

Publication: Times Of India Delhi;Date: Jun 1, 2009;Section: Anniversary Spl;Page: 44

MANAGERS OF TOMORROW

A CONTEMPORARY MBA PROGRAMME SHOULD BE OPEN TO INNOVATIONS THAT RECOGNISE BOTH THE CHANGING NEED AND THE CHANGING REALITY OF THE GLOBAL MARKETPLACE, WRITES ASHWAMEGH BANERJEE

From the very beginning, management education has been characterised by its focus on responding to market needs and expectations. In fact, the MBA as you know it was once an 'advanced degree in commercial sciences' meant to meet the demand created by companies seeking scientific approaches to management. And as industry needs changed, so did the degree. From the establishment of the first graduate school of management in 1900 to the introduction of the executive MBA for working professionals in 1940; from the first time candidates could choose between pursuing a one-year degree instead of two to the first time they got to choose a specialisation; and so on and so forth.

In effect, management education has evolved systematically. Starting from creating a need among the end-users of the product, it became specialised by focussing on specific sectors. And today, there is hardly any sector or student segment that is not addressed.

THE INDIAN STORY

"The credit for management education in India goes to physicist Vikram Sarabhai. After the establishment of the IITs, he foresaw the need for similar establishments in the field of management education. And with his efforts, the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA) was established in December 1961, followed soon after by one in Kolkata (IIMC)," says Shailesh Gandhi, associate professor, IIMA.

IIMA started with a three-tier management development programme (MDP), not the typical two-year MBA. The objective was to invite participation from select organisations at middle, senior and top management. And as Gandhi points out, these MDPs helped the institute move forward. He adds, "They provided access to companies for writing cases and teaching material and, today, the institute is famous for the case method of teaching. Further, by the time IIMA introduced its twoyear MBA (or PGP) in 1964 — it had in place a network for both summer internships and final placements for graduating students."

Besides these, a need was also felt in the country to develop management teachers. And this led to the launch of doctoral programmes in management. The IIMs called this the 'Fellow Programme in Management.' And apart from sector-based programmes such as agri-business, banking, etc, shorter programmes such as the one-year MBA offered by the Indian School of Business (ISB) in Hyderabad, also emerged. Similarly, programmes catering specifically to working professionals weren't far behind either.

"When people put in about five to seven years in their jobs, they may reach a stage where further growth is subject to additional qualification/skill-building. So, IIMA launched the PGPX in 2006 — unless you have five to seven years of work experience, you can't apply," informs Gandhi. IIMC also offers this programme now and IIM Bangalore and Indore will introduce it this year.

WHO TEACHES WHAT

According to Ashok Som, professor of management at ESSEC Business School, Paris, the curriculum of management education in India is usually borrowed from the West — where it was born and where schools invest heavily in developing teaching materials like books, cases, industry notes, etc. IIMA, for example, was founded with the help of Harvard Business School (HBS) and MIT Sloan helped IIMC. "And most, if not all, B-schools in India would follow the IIMs and take its curriculum as the benchmark — although professors may utilise some adjustments and innovations in the cases they teach and the books they refer to," says Som.

He adds, "I remember when I was teaching in 2007 at IIMA's PGPX, I changed the cases to European/French cases to make the participants aware that there could be an alternative. Indian B-schools must adopt innovative teaching material in the particular context it is relevant and not just follow the curriculum of the West. For example, with the growth and the interest in emerging markets like India, many B-schools in the West have incorporated business cases from these nations."

WHEN CRISIS CALLS

But, regardless of what was being taught, what is pertinent in light of the current economic slowdown perhaps is what 'will be taught' now? As Arnoud De Meyer, director, Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, points out, "A top quality MBA programme would have kept all its value, as an ideal post experience education to help ambitious young high potentials to consolidate their own insights and experience and to share with them some of the basics of management. But that does not mean I would be blind for the need to change."

Changes, he says, need to happen at three levels:

1) A top quality MBA is a preparation for a wide range of jobs in a wide range of sectors. Over the last few years, too many of our graduates went into a limited range of jobs in finance or consulting, and that may have influenced our programme's design and implementation. These sectors are perfectly exciting, but had become somewhat too overpowering. We need to adjust our programmes to take into account a wider range of job possibilities and sectors.

2) We had also perhaps become too discipline driven. In our programme we have always offered the opportunity to sample what the wider university (Cambridge) has to offer. As a recent example I can quote the fact that we offered a very popular elective on 'philosophy in business,' taught by a philosopher, which helped our students think from a totally different perspective about the role of business and management in society.

3) And finally, we need a rationalisation of the sector. There are too many MBA programmes and too many of these are substandard and too small. I believe we will see a weeding out of some not so good programmes.

CHANGES IN CURRICULUM

HBS, which celebrated its Centennial year in 2008, asked hugely relevant questions and conducted extensive research on issues such as the future of market capitalism and the future of management education. "Those discussions have led to faculty task forces looking across the entire curriculum for ways to improve and ensure our curriculum is relevant," says Joe Badaracco, senior associate dean and chair of the MBA programme at HBS.

He adds, "In terms of new programmes available to applicants, we have introduced innovations that recognise both the changing need and the changing reality of the global marketplace. For instance, because issues today, including the financial crisis, are multidimensional in nature, HBS has a joint degree programme with the Kennedy School of Government that recognises and trains students at the increasingly important intersection of business and government."

According to David Yoffie, senior associate dean and chair of executive education at HBS, "Beyond the MBA programme, many of the innovative changes to our programmes are coming in executive education, where participants are actually managing businesses through the recession and looking for insights on how to help their businesses emerge stronger on the other side."

The School held a three-day executive programme in March for almost 100 alumni on understanding the financial crisis, analysing it and developing actions to manage through the crisis. "Further, our executive leadership programmes will be adapted this year to introduce new areas of emphasis related to the downturn, including having participants who are in the midst of the recession actually become part of the teaching process. We will also be running a brand new executive offering on turnaround management strategies to help executives renew their businesses in tough times," says Yoffie.

THE FLIP SIDE

But, as with any other academic degree, change isn't always forthcoming. Gandhi elaborates, "In universities, there are Boards of Studies which are responsible for revising the curriculum to make it contemporary and relevant. Who the members are and how frequently they meet, however, is another matter. Besides, as far as profit-oriented private schools are concerned, it seems it does not matter what they teach."

Similarly, Som states that some B-schools attempt to revise their curriculum once in 10 years or so (the emphasis here is on attempt). He says, "It is a long-drawn process as a lot of work needs to be put in to really overhaul the curriculum. As a result, most schools choose instead to opt for incremental changes and offer electives in 'emerging' areas."

However, with all this importance being placed on change, Badaracco also points out a similar need for 'not changing,' in some ways. He says, "Although we recognise the need for curricular change and evolution, there are certain fundamentals to which we hold true and which are important to our students. So, among other things, we will continue our proven approach to leadership education — emphasising sound judgment, values and ethics; the ability to listen and communicate; and a penchant for turning analysis into action."

Lesson Plan

- Management education has been characterised by its focus on responding to market needs
- The management curriculum in India is usually borrowed from the West, where it was born
- Programmes need to take into account a wider range of job possibilities and sectors

