Introduction
It's time to recognize conventional MBA programs for what they are - or else close them down. They're specialized training in the functions of business, not general education in the practice of managing. Using the classroom to help develop people who are already practicing management is a fine idea, but pretending to create managers out of people who have never managed is a sham. It's time that our business schools gave proper attention to management.

This may seem like a strange contention at a time when MBA programs are at the height of their popularity. Every decade in the United States alone, almost one million people with a credential called the MBA descend on the economy, most with little firsthand knowledge of customers and workers, products and processes. They hope to manage people who have that knowledge, which they have gained in the only way possible - through intensive personal experience. But lacking that MBA credential, such people are increasingly relegated to a "slow track" where they're subjected to the "leadership" of people who have the MBA but in reality lack the legitimacy to lead.

Considered as education for management, conventional MBA programs train the wrong people in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences.

"Conventional" MBA refers to full-time programs that take relatively young people, generally in their 20s, and train them mostly in business functions, out of context - independent of any specific experience in management. That describes most MBA programs today.

With a few exceptions, the remaining programs, usually called EMBAs, take more experienced people on a part-time basis and then do much the same thing. In other words, they train the right people in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences. That's because they mostly fail to use the experience these people have.

The Wrong People
Trying to teach management to someone who has never managed is like trying to teach psychology to someone who has never met another human being. Organizations are complex. Managing them is a difficult, nuanced business, requiring all sorts of tacit understanding that can only be gained in context.

Effective managing happens where art, craft and science meet. But in a classroom of students without managerial experience, these factors have no place to meet. Where there's no experience, there's no room for craft - inexperienced students cannot understand the practice.

Conventional MBA students graduate with the impression that management is analysis, specifically the making of systematic decisions and the formulation of deliberate strategies. But this is a narrow and ultimately distorted view of management that has encouraged two dysfunctional styles: CALCULATING (overly analytical) and HEROIC (pretend art). Those can be contrasted with a more experience-based style, ENGAGING (quiet and connected, involving and inspiring).
Of course, the fact that students don’t yet have management experience might suggest that the problem isn’t the wrong people so much as the wrong time. But the reality is that MBA programs by their very nature attract many of the wrong people - too impatient, too analytical, with too much need to control.

The students select themselves for these programs, presumably in the belief that leading is better than following (and pays better). In fact, many people apply to MBA programs not just to move UP but to move OUT - to find a better job somewhere else - in other words, to get away from the source of whatever limited experience they have. Should that be telling us something?

The business schools choose from this pool of self-selected leaders. The students do take the GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test), which assesses the ability to give fast answers to little numerical and verbal problems, but it’s more suited to identifying successful students than successful managers.

The Wrong Ways

In a recent brochure, Wharton, which has often led the rankings for MBA schools, declared that it "has top-ranked departments in more areas than any other business school, including finance, entrepreneurship, insurance and risk management, real estate, and business law." Everything but management!

Business managers certainly have to understand the business functions such as marketing and finance. At the very least, those functions constitute a need-to-know "language of business." But management isn’t marketing plus finance plus accounting and so forth. It’s about those things, but it isn’t those things. Yet these days, management is rarely taught, and when it is, it’s generally taught as strategy, which itself has become a narrow, specialized function.

The old joke about MBA standing for Management By Analysis is no joke at all. Techniques - so-called tools - are offered to people in a hurry, whether it’s portfolio models for financial resources or competitive analysis for strategic resources. But as the chief executive of a pharmaceutical company told a group of MBA students, "My problem is that when I face a problem, I don’t know what class I’m in."

MBA schools have turned to case studies to provide a taste of the real world. But dozens of students sitting in neat rows pronouncing on stories they read the night before does not, as MBA adherents have claimed, capture the essence of leadership, or give students responsibility for decisions, or promote learning by doing, or turn the students into risk-takers and make them at home in any management situation.

The skills developed in the case study classrooms are the skills of decision-making - just as in theory-oriented schools. The fact is that the practice of managing cannot be replicated in a classroom the way chemical reactions are replicated in a laboratory.

The Wrong Consequences

We can’t afford to have a society of elitist leaders trained in analysis and promoted on “fast tracks.” This undermines our organizations and our social fabric, as well as our educational institutions.

Confidence without competence breeds arrogance, which is why arrogance rather than humility is often associated with MBA students. People whose confidence exceeds their competence can be dangerous. They drive other people crazy. And MBA schools not only attract such people, they also encourage their tendencies.

If the business schools were really doing their job, were truly creating leaders, their graduates would be known for their humility, not their arrogance. Certainly they would graduate with an acute appreciation of what they don’t know.

MBA graduates enter the workplace - their leap into the real world - most notably through consulting, investment banking or whatever else is “hot,” such as dot-coms, generally as those hot areas are cooling off. They put the practice of management out of balance by encouraging the calculating and heroic styles.

Too often, MBA leaders are unsuccessful. David Ewing’s book, Inside the Harvard Business School, presented a list of 19 superstar graduates of that school. A look at their records late in 2003 revealed that 10 of the 19 had clearly failed (their companies went bankrupt, they were forced out of the CEO chairs, or major mergers backfired) and the performance of another four could be called questionable at best.

Ask people who the best business leaders are and often the names that come up - Warren Buffett, Herb Kelleher, Michael Dell, Bill Gates, Jack Welch - don’t have MBA degrees.

Obviously the MBA isn’t a dysfunctional degree that ruins everyone who gets it. There are graduates of these programs who are doing fine, just as there are graduates who have failed miserably. But the MBAs who succeed do so in spite of the distorted image of managing that’s left by their education. And those who fail may be the ones who
have taken that image most seriously.

Eight Propositions
Here are eight propositions that explain how to teach management to the right people in the right way with the right consequences.

1. **Management education should be restricted to practicing managers.** It should be a privilege earned by performance as a manager, not a right granted by the score on a test. Instead of having students self-select themselves for MBA programs and enter the “fast track,” it should be required that people who have proven themselves, in an industry and an organization, be selected.

   The most effective way to do this is to have organizations suggest their candidates and support them by paying for the cost of the education, including the cost of their people being off the job. Selection by a sponsoring organization leads to few mistakes about the will to manage, the ability to manage and basic intelligence.

2. **The classroom should leverage the managers’ experience in their education.** It makes no sense to select people steeped in practice and then ignore that experience in the process of educating them. The most powerful learning comes from reflecting on experiences.

   There’s too much teaching and not enough learning in management education - too much control of the classroom by “instructors.” Professors certainly have much formalized knowledge to convey and other experience to diffuse through cases, but this has to meet what the participants bring to the classroom. Management education belongs where the push of theory from the professors meets the pull of practice by the students.

3. **Insightful theories help managers make sense of their experience.** A central purpose of education is to encourage the development of wisdom. That requires a thoughtful atmosphere in the classroom, where people can probe their own experiences primed by interesting ideas, concepts and theories. Managers these days are inundated with prescriptions. What managers need is descriptive insight to help them choose or develop prescriptions for their own particular needs.

4. **Thoughtful reflection on experience in the light of conceptual ideas is the key to managerial learning.** Many management programs promise to subject students to “boot camp.” Be prepared to work hard, they warn - this is no country club. Managers certainly don’t need a country club atmosphere for their development, but neither do they need a boot camp, since many of them live that routine every day. They need a chance to reflect, alone and together with others, in a community of people drawn from different practices.

   Speak to managers who have attended a management program and they will tell you about the interesting discussions that took place at meals, coffee breaks and after hours. Why can't class time be as engaging as the time out of class - by allowing the managers to reflect on their own experience?

5. **Sharing their competencies raises the managers’ consciousness about their own practices.** The instructor should identify a managerial competency, such as negotiating or managing projects - better still, a particular application of one, such as negotiating with partners in a joint venture or dealing with a time delay on a project - and enormous experience will usually come forth from a classroom of practicing managers. Managers love the opportunity to share their experience and to be opened up to the experience of others. And they can learn a great deal in the process.

6. **Beyond reflection in the classroom comes learning from the impact on the organization.** All managers have to be teachers. As coaches or mentors, they have to develop their own people and aid their colleagues by sharing ideas and experiences. This should be especially true of managers granted the privilege of formal education. The learners away should be teachers back home.

   Impacts of this kind can range from sharing readings the managers found interesting to briefing colleagues on particular classroom sessions, even running miniature replications of whole modules. To avoid managers going away to programs alone and feeling isolated when they return, it can help to send people to programs in cohorts so they can work together in the program and share their learning on their return.

7. **All these ideas should be blended into “experienced reflection.”** The managers bring their experiences to the classroom, where the faculty introduce various concepts, theories and models. Reflection takes place as experience is considered in the light of conceptual ideas.
The resultant learning is carried back to the job, where it influences behavior, providing further experience for reflection on the job and back to the classroom. This constitutes a recurring cycle, from tacit understanding on the job to explicit learning in the classroom back to tacit application on the job, and on to the next education module.

8. The curriculum, the architecture and the faculty should be shifted from controlled designing to flexible facilitating. The photographs in business school brochures always show a professor making a point (with finger in the air!) while all the managers look on obediently. Instead, the managers should often be working in groups, as in the office. Professors need to introduce interesting material and then engage the class with it - by stimulating, listening and integrating.

Conclusion

Developing these ideas - as in the International Masters in Practicing Management program co-founded by Henry Mintzberg - can result in the right people being taught in the right way with the right consequences.

Beyond that, however, management education might include some undergraduate programs in which students learn the underlying disciplines in which business and management are rooted, such as psychology, economics, mathematics, history, anthropology and philosophy; specialized masters programs that train business specialists - not managers - in fields like marketing or finance; development programs for practicing managers; and doctoral programs.

- End -

About the Author: Henry Mintzberg is a professor of management studies at McGill University and the author of 12 books.

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