compelled to analyse their own performance, making the learning process more relevant and applicable to sponsors. At Ashridge in the UK, participants begin discussing their learning needs with their superior two months before the programme begins, prepare a presentation on their changing work situation (personally and for the organisation), and experience 360° feedback from their work colleagues, fed back to them individually by an Ashridge coach to help them focus on personal strengths and development needs.

Participants return to the work environment mentally refreshed, with enhanced leadership skills to motivate teams and lead people to ambitious goals. They have also had the chance to challenge conventional wisdom, to take risks in an experiential learning environment and try out new ideas in confidential discussions with their peer group. They are not only thinking, they're also thinking about how they are thinking. In weeks they will have acquired the equivalent of years of experience.

Fitness sessions often make up part of the schedule, as schools emphasise the importance of physical wellbeing, which underlies professional performance. Many schools include sessions on work-life balance,

“Selection for an AMP is a clear signal the company is going to invest in you”

while INSEAD offers a health management module that includes counselling on stress management.

Many AMP and SEP alumni refer to their time on the programme as a life-changing experience. As a participant at the Oxford AMP explains: “It’s the extra bits, all taken together, that make the difference. The discussions outside the class have been as valuable as the formal sessions.” Alumni are often wistful. They see the AMP as the last formal executive education they are likely to experience. After that, they have to educate themselves.

YOUR HEAD IN THEIR HANDS

Business psychology has valuable benefits in revealing the mental traits that will dictate an individual's performance in a new situation, says RICHARD LOFTHOUSE

Ever heard the story of the executive posted from Europe to Indonesia? His wife went too, and the company generously paid for her beloved cherry trees to go with her. The trees died in Indonesian soil, she went mental and he lost the company €30m over six months. Another businessman started crying when his Whitney Houston CDs were impounded by customs, and a third went to pieces when he couldn't find a western hairdresser in Hong Kong.

Business success is always down to the messy reality of human beings, as any victim of a failed merger or acquisition will readily testify to. Business psychologists argue that beneath radical differences in culture and language, humans share a fundamental, universal psychology that can be explored and trained to facilitate success and avoid costly disasters in everything from staff recruitment to personnel relocation.

No one can say where universal psychology ends and the particularities of cultural nuance begin, but both factor heavily in leadership training of the sort offered by Kaisen Consulting. Gwyn Rogers, a founding partner, says he often screens individuals for their leadership potential, and also for their ability to adapt to foreign cultures.

Getting such decisions right can make or lose millions of euros for the client company, which explains why business psychology is such a rapidly growing sub-category of business consulting in Europe. What makes for leadership success in one culture can lead to disaster abroad, says Rogers, who considers himself to be in the business of “hard-nosed risk assessment”. Where cross-border placement of individuals is concerned, he studies individual motivation, what's called “locus of control”, and emotional resilience.

“The first is particularly risky,” he says. A classic example is the individual who goes off to Dubai for purely financial reasons. “They get there but the proper risk assessments

haven't been carried out, and three months later they're in trouble.” Locus of control means whether an individual is fatalistic or hands-on about changing things for the better once posted abroad. Either stance can be fatal depending on the culture. “Ambiguous cultures can be particularly sapping,” notes Rogers, adding that Germans tend to fare badly in ambiguous cultures. Emotional resilience is about finding the western hairdresser and identifying the local cherry trees instead of importing the western ones – seeing that foreign is different, not worse.

Rogers describes business psychology as a sector finally coming of age, not because it ever lacked good ideas for business improvement, but because its exponents tended to be so embarrassed by the many pseudo-psychologists and quacks operating in the same space that they failed to sell themselves properly. “It was rather like a cabinet maker coming to your home and only boasting about his chisel. What about the cabinet?”

Leadership studies and the rise of the human resource department have been Trojan horses that have helped business psychology break through, admits Rogers, who describes business psychology as the “missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle”. He and four other directors founded Kaisen in 1991 with the intention of applying psychology to business needs. Today a fully fledged consultancy able to implement projects for SMEs and large multinationals alike, its consultants all have experience in business and not just in psychology.

Kaisen treated CNBCEB to a battery of leadership potential tests and they showed up strengths and weaknesses with the same brutal efficiency that allows an incoming tide to scour a beach. Proving that this process makes or saves money for the client is harder, but any prospective client only has to reflect on one significant mistake to see the value.

Rogers says: “It's down to measurement in the end. Kaisen demonstrating that the application of psychology to people has demonstrable business benefits. Our problem in the west and Europe is probably that we're too driven by the head – it's the heart that matters most in business decisions, viewed globally.”

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