



Challenging the “Tailor”

How to Effectively Customize Executive Education for the Companies’ Benefit

By Andreas Löhmer

When it comes to executive education, companies very often accept second best solutions. Looking at the impact achieved, these investments do not always seem sufficiently well-placed. In a time where resources are even scarcer than before, organizations require proper learning partners in order to stand out. Here, two things are crucial: First, companies need to improve their capacity to clearly identify concrete challenges of their leaders. Second, only business schools that refrain from “mass-customizing” and genuinely partner with the organizations’ executives will underpin sustainable transformation and innovation.

There are moments in life where suits from the rack just won’t do it anymore, where the will to have something unique, measured to one’s own size is stronger than the financing argument. It even rules out convenience. In other words, by buying a tailored suit one will stand out as it will fit well, be of quality and – above all – will answer properly to expectations and demand. The same applies to the world of executive education. Here, however, the CEOs, HR directors or Learning and Development managers should not wait until they feel it is time to do something special or to fulfill their dream of buying a new tailored suit for the

organization’s benefit (for the sake of it). The step to go for solid and purposeful executive education – be it open enrolment, degree or *specifically* customized programs – needs to be thoroughly thought through and well-anchored in the overall organizational development and strategy. All this is not new thinking, yet it is still not always done as it should be.

Leadership Development Still a Challenge – So What?

Looking at large corporate organizations, leadership development is still pretty much on top of their agenda and seen as a strategic priority. However, the efforts made are ranked as not being very effective if one believes recent surveys.¹ This insight is not surprising as growth in the global business environment has mobilized many organizations for reinvention.

In addition, we are witnessing another blow to the global financial system which infers new and more disciplined management thinking and sophisticated methods. According to a survey from November 2011 by the *Chief Learning Officer*

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magazine and *Human Capital Media* (HCM) Advisory Group², more than 50 percent of the senior learning and leadership development executives still perceive strategic planning as a crucial leadership skill to target. Besides, contents such as business acumen, coaching, critical thinking, mentorship and situational leadership were amongst the most favored traits required. Is this really a mind-boggling insight? And does the comment that “as business grows more complex, corporate leaders need to have a wider skill set and global experience to succeed” hold more true than two decades ago? Yes, complexity might have grown and yes, the global interconnectedness – given social media’s impact – and intercultural specificities have increased³. Regarding the leadership development challenges, the contents are more or less the same.

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What is far more important is that the “how” has changed: the coloring⁴, the methods and the time to market demands will be more sophisticated and nowhere near the ones of the past. Nowadays leadership development needs to give high quality answers to business challenges in the quickest possible time with highest probable dispersion within the organization. This is why – from a business perspective – demand grows for HR professionals as well as L&D experts to be better skilled in meeting these challenges. Corporate experience shows that high pressure on project delivery, poorly developed skills in designing learning solutions, and a high turnover in programs as well as in people responsible for their creation ultimately leads to sometimes disastrous outputs. And although some companies try to compensate for their flaws by initializing industrious interviewing procedures or creating cross-functional working groups, the performance often mirrors helplessness. More bureaucracy leading to poor internal coordination on content etc. is often the case. Executive education partners can at this stage be one of the most valuable supporters to these companies by pushing the right buttons.

What is the Business Schools’ business?

The way large organizations react to the demands in leadership development is either to outsource the topic altogether and have external companies deal with organizational and leadership development issues. Or they transfer parts of it – such as leadership and business knowledge programs – to renowned Business Schools and consulting firms. Others might want to tackle the challenge by introducing their own business school or Corporate University with training facilities and “homemade” faculty⁵. Smaller companies, on the other

hand, might want to work with a set of “one-man-shows”.

If one is to believe that leadership on an international scale can still be professionalized – as yet another survey by Deloitte and IEDP insinuates⁶ – it is not surprising that customized programs are en vogue. This is good and bad news for business schools. The good news is that organizations are seriously focusing on leadership development as a discipline that can be learnt⁷; the bad is that academic institutions are providing customized solutions to satisfy large corporate clients but miss out on their alignment with the real needs of the company leadership curriculum. Several business schools have already uncovered this mismatch and are paving the way for more realism in programs and their liaison with the client’s challenges in more innovatively blending content and context⁸.

But what does tailoring mean exactly and what effects does it have on a Business School’s business model? Nearly every renowned player in the executive education market (and even the lesser known ones) claims to have a strong department for designing programs exclusively to the customers’ needs and benefits. All of them show their “unique” approach on their websites and underline their specific trait of differentiation.

In reality, however, most of the top Business Schools are trying to sell their open enrolment content (with some billable hours through faculty during which they “tailor” the program) to the corporate client. Unfortunately this *modus operandi* is neither fostering nor building beneficial and sustainable leadership development in organizations. On the contrary, this “mass-customizing” blocks the readiness of affected executives for accepting new ways of thinking as it fails to address the organization’s real issues. The Business Schools on the other hand find themselves in a dilemma as their faculty – bearing the weight of the tailoring on their shoulders – cannot or do not want to find the necessary time to do so as they are occupied with lectures, research and consulting projects.

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As a consequence tailored programs in executive education are very often a bluff package. And yet in this pretended custom packaging lies a big opportunity for those that [take tailoring seriously](#)! Business Schools can distinctly differentiate themselves from the majority in three ways. First, they should actively listen to the clients’ need and help the client to translate and interpret the organization’s own demand. Second, business schools will need to find a way around the typical customizing approach by having program directors who participate more actively on the content side as the faculty’s and client’s interface. Third, tailoring a program means enclosing all: joint design, delivery and implementation of

content in the organization. Here executive education can prove that it has evolved from an academic institution dictating curriculums to a genuine partner who consults and coaches organizations for a competitive advantage in their selected market. The real customizing *benefit*, however, should obviously be generated by the clients themselves as they explicitly read their culture and translate the contents into the organizational flow.

Fitting the Suit Properly

In an era of multiple crises in world economy, selective and affordable executive education is necessary and important. With good quality but prices being high, professional learning needs to show its relevance in organizations around the globe and business schools must formulate the differentiation in their approach. Whether it is the preparation, the execution of a program, the distribution of newest research results or the bet on an education's return on paid investment, learning institutions will need to deliver on their promises. Hence, significant value can be added through:

1. an explorative faculty who is in permanent interaction with the business world and has an entrepreneurial experience to offer;
2. the assignment of program directors with a proven business track record in order to understand many customer challenges from their own experience;
3. a structured workflow and design process which ensures the right questions being asked along the preparation, delivery and transfer of a program;
4. continuous exchange with innovative learning hubs and different University institutes on the application of the latest learning techniques and executive education methods.

Tailored executive education solutions might be more cumbersome in their design and industrious in the interaction with clients. The outcome, however, is a corresponding product of enduring quality for the organizations' development. Like a suit "sur mesure", which is of hand-selected cloth and thread, perfectly fitted to the body and which will delight its wearer for its expectation match, an honestly customized program delivers on its promise in genuinely supporting its corporate client and at the same time thoroughly underlining the pure professionalism of its architect.

About the author



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Notes

1. Boatman, Jazmin & Wellins, Richard S.: *Time for Leadership*

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Revolution, Global Leadership Forecast 2011; Development Dimensions International.

2. Kalman, Frank: "Follow the Leader"; in: *Chief Learning Officer*, Special Report: Leadership Development; February 2012; p.1

3. McGill Murphy, Richard: "How do great companies groom talent?"; CNN Money/Fortune; November 3, 2011. See also Seufert, Sabine: "Informelles Lernen"; in: *zfo – Zeitschrift Führung + Organisation*, 5/2011; pp.299-305.

4. The Deloitte LEAD team for example stresses the point that only a combination of four factors – personal motivation, constructive challenge, real issues and reflection – "drive effective learning and development for leaders" and provide "the optimum learning experience", thus being "the most effective leadership development"; see "Head start – A new approach to leadership development"; *Deloitte LEAD White Paper*, 2012.

5. Kalman, Frank: "Back To School: Changes In Executive Education"; in: *Chief Learning Officer*; 2/12/2012.

6. "Head start – A new approach to leadership development"; *Deloitte LEAD White Paper*, 2012; p.1

7. It is important to state that these contents can be learnt through the most *different vehicles* as opposed to just be *taught* by business schools. In this context "informal learning" – as dis-institutionalized learning under the responsibility of the learner himself – plays a pivotal role; compare Seufert (2011); pp.302-304.

8. Compare O'Driscoll, Tony: "Too much content is delivered out of context"; *Financial Times*, 13.2.2012; p.11 and Faley, Tim: "Entrepreneurs are only taught half the lesson"; *Financial Times*, 6.2.2012; p.9.

