

Education Programs Must Be Tailored to Your Needs

THE new vice president of human resources had just been asked to develop an executive education program that would help transform her technology-driven company into a customer-driven organization.

She was well aware of the pitfalls. A few years earlier, her predecessor had spent a great deal of time and money bringing in faculty from a well-known university to teach the managers "how to become leaders." At first, that program had seemed to be just what the company needed, and participants rated the course highly. Unfortunately, the course ultimately had little impact on the day-to-day running of the corporation or the implementation of its new strategic direction.

Because the new ideas and behaviors were never applied, the company essentially lost its investment of time and money.

The new vice president and her predecessor sat down together and identified the issues he thought had led to the failure of the previous program.

The curriculum had not been directly linked to the specific challenges facing the company. No one had taken the time to define the business-related competencies the participants had to learn in order to implement the company's new strategy. As a result, the faculty taught what they knew, not what the company needed.

The participants didn't come to the program with clear goals. During the course, they heard exciting new ideas, but because there was no forethought about their on-the-job needs, they were unable to prioritize their learning.

Monitoring and follow-up support after the course had been inadequate. The managers found that they encountered resistance when they tried to use their new skills. What had seemed easy in the classroom became nearly impossible at work. Without support, they reverted to doing what they had always done. Participants finished the program eager to try the new behaviors, but the company's reward system and political structure supported the old way of doing things.

How could the new vice president avoid making the same mistakes? By understanding two essentials of executive education.

First, learning is a process, not a program. The company described above (and it is a real company) made the critical error of assuming that all the nec-



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essary learning would take place in a classroom. That, in itself, explains why senior officers had not provided follow-up and systems support. They had assumed that the participants would come back transformed. When the officers didn't see new behavior, they assumed the fault was with the participants and were disappointed in them.

The participants went back to work thinking that the learning was over and that all they had to do was implement what they'd been taught. They didn't realize that new behavior is almost always met with resistance. In the end, with no support to help them act on what they had learned, they blamed senior officers for not "walking the walk."

It never occurred to either group that the problem was not with each other, but with the process, one that failed to take into account the need to follow and reinforce classroom experiences with on-the-job learning and support.

Secondly, learning must be linked to strategy. To get the most out of an executive education experience, companies should do the following:

- Spend time to customize the course. Customization should be driven by a company's strategic direction, particularly when a major change is taking place. Since senior managers are committed to seeing their strategy implemented, they should be involved in determining the specific leadership competencies their managers will need to move the company forward.

This process will not only drive the content of the course; it will ensure that when attendees meet resistance in using their new skills, management will be committed to supporting them.

To customize a course effectively, educational providers must understand the company's strategic issues and the leadership behaviors most important to the organization. Based on this understanding, they should prioritize the content and tailor the learning experience to the participants' unique situation.

- Use action learning projects. An action learning project is a group assignment that allows participants to practice new skills and behaviors while working on company issues. An effective course on global supply-chain management, for example, might include lectures on the subject. It would supplement those lectures with action learning projects in which participants work through real supply-chain issues

with guidance from faculty experts.

By linking classroom and workplace learning, participants not only learn concepts, they use them while working on the company's issues.

- Provide follow-up support. Learning, whether it occurs on the job or off, must be continually supported and reinforced. New ideas

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will be resisted by others who have not been through the same experience. People need help adapting new ideas and skills to the context of existing relationships and the workplace in general. They need time, space and support to experiment and apply their learning to the company's strategic initiatives.

Since performance can drop temporarily as people learn new skills, supervisors must allow for mistakes and risk-taking, or people will revert back to their old behaviors.

Executive education can be an effective agent of change if everyone involved – the senior officers, the participants, the faculty, and the program designer – understands that a course is just one part of a continuous, developmental process that begins and ends on the job. If used properly, executive education can yield high dividends.

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Entrepreneur's Notebook is a regular column contributed by EC2, The Annenberg Incubator Project, a center for multimedia and electronic communications at the University of Southern California. Contact James Klein at (213) 743-1941 with feedback and topic suggestions.