People-Centred Management and Leadership:
Design of an MBA programme

Darek M. HAFTOR & Johan LEMBKE
Stockholm University School of Business
Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract: This essay presents the design of a brand new executive Master of Business Administration (MBA) educational programme at the Stockholm University School of Business. This MBA programme aims to prepare professionals for general-management positions in organizations, whether they are business or any other kind. Our holistic view on management and leadership is aimed at preparing candidates to manage and lead organizations towards success in a highly responsible and professional manner, with an assumption that people are the key resources.

Our human-centred approach to management and leadership includes an articulation of the links between facts and values, that give rise to professional and theoretical knowledge, and where the two last mentioned should not be confused. The transformation of the candidates into professional managers includes their development, education and training, while professionalism should be established by providing a critical mind-set toward both practice and theory. Finally, a manager’s ability to develop, lead and make decisions should be based upon the link between well-developed abilities to analyze and to synthesize, all aiming at formulating ideals to be pursued and acted upon.

This essay presents the target group of this MBA programme, the key features of the knowledge and skills we strive to develop, the management capabilities to be built within each candidate, the structure and content of the ten courses that constitute this programme, and some key elements of the chosen pedagogical approach. Our MBA programme represents a unique initiative, probably the only such programme deliberately based on the Nordic tradition of management and leadership, understood as regarding people as the central resource of any organization. This is in contrast to the Anglo-American management approach where financial capital has dominated managers’ attention for a long time.

Keywords: management, leadership, education, MBA, design, idealized design, people, skills, knowledge, capability.
1. INTRODUCTION

In this essay we provide an overview of the design of our newly-developed educational programme, the executive Master of Business Administration (MBA) at the Stockholm University School of Business to be launched in the autumn of 2011. The introduction continues with a background and context for this MBA programme. The following section characterizes the idea of an MBA programme as such. Next, the programme’s intellectual foundation is presented followed by an account of its content and structure. The selected pedagogical approach will then be accounted for. The essay ends with summary and concluding remarks.

1.1. Background and Context

While it would be challenging to find a business school in the Anglo-American world that does not offer an MBA programme, the Nordic countries lack this tradition and most of the business schools in the Nordic region still do not provide such a programme. The reasons for this situation are complex and not relevant to this account. However, as a reaction to market demands and opportunities, a growing number of Nordic business schools have started to offer MBA programmes, although they still represent a minority. This change is probably triggered by the market opportunities. Until recently, Nordic residents have had to travel to other countries – typically the UK – to pursue an MBA programme.

With a growing number of people interested in pursuing MBA studies, business schools have realized that offering an MBA programme may provide several benefits that the traditional undergraduate and science degree programmes do not. For example, significant additional revenues, establishment of closer relations with the business and public sector representatives, and brand building have become more important in attracting students to undergraduate programmes. Also, the perception of responsibility in serving the business and public communities with advanced professional educational plays a key role for some initiatives. Indeed, this constitutes the key reason for offering our new MBA programme.

The Stockholm University School of Business has offered an MBA programme since the mid-1990’s in various formats, volumes, and for different target groups. Until recently, the offered MBA programme focused on providing a high degree of flexibility to the participants pursuing their studies, with most of the courses being elective and with flexible study start, pause and end periods. While such a set-up surely has its advantages it also limits the ability to offer a more advanced and rigid academic profile of an educational programme. In order to remedy this situation and meet the emerging needs of potential participants in an MBA programme, a redesign of the current programme was conducted1 in 2010, making a launch possible in the autumn of 2011. Before sharing our new approach, the idea behind MBA is presented below.

1.2. The 'MBA' as Such

While the 'MBA' acronym is well known to business people in the developed world, its origins and intentions are not always so, particularly in the Nordic context. The first MBA programmes were offered in the USA with the UK following closely behind. More specifically, the very first MBA programme started in 1900 at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, with

---

Harvard (1908), Stanford and Chicago following shortly (the first business school was established in 1881 at the University of Pennsylvania: the Wharton School).2

The key motivation for providing an MBA programme was to professionalize the role of a manager. In the same sense, as there were professional schools and educational programmes for physicians and nurses, lawyers and priests, policemen and firemen, or the various branches of engineers, the need for such an educational programme for managers was emphasized. Managers should not only act upon instincts and their own experience. They should also be able to incorporate scientific theories derived from empirical studies.

One may consequently ask: why do we need professional managers at all? This is of course a question that could be answered at length. In short though, one key reason is that every citizen of the developed countries is exposed to an endless number of organizations throughout our lives, from the very beginning when we are born in a hospital – a rather complex organization – to the very end when the Church – a very stable organization – or an equivalent body, takes care of our last moments on this earth. Virtually every day, each one of us is treated or mistreated by organizations, whether as an employee, a customer, a provider, or something else. If we are to make sure that the great number of organizations operating in our societies function properly, there is not least a need for good managers. This is the chief assumption and motive for our new MBA programme. It is based upon the conviction that it is the responsibility of any business school to provide good managers to the societies supporting it.

While the initial MBA programmes were two-year set-ups, typically targeting younger people with a basic academic degree in some other discipline (often engineering), there soon emerged a need to also educate managers with a significant amount of professional working experience. This gave rise to an alternative educational process that targeted more senior people in the midst of their professional careers. The executive MBA was born, a two year part-time programme equivalent to one year of studies. Thus, the differences between a conventional MBA programme and an executive MBA programme are its input (the participants) and the process, while the targeted outcome is the same: professional managers.

A final generic distinction to be made here is that between professional educational programmes and scientific educational programmes. This is typically clear in the Anglo-American world with professional schools (e.g. medicine, business, social work, engineering, etc.) and science schools (offering astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, etc.). As suggested above, an MBA programme aims to prepare people for their managerial duties. In academic terms, this is characterized by becoming a master of business administration. This implies that MBA candidates are exposed to various theories, methods, models, approaches and frameworks developed within the discipline of business administration, all of which imply a science-based professional education.

The discipline of business administration, on the other hand, may also be studied with a scientific intention leading to a Master of Science in Business Administration, which implies a science-based science education. MBA studies focus on the managerial application and use of theories, models and methods from business administration (and also from other disciplines), while the M.Sc. in BA studies focuses on business administration theories and methods as such, and on their strengths and limitations and their research and development.

To clarify this further: MBA programmes aim to develop managerial understanding and skills and not the ability to produce scientific contributions, while M.Sc. programmes aim to develop an academic understanding of business administration and skills in developing theoretical contributions, not acting as a manager. MBA studies frequently employ the so-called case method.

---

for teaching, where specific managerial situations are addressed by students with the help of various theoretical bodies. M.Sc. studies expose and train students in the theory and method of science, such as the design of research, the identification and critical review of current theoretical status, the collection and analysis of data, and the derivation of results and conclusions. M.Sc. programmes therefore educate its students in the art of constructing theories that represent some general characteristics of a given category of empirical phenomena.

A profession-focused programme, on the other hand, teaches the use and application of theories to a single specific instance of the given category of phenomena, such as how to develop an organization. In short, while MBA programmes and M.Sc. in Business Administration programmes both have business administration as the core topic, they are characterized by rather different aims, teaching approach, and therefore a different end-result.

In summary, at the very beginning of the twentieth century American universities started to introduce new educational programmes, called 'MBA', as a reaction to the need to professionalize the manager function. Indeed, the initial focus was on the General Manager role. The target groups for the two year full-time programmes were and are younger people with a basic academic degree. The aim was, and still is, to prepare people to become good managers in the numerous organizations that constitute our societies. In the beginning of the 1940s, an alternative MBA was introduced, the 'executive MBA' with the same aim: to produce good managers, although with a different input (senior people with extensive professional working experience), while the educational process was reduced into a one year full-time or two year part-time programme.

The MBA is a science-based professional education that prepares people to become active and successful actors in managerial situations, to deal with everyday, concrete and practical challenges in a way that is responsible and makes a difference. The design for the Stockholm University Business School MBA recalls those pioneering principles of the MBA education, including preparing people for their concrete and specific managerial practices in general manager roles. The crucial question that emerges then is: to what degree can the university prepare people for their managerial duties?

2. THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATION

The very core of our new MBA programme is presented in this section. It opens with the intentions and continues with an account of the intellectual infrastructure that constitutes the foundation of the programme. Allow us first an account of the aimed target group.

The intended participant of our MBA programme is a working professional in the midst of his or her career who aspires to assume a General Manager position, or who has already achieved it. This professional has typically experienced and felt the need to develop his or her managerial capability in some sense. A significant portion of this group of people have a non-business education (e.g. in the area of law, the armed forces, engineering, medicine etc.) and has changed her or his professional course from being a specialist (within, for example, marketing, sales, procurement, engineer, legal advisory services) to one that manages an organization of whatever kind or size. Finally, as our MBA programme is offered with Swedish as the principal language of instruction and is physically realized in Stockholm, the typical MBA candidate lives and works within the greater Stockholm area.
2.1. Our Intentions

In line with the original conception, the newly-developed MBA programme at the Stockholm University Business School aims to prepare people for becoming good managers. The chief reason for this is to serve the surrounding communities, which also enable the very existence of the SUSB. If more qualified managers are provided to the society, its organizations may be managed in a more positive manner and thereby contribute more to the well-being of society in general and its citizens in particular.

Now, the crucial question here is: what does the term 'good managers' really mean? An exhaustive answer would certainly require several volumes and may still not necessarily reach a final notion. However, we need to articulate what we strive for to achieve it. Thus, our elaborated vision is as follows: 'After having completed our MBA programme an individual shall feel transformed and prepared to lead organizations toward success, in a responsible and professional manner, where people are the fundamental resource!' This vision may be further broken down into to four core elements that constitute the very intellectual foundation of the MBA programme, hence its intellectual infrastructure. These four core elements, or founding values, are: People, Success, Professionalism and Transformation, and will be explored below.

2.2. People

This is probably the most fundamental core element and value of our MBA programme. The chief motive is the fundamental assumption held that all management and organizations start and end with people. Even in the age of the Internet, it would be impossible to even imagine management and organizations completely without people. Therefore, humans, with all their creativity and complexity, are the most central asset, or capital, of any modern organization. This notion is well aligned with the Swedish and indeed the Scandinavian management tradition that sets people at the centre of managerial attention. It is often manifested in such managerial features as decentralization of decision making and flat organizational structures, participation and open communication between managers and those being managed, consensus-oriented decision making aimed at achieving acceptance of the involved stakeholders and therefore transparency of strategic decision making, etc.

The notion of people as the core capital may briefly be set against the Anglo-American management tradition where financial capital has been considered the main concern of management, and the Germanic tradition where natural resources and production capabilities have received the chief managerial attention. The assumption that people are the key capital of any modern organization is aligned both with the Swedish management tradition and with past and current interests and the research profile of the faculty members at our school. For instance, we have pioneered research on personnel economy with an academic journal addressing the topic and on measuring the so-called intangibles (such as human knowledge and creativity). We also have research programmes addressing the notion of human practices, organizational health, and so on. This well-established capability at Stockholm University School of Business may be regarded as a guarantee for the relevance, quality and uniqueness of our MBA programme.

The articulation of the role and importance of people may take various shapes depending on the subject matter addressed during the educational process itself. However, we stress three central aspects: human values, group dynamics and multicultural structures. In short, we consider human values the anchor of human behaviour, which therefore constitutes the space for managing. Without understanding the function and profile of human values in a particular managerial situation the manager is like a blind person guessing which way is the right one rather than seeing it before actually walking there.
Secondly, *group dynamics* address the fact that managers typically handle a management team, or a set of direct reports. Independently of whether this concerns an operational project team or a senior executive team in a multinational corporation, the management team constitutes the principal tool enabling managers to manage the organization. It is therefore of utmost importance to assume a leadership profile that enables a well-functioning managerial team. Fortunately, group dynamics is a well-researched domain within group psychology that provides important managerial understandings and tools to that end.

Thirdly, *multicultural structure* addresses the fact that most organizations today operate in a multicultural context. This may be manifested in various ways, such as the sites of an organization being spread all over the world, its employees originating from various cultures, or its customers and suppliers being present in different markets. Being able to understand different cultures, respect people belonging to different cultural contexts, and communicate efficiently with them, is crucial for a successful intercultural interaction and thereby the success of any modern organization. This opens for the second core value of our MBA: *Success*.

2.3. Success

Our starting point is that managers wish to manage their organizations successfully so that their organizations become successful. While there have been and still are frequent debates, and also a lack of consensus regarding what successful management and organization are, this does not mean that the notion and ambition of successful management should be displaced. Rather than focusing on the substance and features of successful management and organization, our focus is on procedural features, i.e. its function rather than its structure and content. We achieve this by emphasizing three key capabilities of any management: *analysis, synthesis and idealization.*

Analysis is the most recognized capability in the Western cultures that has prioritized analytical thinking and thus disregarded synthesis thinking or design capability. A good analysis, or the cognitive capability of *taking things apart,* is crucial for any manager’s ability to distinguish and separate items within a complex situation. The ability to conduct an elaborated analysis is fundamental for managerial success. However, no matter how well analysis is conducted it will not provide all necessary understanding of a given managerial situation (e.g., no matter how much we analyze or take apart a British car, we will not understand why its steering wheel is situated on the right). Any managerial situation functions within its environment or context and must be understood in terms of being a part of a larger whole. Failing to do this will provide only local understanding of the situation at hand, in the longer run most certainly leading to disaster.

Leading and managing organizations is inherently made up of putting things together, i.e. synthesis or design. A well-developed cognitive capability to design is as important as the capability to analyze. A consequent question is: what should the compass needle of any analysis or synthesis be? For instance, when an entire organization or part of an organization is being developed, what should such an endeavour strive for? Our approach is to strive for *the ideal!* More specifically, any managerial activity, decision making etc., should in one way or another strive toward an *idealized* notion of the organization at hand or its desired features, e.g. organizational structure, product, market, customer, or any other. In short, an ideal is the most desired situation of something, e.g. an organization that is feasible, viable and conceived by the consensus of its stakeholders. In conclusion, a well-developed capability combining analytical and design thinking toward desired ideals is the principal tool for enabling managerial success.

---

3 This notion of analysis, synthesis and idealization incorporated into an educational programme has been inspired by a unique education experiment previously pursued at the Wharton School of Business, USA. This programme was called Social Systems Sciences, or just S3.

4 This follows the previously mentioned approach of *Idealized Design* as developed by R.L. Ackoff.
2.4. Professionalism

One of the fundamental motives and ideas behind the original MBA education was the aspiration to professionalize the role and job of a manager. There are various notions of professionalism. In more simplistic terms it may be juxtaposed with an amateur, where the latter conducts a task without prior experience and knowledge of it. This would imply that professionalism includes extensive knowledge, experience and also a certain degree of routine-governed execution of the task at hand. However, our notion of professionalism has a more profound aspiration, namely to realize critical self-reflection and awareness when conducting duties. This starts from the assumption that all human beings have responsibilities toward themselves and their environment, be they human and social, industrial, economic, commercial or environmental.

The second assumption is that all managerial activities are normative as decision making typically transforms social reality from how-it-is into how-it-is-decided to-be. A key professional question is therefore: how to respond to the various norms and interests inherent in any managerial situation? As ‘managing’ is a concrete human endeavour in a specific real-life situation, this concrete reality constitutes the very source of norms and also managerial decision making and acting. Therefore, a critical reflection upon a managerial situation must be pursued by any manager in order to attempt the avoidance of giving rise to sub-optimization and harmful consequences. To this end, the manager is equipped with various theories, models and methods aimed at supporting her or him in an understanding of managerial reality, which is more elaborated, balanced and informed and in this way critically challenges naïve conceptions.

However, even though an approach to managerial reality with theoretical tools does provide significant support for establishing a more elaborated understanding of that reality (just as a brain surgeon approaches a brain during brain surgery), such a theoretical approach is by no means a guarantee for an ideal managerial outcome as any theoretical thinking has its limitations (e.g. theories are, by nature, generic abstractions while any managerial situation is concrete and specific). Therefore, professional management requires a critical awareness of the conceptual tools employed in the managerial conduct rather than an uncritical acceptance of any theoretical contribution to understanding management and organizations.

When these two concepts are put together, the limits of practice and the limits of theory, they imply that all human thinking and acting (including managerial) has its limitations. Or in other words: all human thinking and action is unconditionally limited in its ability to rationalize. As a consequence of dealing with that unconditional limitation of human reasoning and acting, a professional manager should critically reflect upon the unconditional limitations of her or his managerial activities. This means that rather than assuming that a perfect or ideal decision was made in any non-trivial situation, there must be some limitations inherent in the professional

---


position and decision, and the manager’s duty includes reflecting upon these limitations and their potential implications, and when needed acting appropriately upon these limitations.

A brief illustration of our notion of professionalism may take the following lines. Assuming that there are two market actors, e.g. firms competing for the same customer, the uninformed and inexperienced manager would naively select the alternative that generates the most benefit for the business. However, the informed manager knows that Game Theory (e.g. the prisoner’s dilemma) suggests that, in some contexts, such a decision will lead to a negative outcome due to the competitor’s behaviour and consequently decides upon the next optimal alternative.

In this sense, a theoretical approach to practical managerial reality critically challenges the naive, pre-theoretical opinions. However, the informed manager also knows that Game Theory rests upon certain assumptions, e.g. that of the rational human being. As the manager knows that such an assumption does not correlate perfectly with practical reality, Game Theory may therefore not be useful in all situations, particularly when non-rational agents are involved. This in turn manifests the ability to critically reflect upon the managerial tools available and employed, and thus for taking appropriate decisions and consequent actions.

In summary, managerial professionalism is here understood as the ability to critically reflect upon the managerial reality at hand, the managerial methods and tools employed, and the unconditionally inherent limitations of any managerial decision making and acting in order to avoid any unwanted and harmful consequences such decisions and actions may give rise to: this is responsible and professional behaviour.

2.5. Transformation

This core component of our MBA programme has a dual function. Firstly, it applies to the participants of this educational experience. Secondly, and in a similar manner, the programme’s future managers and decision makers may conceiving their respective management as a transformation of their organizations and also of themselves. A professional transformation of an individual participating in our MBA programme may be conceived in terms of three interrelated aspects or capabilities.

One is the skills of how-to-do things (practicable knowledge) that includes so-called tacit professional knowledge (know-how). Just as it is impossible to learn how to swim from a textbook, managerial transformation must not be limited to theoretical understanding. Therefore, the programme’s participants should be exposed to practical management situations, for instance in the form of various case studies, where theories and models are applied in a critical manner to seek a satisfying solution.

The second factor is knowledge about management and organizations. This provides a theoretical understanding and thus an ability to conceive managerial situations and their alternative solutions prior to their implementation, as implied by know-how above. This is provided by traditional academic lectures and discussions. While training provides tools and skills, education provides knowledge and understanding. Both are equally important and necessary for the successful management of organizations.

Finally, the third transformational component of our MBA programme concerns the establishment of managerial insights. This is based on a person’s basic values and convictions that govern the use of knowledge and skills. Managers are often exposed to complex situations that lack a simple solution, such as when discharging employees: “should we discharge Adam or Eva?” As all decision making rests upon assumptions and convictions, the ability to develop a manager’s self-knowledge and self-understanding of her or his core values, and then act upon these values together with acquired theoretical understanding and practical skills, is a central
capability of the professional development attempted by our MBA programme. All of this may be applied both to the manager and to her or his organization, to manage oneself and an organization as a transformation governed by its collective skills, knowledge and values.

3. THE STRUCTURE OF THE MBA PROGRAMME

Given the above-presented intellectual infrastructure of our MBA programme, its realization (or structure and content) will be summarized in this section. Our programme consists of ten courses, where the first nine are subject topic courses and the final one is an MBA project. The programme spans over four semesters where each semester is a spring or an autumn semester of about nineteen weeks of part time studies, with a shorter winter breaks and a longer summer break. This makes the programme a two-year part time study endeavour. The first three semesters include three courses each, while the MBA project constitutes the last semester.

As the core intention of this programme is to prepare its participants to become better managers in positions at a General Manager level, an attempt is made to provide a holistic exposition of management and organizations. Moreover, the subject order of this holistic exposure is people-centred to realize one of the core founding values. In this sense, the programme assumes a bottom-up approach, starting with the individual manager and human being, and then gradually proceeding up in organizational complexity course by course throughout the organization and its environment, ending up with how to manage both.

3.1. The First Semester

The first semester focuses its attention upon people, management, groups and their dynamics and workings. The semester’s three courses are: Manager, Leadership and Problem-Structuring. The second semester moves its attention to the organizational level, to understand its structures, functions and processes, and also to the related resources. Its three courses are: Organization, Production and Money. After having been exposed to the individual and groups, and then to the organization, its production and finances, the third semester moves its attention to yet another level of complexity with three courses: Environment, Strategy and Control.

The logic of this set-up is as follows. In order to be able to manage an organization, one is required to understand self-management that is exposed in the first two courses: Manager and Leadership. Secondly, most managers, whether at mid-management or senior management level, typically manage through some leadership team. Quite often, the functioning or malfunctioning of such teams may be crucial for the success or otherwise of a manager. Therefore, understanding and being able to deal with groups and their dynamics is a central component, exposed in the second and the third course: Leadership and Problem-Structuring. The latter course also provides concrete methodologies for perceiving and conceiving complex ill-defined managerial situations that often challenge a manager’s rationality.

3.2. The Second Semester

After preparing the student with the knowledge and skills of self- and group management, the first course of the second semester, Organization, addresses the complex domain of human organizations, such as firms, governmental bodies or non-government organisations (NGO:s).

An organization seldom exists without any purpose or reasons. Typically the generic reason is to generate some kind of output(s) for someone. The structural and functional characteristics of such generation, or production, are addressed in the next course: Production. Once the student has been exposed to organization as such and its production capabilities, it is time to address the various financial matters that an organization and its production mechanisms may give rise to.
These may include revenues and costs, various kinds of costs (fixed, variable, working capital, profit-and-loss planning, net valuation of firms or products, personnel economy etc.). These and other matters are covered in the third course of the second semester: Money. The second semester aims thus to provide understanding and skills in managing organizations and their key resources: people and money.

3.3. The Third Semester

After having been exposed to the various workings of the organization, including its production and its financial matters, the first course of the third semester, Environment, moves its attention outside the organization. The focus is upon the various stakeholders that an organization may have and different kinds of relationships, including that of mutual influence.

Subsequently, the participants of our MBA programme are ready for the Strategy course. Among its aims is to put all things together so that a unified or holistic understanding of a given organization may be obtained, and so that a compass needle may be set for the desired direction and thus course of actions. More specifically, this includes the various perspectives on a strategy, including the organization’s environment or industry, its internal resources and capabilities, and the human side as manifested in the formal and informal institutions.

The course Control is the last one of the third semester. It complements the previous Strategy course by translating it into managerial control and governance. No matter how strong an organization is and how clever a set strategy may be, without proper governance and the associated necessary tools the organization will most likely not be successful for very long. Management control addresses questions such as what to control and why, different approaches to direct and control, and also management systems that facilitate control.

3.4. The Fourth Semester

The tenth and final course, the MBA project, constitutes the whole of the fourth and final semester. The founding idea here is that the participants shall design and execute a business project in close collaboration with a real-life organization, such as their employer. The project’s core subject should be an advanced investigation or elaboration of some important subject matter, for example how to enter a certain market with an existing product portfolio. The purpose of the MBA project is to manifest the participants’ mastery of business (hence the MBA), where a complex and practical organizational challenge or opportunity is solved by applying business theories, models and methods together with relevant data.

It should be stressed here that the MBA project is not a science project, as is the case with a M.Sc. programme where the aim is to generate an outcome that aspires to make a theoretical contribution (being generic in some sense). Rather, the role of an MBA project is to deal with a concrete, specific and practical yet complex and advanced organizational problem and thereby to solve it, by means of applying scientific tools to such a specific domain and then providing normative recommendations, for example how to enter a new market.

This ends the presentation of the content and structure of the MBA programme as characterized here. Table 1 on the following page provides an overview of the presented content and structure of our MBA programme in terms of the aim and content of each course.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1        | Manager     | - To establish some fundamental questions to direct the participants' studies throughout the four semesters.  
- To provide a set of practical tools for the studies. |
|          | Leadership  | - To provide understanding and skills for reflective self-leading and leading of other people. |
|          | Problem-Structuring | - To provide understanding and skills in reflective formulation and structuring of organizational problems and deciding upon means for their resolution. |
| 2        | Organization| - To provide understanding and skills about an organization and its workings in general, and specifically for how to analyze, design and change an organization. |
|          | Production  | - To provide understanding and skills about production mechanisms in and between organizations, their analysis and design. |
|          | Money       | - To provide understanding and skills about fundamental financial aspects and analysis of an organization. |
| 3        | Environment | - To provide understanding and skills about managing multiple stakeholders of an organization. |
|          | Strategy    | - To provide understanding and skills for conducting strategic analysis and for the formulation of a new organizational strategy. |
|          | Control     | - To provide understanding and skills for how to design and use a relevant management control set-up for a given organization and its strategy. |
| 4        | MBA project | - To manifest master of business practice with regard to advanced investigation. |
4. THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Given the intellectual infrastructure of our MBA programme and its structure and content, it is time to account for our pedagogical approach. In the present context, pedagogical approach refers to the notion of how to educate people. Our pedagogical approach aims not only at providing guidance in the concrete execution of the MBA programme, but also at constituting a link between its intellectual infrastructure and its content and structure. In metaphorical terms, the core elements or values that constitute the intellectual infrastructure may be regarded as the genes of the MBA programme, while the programme's constituting courses may be regarded as a vehicle for their transfer. As each MBA participant is a unique individual with her or his unique pre-knowledge and experience, interests and motivation, she or he will after completing the MBA programme have undergone a unique transformation (hence become a unique phenotype of a similar genotype).

4.1. Knowledge as Co-Construction

In the history of knowledge development and also of education, various notions have been formulated with regard to what knowledge is and how it is constituted. Such notions are important in this context as they influence the practice of education. For the education of our MBA programme we use a constructivist notion of knowledge. It maintains that all human beings are unique and active knowledge constructors or creators. This may be juxtaposed to notions that assume that humans are like machines or passive containers and that objective knowledge may be put into these containers.

The constructivist position assumes that a strict knowledge transfer between two or more individuals is not really possible, cognitively regarded. The best we may do is to create a learning environment and expose each individual for the conditions and information that trigger and stimulate each individual's private knowledge-constitution process. In this context, each individual's previous experience and pre-knowledge, interests and intentions are crucial as they constitute the knowledge-constitution conditions and thus the outcome.

Finally, the constructivist notion of knowledge does not apply to the idea of knowledge as being a map of a reality. It rather regards knowledge as a useful device for an individual or a group of individuals, in the process of their pursuit of aims, which in more general terms suggest a successful adaptation to their environment. This position has at least two implications. Firstly, it implies that knowledge constitution is a social process (hence co-construction) that asks for inter-subjectivity, i.e. where two or more individuals subscribe to a similar body of knowledge. Secondly, rather than seeking for a complete objectivity of knowledge, which is not really possible in the view of the constructivist theory of knowledge, the practical usefulness of a given theoretical body is the main concern.

4.2. Practical Implications

The previous outline with knowledge as a foundation for the educational process of our MBA programme may be operationalised in various ways. While available space limits a full account, a few will be mentioned below. The notion that an individual is an active knowledge creator directs the utilization of various kinds of exercises, cases and assignments for the programme participants to work on actively, and thus form their knowledge base. Both inductive (from a case to the principle) and deductive (from a principle to the case) learning methods need to be utilized as devices of learning.

---

7 The constructivist theory of knowledge as adopted here is taken from the various dialects of constructivist epistemologies, including Le Moigne's Projective Constructivism (Ref), von Glaserfeldt's Radical Constructivism (ref), and von Foester's second order cybernetics (ref).
Moreover, as each individual's prior knowledge and experience, current interests, and motivations condition the process of their knowledge constitution, respectively, the educational facilitators need to adopt appropriate teaching materials (e.g. cases, to match these interests, motivations and prior knowledge and experiences). Finally, the social character of knowledge co-construction implies that well set-up exercises, and their follow-up, must stimulate discussions and debates in such a manner that each individual's pre-knowledge and thinking is brought into the learning process and thus impact its outcome.

4.3. The Core Components

Given the above-exposed notion of knowledge, which is general to all knowledge constitution contexts, the specific core elements of our MBA programme require a more specific pedagogical and didactical set-up.

The first core element, People, its meaning and function, is addressed in some manner in all the nine subject courses. For example, given that the Money course addresses the various financial aspects of an organization, such as its costs and revenues, the notion of human capital and its translation into financial value and personnel economy is one way in which a core element of the present MBA programme is articulated in a specific course. Such a translation is used for all the nine subject topic courses as there is no subject matter addressed in this programme where human beings are not central to the working and management of an organization.

Secondly, the core element of Success, articulated through the function of an analysis, a synthesis (or design), and an idealization, is expressed in all ten courses constituting our MBA programme. This is done in two principal ways. Firstly, all lecturing and exposition of the subject matters in each of the specific subject courses addresses both the means of its respective analysis and its respective synthesis (design). For example, in the context of the Organization course, the exposition is not only aimed at addressing what an organization is, but also at how to analyzing an existing organization and then how to designing a desired organization. Similarly, in the context of the Production course, besides the understanding of the various production mechanisms of an organization, the course offers the methods and skills for analyzing an existing production capability and then designing a new production capability. In this sense, each course provides its participants with the opportunity to develop an understanding and practical skills for conducting an analysis and a synthesis. Furthermore, each of the nine subject courses features two assignments that constitute a laboratory environment for the exercises of analysis, synthesis and formulation of ideals.

Thirdly, the Professionalism element is constituted by the above-presented interaction between practice, theory and critique. The participants’ development of the aspired professionalism is exercised through iterative exposition and exercise for practical managerial situations, the relevant theoretical bodies, and the formulation of critique of both practice and of theory. This means that if a certain theoretical body is exposed, for example Game Theory, its strengths and its limitations (the assumption of a rationally behaving human agent) will also be addressed. Similarly, exposed to a given specific managerial situation, such as the question of where a new manufacturing plant should be built, a challenge is presented (beside a critical investigation of the various location alternatives), as here the very notion of building such a plant.

The fourth and final core element of the intellectual infrastructure is Transformation. This addresses the aspiration to contribute to a positive transformation of the MBA candidates into good managers and to provide them with the capability to continue to self-transform and to guide the transformation of their organizations. The three mechanisms assumed to generate such transformation (education for knowledge and understanding, training for know-how and skills, and development for insights and wisdom) are all incorporated into the nine subject
courses. Each course therefore aims to expose its participants to various kinds of knowledge that give rise to understanding of the phenomenon in focus, then to offer various kinds of exercises and assignments to train skills and establish the know-how in their management, and finally to provide room for moral reflections in relation to the participants’ own core values and consequently for them to base managerial decisions upon these reflections.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This essay presents some of the key characteristics, albeit not all, of a newly developed executive MBA programme at the Stockholm University School of Business. Its aim is bold and important: to provide better managers for our organizations and thereby serve our society with advanced professional education. It is aimed at professionals in the midst of their careers who have identified a need to develop their managerial capabilities. The focus of our programme aligns with the pioneers of MBA education at the very beginning of the twentieth century, General Managers or similar. This in turn requires that our MBA programme offers a holistic understanding of management and organizations, which is realized by the programme’s nine subject courses and the final MBA project.

In order to achieve our aims we have designed an intellectual platform with four constituting elements that form the genes of this MBA programme: People, Success, Professionalism and Transformation. The programme is a part-time, two-year endeavour that consists of four semesters. The first three semesters offer three courses each, while the last semester consist of the final MBA project. The order of courses is people-centred and bottom-up-oriented in terms of organizational complexity: from the individual, through groups and their dynamics and the organization and its production and finances, to the organizational environment, setting an organization’s direction and controlling it, all surrounded by numerous stakeholders.

Our MBA programme offers the capability to formulate ideals, as conceived by its various stakeholders, which are practically feasible. In the same sense this programme is the outcome of a process of idealized design. The crucial question that emerges then is: to what degree can the university prepare people for their managerial duties? Various metrics and follow-up procedures need to be developed and deployed to track this. We cannot be certain that the outcome will be as intended. On the other hand, the assumption is similar to that of, for example, the brain surgeon: even though we can never be sure that our brain surgery will be successful we would prefer a brain surgeon to conduct this surgery and not a butcher. In the same sense we need managers that are brain surgeons rather than something else...