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Partnering with your leadership development provider: seven worst practices

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to present seven things human resource (HR) leaders are wise to avoid when partnering with their executive education leadership development program providers who have been engaged to design and deliver a custom leadership development program.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper is based on numerous years of working with corporations in the design and delivery of custom executive education leadership development programs. More precisely, it is based on experiencing the negative, unintended consequences of mistakes HR leaders sometimes make when sponsoring significant leadership development program endeavors.*

Findings – *The seven worst practices are identified. These include the corporate sponsors' failure to sufficiently contextualize how the programs fit into larger corporate and personal agenda and a failure to embrace the best practices.*

Practical implications – *The field-based lessons presented here can serve as a cautionary checklist of things to avoid. The seven highlighted items are often not anticipated by corporate HR managers when working with a university-based leadership development program provider; they are easily avoided; and they are insidious in their detrimental effects if not avoided.*

Originality/value – *Through bitter experience, seven worst corporate practices associated with the design and delivery of customized professional development programs are highlighted with the intention of alerting HR readers to them so that they can be avoided.*

Keywords *Learning and development, Talent management, Partnering, Executive education, Leadership development, Human resource strategies*

Paper type *General review*

The economy is getting a bit better. Business appears to be picking up. Budgets are slightly more optimistic. Delayed investments are beginning to get the green light. Such sentiments are emerging around the corporate landscape and, finally, HR can re-invigorate, renew, and re-invest in the talent development pipeline. Indeed, as the *Financial Times* recently reported, "human resource managers [. . .] are now beginning to return to business schools with cash to spend" (*Financial Times*, 2011).

Best practices, worst practices

The chronicling of "best practices" abounds in business literature and on the speakers' circuit. Such insights, across the business spectrum, offer important "To Dos" and can spark action towards a variety of improvements and innovations. What is surprisingly scarce in the literature and on the speakers' circuit, however, is a sharing of worst practices – the Don'ts – as they pertain to a particular business endeavor. For sure, "We ought to be able to learn some things secondhand [because] there is not enough time for us to make all the mistakes ourselves" (Hall, 1990). The purpose of this article is to share the corporate "worst practices" I have observed, experienced, and advised against over the past 20-plus years

The helpful comments of the author's colleague George R. Shaffer on this article are greatly appreciated.

of designing and delivering custom executive education programs. This article's succinct summary of such avoidable practices is intended to help those companies coming to "business schools with cash to spend".

Worst practices, in the context here, are those company practices that undermine the full potential benefit to be experienced by those attending a residential, offsite, custom, executive education program. The potential benefits from such a professional development experience include learning that is not just subject-matter focused but also learning that pertains to developing the following:

- an enhanced capability for collaborating and partnering with colleagues;
- a working knowledge of contemporary practices in functional areas beyond one's main area of work;
- a greater awareness of, and appreciation for, the activities of corporate colleagues in other business units, geographies, and functional lines;
- a broader awareness of possibilities for one's self, one's business unit, and one's employer;
- a more persuasive and engaging ability to communicate and lead;
- an appreciation for the positive power of reflective thinking;
- a new or expanded repertoire for galvanizing and nurturing creative thinking; and
- a renewed sense of enthusiasm, energy and commitment to make a difference.

Program design issues

Efficiency, productivity and lean are all great business concepts. In operations settings, business executives who champion such objectives and deliver improved results in this regard are to be applauded. The same fervor and bulldog tenacity that can result in leaner operations and increased productivity with tangible assets is often misguided, however, towards learning venues. Many corporate sponsors of custom executive education programs make the mistake of insisting that each program day be stuffed with scheduled sessions (no. 1). Certainly, a schedule that shows classes ending at mid-afternoon each day is an easy target for a call to add another session. What is often overlooked is the potential value during unscheduled time for reflection, continued informal conversations with colleagues and instructors, preparation of the next day's assignments, pursuit of suggested further reading, and/or some non-midnight attention to pressing issues back at work.

A second program design worst practice is a failure to provide for both CD (current development) and RD (readiness development) (no. 2). There is a seductive tendency to want to design programs wherein the content is aimed mostly at helping program attendees do their current jobs/tasks better. Such foci are often centered on things like improved cost analytics, better business-to-business marketing plans, more robust capital rationing methods, opening a facility overseas, more effective post-merger integration steps, and resolving conflicts amongst a business team. Clearly, there is merit in such topical priorities and yet, they should be complemented with a set of longer-term professional development objectives aimed at getting attendees ready for more responsibility, promotions, new assignments, and likely forthcoming challenges.

In particular, program designs oriented to honing attendees' creativity, global perspectives, strategic thinking, visioning, and persuasiveness are, to name just a few, examples of important managerial RD capabilities that should augment a CD learning agenda. Those more expansive skills provide "stretch" for attendees, serving to tee up a set of executive-level, aspirational objectives. A RD learning agenda contributes to a company's investment in a future cadre of executive-level leaders and can thus be a major contribution within a company's succession planning considerations.

Putting it into context

It is often a big deal (or it should be) for a corporate manager to be tapped to attend an off-site, premiere professional development program sponsored by his/her company. Amidst the deadline pressures of picking and informing attendees, HR sometimes fails to sufficiently contextualize, for an attendee, why they were tapped and how the program fits into a larger corporate and personal agenda (no. 3a). Selection for such programs should not be, as it sometimes is, a reward for years of service or as a parting gift preceding someone being downsized or retiring.

Those who attend programs due to such rationales tend to be less than full participants. Even worse, they often undermine the learning experience for others due to their lack of a long-term perspective for, and commitment to, the sponsoring company. It is best for attendees to know why they are there and the expectations connected to their attendance. Perhaps their attendance is part of a "key experiences" agenda, or a step along a succession planning path, or preparation for a new set of responsibilities, or an antecedent to a rotational job assignment, or it is an opportunity to enhance a previously identified managerial weakness. A clear context and set of expectations helps attendees maximize their program takeaways via the focus and the line of sight to the sponsor's intended outcomes.

Making the strategic link

Likewise, HR sometimes fails to sufficiently position, for business unit leaders who are to nominate program candidates, the program's importance and how it benefits their units and the company (no. 3b). Besides a host of explicit tangible skills-oriented takeaways, additional benefits such as enhanced strategic alignment across units, deeper commitment to the unit and company, increased enthusiasm and energy for one's work, expanded cross-company collaborations, and the building of foundations for breakthrough idea sharing are often overlooked and under-valued.

In a related vein, sponsors of customized professional development programs often engage in no substantive post-program follow up with program attendees (no. 4). Guilty parties in this regard can include both HR leaders and the business unit leaders from whose units the attendees were selected. The purposes of such follow up can be to:

- gather insights regarding the value of the program;
- give attendees an opportunity to articulate the way(s) in which they personally benefited from the program;
- raise the "at-stake" levels for the attendees to use the lessons learned and the insights garnered from the program;
- identify and codify the collective ideas sparked by the program and the interactions amongst attendees; and
- explicitly encourage and assist attendees in following through on the initiatives and improvements they have been energized to pursue.

Relational issues

Off-site, university-provided, company-sponsored professional development programs are often privileged to host a C-suite executive from the sponsoring company as a dinner speaker or participant in a tailored class session. More often than not, providing such exposure for the program attendees is greatly appreciated and enormously valuable. However, a "guest" appearance by a C-suite executive can sometimes undermine parts of the program learning agenda or even the entire program experience. C-suite executive detractions, such as those below, must be avoided (no. 5):

- Often executives challenge the program attendees to improve performance, and in doing so they assert that they have not been doing their jobs well and, unless they improve, personnel changes will be made.

- With no real first-hand knowledge, a C-suite executive should not criticize the program their managers are currently attending as probably a waste of time, or a bunch of academic stuff, or merely something in which HR insisted they participate.
- If a C-suite executive makes a commitment to speak or co-teach at a particular professional development program, he/she should not cancel at the last minute as attendees often receive that news as signaling that either the program is not very important, or they are not very important, or both.

Relationally, HR is sometimes guilty of another worst practice. If HR is the program's primary corporate sponsor and contact, HR should avoid going "radio silent" with their university program provider (no. 6). Collaborative partnerships are built on open and frequent communications. Those communications may run the gamut from ongoing explorations of program possibilities to planning schedule specifics and everything in between.

Both parties have To Dos, critical path time lines, and competing claims for their time and attention. Radio silence i.e. the failure to return phone calls, respond to e-mails, answer queries, provide promised materials, engage in planned debriefs, etc. serves to undermine the collaborative relationship. And, in the mind of the program provider, an undermined relationship can slowly and insidiously take on less importance, less priority and less attention due to the provider's inference that the sponsor does not see it as important as the program provider does.

Remember these best practices

One final worst practice is worth noting. In an earlier article in this journal, a dozen HR best practices pertaining to the design and delivery of impactful, custom professional development programs were presented (Haskins and Shaffer, 2009). Thus, just as a reminder, a seventh worst practice is failing to embrace the "best practices" (no. 7). They are outlined below:

1. obtain significant CEO program ownership;
2. galvanize a series of face-to-face interviews between senior company executives and the program designers during the program development phase;
3. establish a clearly delineated target population for program attendance;
4. broker ongoing, paired relationships between company executives and program instructors;
5. insist that the final program design contain significant workshop time to explore company applications of lessons presented and learned;
6. prior to a program's rollout, a company's senior executive team should attend a condensed, residential version of it;
7. each program offering should have an active, conscientious, in-residence executive sponsor;
8. execute a comprehensive communications plan targeted to each of the program attendees prior to and following their program attendance;
9. ask for an interim briefing from the program provider that provides feedback regarding such things as road blocks to change that participants bring up and the classroom climate they have set;
10. ask for summaries of any program-administered participant-focused diagnostic instrument (e.g. the LPI, Myers-Briggs, INSIGHTS and Profilor);
11. leverage the company- and manager-knowledge of the program instructors by using them in other company-related venues; and
12. commit to a relatively speedy throughput of the target population.

Benediction

Corporate-sponsored, customized professional development programs represent a non-trivial investment of company time and money. The inherent potential for such endeavors to positively contribute to a company's strategic needs and opportunities is great. There can be, however, derailments. From a program-provider's vantage point, I have learned some hard lessons. The old Japanese proverb of "Fall seven times, stand up eight" is pertinent (Taylor, 2010). I have fallen victim to these seven worst practices and it is my hope to stand and help you avoid them.

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About the author

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