# The missing component in MBA programs

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to illuminate a crucial component missing in the education of MBA students. This component involves awareness translated into skills that would enable leaders to narrow the gap between vision and practice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – An analysis of MBA curricula shows that the ability to exploit intangible assets has not been explored sufficiently as well as why this ability is instrumental for leadership.

**Findings** – This study emphasises how crucially important it is for leaders to be able to consolidate a vision and lead change derived from that vision as reflected in their daily managerial practice, and argues that current MBA students need to develop additional unique skills that will enable them to diagnose problems related to the assimilation of change and to measure the effectiveness of this process.

**Originality/value** – This paper offers an original approach to the link between theory and practice and to the importance of developing a vision that challenges the way this topic is generally taught in MBA programs.

**Keywords** Vision, Organizational values, Leaders, MBA programmes, Leadership, Master of Business Administration, Students

**Paper type** Conceptual paper

The fundamental mission of business schools is to train the future generation of managers. As part of the education process, business schools strive to prepare managers to lead changes in their organisations. The importance of this issue is based on the notion that in the present age, organisations must continually change in order to survive and prosper. This change may be initiated by the organisation as part of its innovative nature or may be a response to changes in the environment. Thus, a considerable part of organisational action is related to leading and implementing change.

During the past few years, criticism of MBA programs has become increasingly vocal, specifically concerning its relevance to reality (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2011). For example Rynes *et al.* (2003) claimed that schools are much too focused on abstract theories and not sufficiently oriented towards providing practical skills. As a result, there is a misalignment between the curricula taught in business schools and the skills actually required for management. This article approaches this misalignment by presenting an original approach to the link between the theory and practice of developing a vision that challenges the way this topic is generally taught in MBA programs. Specifically, it seems that business schools do not devote enough time and attention to the development of decision-making skills, manpower-management skills and strategic-management and innovative skills (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009).

We can therefore support the idea that not only MBA does education as it is today not provide a wide enough perspective on reality, but it also that it does not, in fact,

foster the development of a global world view, management skills or increased awareness of social issues. The relevance of social responsibility to business managers is hardly self-evident. However, creating meaning for the employees' work and achievements by aligning the employees to the organisational vision is part of an intrinsic and extrinsic process that influences both the individual and the organisation, and interacts with the concept of social responsibility in the broader context. Despite its obvious importance, it is not clear why this concept should be part of a MBA program. A possible answer draws on Cornuel and Kletz's (2006) argument according to which our daily behaviour is more often influenced by habit than by any teaching. This claim, however, appears less sustainable when one enters the field of ethics, or to specifically, responsibility. They claim that habit alone cannot explain our behaviour or the decisions we make, and that experience is always specific and contingent in nature and thus seemingly incapable of being governed by rigorous laws. Furthermore, the type of knowledge that one acquires through habit is governed by subjective necessity alone, but cannot satisfy the criteria of necessity and strict universality that knowledge requires.

Thus the following questions arise: What is expected of an MBA graduate beyond skills and knowledge? What are the basic skills MBA students need and to what basic knowledge should they be exposed? In this era of rapidly changing environments, what kind of awareness, which capabilities, are required from a successful leader?

To promote change within an organisation, the leader should encourage support for the change by individuals and groups by creating an overlap between the goals of the individual and those of the organisation. The role of the leader focuses on helping his or her people interpret the change (Rhydderch *et al.*, 2004). Resistance to change increases when there is an absence of such overlap. In some cases, the organisation members and stakeholders are unwilling to accept the change and assimilate it (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). This might create the impression that the main challenge is in implementing a vision amongst employees. However, in many cases less effort will be required to persuade top management to participate on a regular, everyday basis and to align themselves with the vision. This is because the management takes a more holistic view of the organisation and its challenges, while employees tend to relate to the vision mainly in the context of specific challenges.

Sometimes resistance is a reflection of a psychological fear of change, whether on the part of a particular influential individual or of a group. In most cases, the problem of assimilation of change is limited. However, when it does arise in an entire organisational unit, the manager will face a complex situation that requires his or her intervention. The goal of this paper is to raise awareness of the gap between vision and its translation into practice, and to offer a number of skills that the managers of the future will need in order to narrow it. Whereas today, the main emphasis in education and training is placed on economic considerations (Kaplan and Norton, 1996). We should instead focus on the crucial importance of consolidating a vision. Thus, the mission of MBA programs is to prepare their students for the challenge of leading change as derived from their vision and as reflected in their daily managerial practice. This paper will argue that additional unique skills are needed to diagnose problems related to the assimilation of change and to measure the effectiveness of this process. These skills will help future managers identify problems related to the assimilation of change and successfully lead the change process.

## Management and organisational change

Pettigrew and Whipp (1991) identified five managerial factors that can explain the performance of companies: how firms assess their environment; how they lead change; how they link strategic and operational change; how they manage their human resources; and how they manage the coherence of the overall change process. Their findings underscore the idea that the managerial components of organisational change are instrumental in the success of organisations. The managerial challenge posed at a time of organisational change is complex and multifaceted. When leading change it is important to create a readiness for change, build the ability to change, design content and outline a direction, address operational issues, recruit support, communicate the need for change, balance the organisation and then institutionalise the change. The strategy for change is influenced by the human aspects of the organisation – "Formulating the content of any new strategy inevitably entails managing its context and process" (Pettigrew, 1987, p. 657).

There is a broad consensus that managers play a key role in the development and assimilation of organisational culture (Jung, 2001). This role is especially striking when changes are crucial for the survival of the organisation:

> If cultures become dysfunctional, it is the unique function of leadership to perceive the functional and dysfunctional elements of the existing culture, to manage cultural evolution and change in such a way that the group can survive in a changing environment (Schein, 1992, p.15).

Nadler *et al.* (2001) maintain that in order for effective cultural change to take place, active intervention by the manager is needed. The challenges managers face today in leading change lead us to conclude that leaders rather than managers are needed. Kotter (2008) outlined the differences between management and leadership. According to his theory, the first difference between the two lies in the means. While managing an organisation involves planning and budgeting, setting targets or goals for the future, outlining steps to achieve them and resources to support these steps, leading an organisation begins with setting a direction – a vision for the future – and the strategies needed to implement it. The second difference lies in alignment. In order to achieve organisational goals, management creates an organisational structure, fills positions, delegates responsibilities and monitors progress. Leaders align people. This means communicating a new direction to those committed to the achievement of the goals. The third difference lies in the way each ensures that the goals are accomplished. While management does so by controlling and problem solving, using a "hands-on" approach, leadership does so by motivating and inspiring the members of the organisation.

Successful leadership discerns what is currently happening in the organisation, evaluates what is most important for the future and focuses the organisational activity on it. Leadership provides bridges from the present to the future. While managers operate on physical resources, such as capital, skills and technology, leaders operate on emotional and spiritual resources, such as values, commitment and ambitions (Bennis and Nanus, 1985).

## Organisational change and vision

Organisations are dual in nature: On the one hand, they have a built-in inertia, while on the other hand, various aspects of the organisation are constantly and dynamically

changing (Hannan and Freeman, 1984). March (1981) argued that although organisations change frequently, this change cannot be arbitrarily controlled. To lead organisational change successfully, work patterns need to be flexible rather than rigid and based essentially on bureaucratic management. Thus, the leader needs to demonstrate leadership and adaptability.

In the light of these challenges, Kaplan and Norton (1996) recommend focusing on four core strategies:

(1) Consolidating the vision, clarifying it and attaining a consensus for it among the managerial team.

(2) Communicating the vision and educating employees by setting goals and creating an appropriate system of rewards. These strategies are important to advance a shared vision.

(3) Creating a business plan that sets measurable goals, allocates resources and determines milestones.

(4) Creating a system of continuing learning that provides feedback regarding the implementation of the shared dream and its continued adaption to reality.

Bennis (2009), in his book, *On Becoming a Leader*, describes four essential competencies for all leaders. The first, the leader's ability to engage others and harness them to his aim, is related to creating a shared meaning. By shared meaning, Bennis means that followers adopt the leader's vision as their own.

A salient vision is important in modern organisations that produce knowledge in a rapidly changing and complex working environment (Nanus, 1992). Today, organisational activity is not restricted to time and place; it is multi-purpose and geared to satisfying many stakeholders. Vision is an organisational principle of reality. This detailed view allows people to act from a position of knowledge and to commit to a certain direction, instead of proceeding from uncertainty, guessing each time anew (Hodges, 2005).

### The organisational vision

A survey of the literature shows that vision has three main functions:

(1) To provide inspiration for the organisation and its members.

(2) To focus the efforts of the members of the organisation and to outline and motivate meaningful directions of action (Bennis and Nanus, 1985).

(3) To create solidarity, social cohesion and commitment to the desired future picture among the members of the organisation (Senge, 2006).

In the context of the third function of a vision, a good organisational vision is perceived as a joint product of all the members of the organisation. The responsibility for building the vision in the organisation belongs to all the members and should express their authority. A shared vision is crucial because it provides the focus and energy for learning, lends solidarity and commitment among all its members towards a desired picture of the future, as well as a commitment towards one another (Osguthorpe and Patterson, 1998; Senge, 2006). Furthermore, rather than create mere obedience, the common vision creates a genuine commitment to the task and a willingness to mobilise to achieve it.

Vision can be referred to as a managerial tool, yet it can be much more. It must represent a means of unity around a vital and shared idea, while at the same time enabling individuals to feel that they are part of a group that shares a vision of the future, and that they have the legitimacy to express their own unique ideas. These tensions emphasise the need for an internal dialogue among the members of the organisation, as well as a dialogue between the organisation and its environment.

Dialogue is one of the key components in translating a vision into practice, since the fact that an organisation has a clear, structured vision does not guarantee that it will be implemented. Consequently, leadership requires diagnostic processes that enable reflection, clarification and restructuring (Collins and Porras, 1997).

### The implementation of a vision

The question of the implementation of the organisational vision, as well as the extent to which and how it is implemented, is indicative of the difficulty and tension involved in translating the vision into strategy and daily practice. At the same time, operating within the organisation are many different stakeholders who may have different interpretations of the vision itself and how to translate it into strategy. Moreover, the leadership of the organisation has to contend with the constant tension between the vision they are striving to instil and the personal visions of the organisation's members. Dealing positively with this tension, according to Senge (2006), means losing the leadership's monopoly over the vision.

In order to implement a shared vision, it must be translated into organisational values. Values are concepts or beliefs regarding behavioural patterns, aims or target-motivated actions that help to direct, evaluate or judge conduct, situations or events. Organisational values underlie every organisational culture (Ostroff *et al.*, 2003; Schein, 1992). These values represent basic and abstract motivations, a driving force upon which people or organisations base their norms, activities and positions in different situations and events (Friedman, 2001).

These values, therefore, are likely to form the foundation of an organisation's culture as well as its driving force. Their impact is especially evident when they become factors that drive the products, behaviours, positions and expectations of the organisation's members (Friedman and Almog-Bareket, 2006).

The organisational culture consists of shared values and behaviours. It consolidates as part of a slow, lengthy process that emanates mainly from the organisation's founders and top echelon. The founders, managers and executives are the key figures in the creation and cultivation of the organisational culture. These leaders feed the organisation's culture with value-based messages that constitute its map and a compass.

Culture depends on shared meaning – a common understanding of certain aspects of the organisation and a shared connection to it. Samuel (1996, p. 241) believes that "a culture determines the ways in which an organisation copes with existential problems and how it adapts to given environmental conditions. These patterns are the product of cumulative collective experience, and are learned over time by most of the organisation's participants".

Scholars have presented the connection between the strength of the organisational culture and the organisation's performance (O'Reilly, 1989; Wilderom, 2000). Kotter and Heskett's (1992) study showed a link between strong organisational culture and

the performance level of organisations. The studies of Peters and Waterman (1985) also
support this argument and their findings attest to the fact that one characteristic of
outstanding organisations is linked to the existence of a "strong" and uniform culture.

The basic assumption of this approach is the existence of a spillover from
organisational vision to organisational values to organisational culture (see Figure 1).
It is the organisation's lifeblood and the central idea underpinning organisational
activity (Levy, 2000).

The process of translating the organisation's vision into strategy assists managers
in building stakeholder consensus around these two components. During this process,
a set of well-defined objectives and measures should be used as a bridge between
vision and strategy (Kaplan and Norton, 1996).

The assimilation process involves "marketing" a clear and attractive vision,
assessing the extent to which the vision addresses the needs of the partners, using
organisational frameworks and mechanisms (for example, pay and rewards) and
modelling the vision's messages in words, behaviour and symbols (Katz, 1999). Moving
from vision to implementation includes the three elements of vision, strategy and its
translation into daily practice.

### Islands of organisational culture as the threat to organisational change
It is important to bear in mind that organisations are made up primarily of people who
work together to achieve common goals and that the organisational culture is an
important part of what connects them:

> Organisational culture is a quasi social fabric, linking the organisation's human components
> by interwoven social conventions (Samuel, 1996, p. 260).

The organisation's members are the building blocks in describing what occurs in the
organisation (Schein, 2000).

Organisational systems try to base themselves on the principle of control and on
determining principles of action in order to ensure required uniformity and anticipated
standards (Inbar, 2000, p. 218). However, in view of the size of (many) organisations as
well as the frequency of changes, leaders feel they lack formal tools, and that those they
do possess are limited in their ability to enable control. This limitation is the reason
why identification with the change the manager proposes on the part of the members of
the organisation can facilitate its assimilation into the organisational culture.

This approach is not based on rewards and economic benefits, nor alternatively on
penalties in the form of bureaucratic or physical supervision, which for the most part
tends to promote conformity. Its purpose is, rather, mainly to have employees

**Vision**

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**Organisational Values**
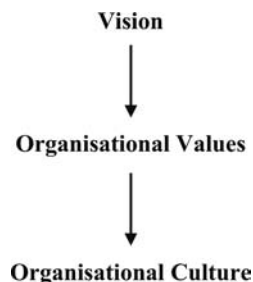
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**Organisational Culture**

Figure 1.
Spill-over process of
planned organisational
change

internalise organisational expectations. In this way, they become the critic and supervisor of the work of their group, and mainly of themselves (Raz, 2004, p. 24). A change in the *locus* of authority enables the manager to take time to execute managerial tasks. This is different from the bureaucratic, managerial method, in which authority is external and legitimacy is powered by a formal bureaucratic system. Those adopting this approach view organisational culture as a shared functional role designed to restrict the individual's behaviour while delineating what is expected, prohibited and permitted in the organisation.

However, islands of organisational culture pose the greatest danger to the assimilation of organisational change. These sub-cultures exist within various parts of the organisation due to another type of work or a different geographic location (Beyer, 1993). They are not cut off from each other, but rather represent various hues and points of emphasis; they do not necessarily combine into a single amalgam either, and are sometimes even opposed to one another.

Although they are part of the same organisation, the sub-units do not always automatically agree on the desired goals or behaviour of the organisation (Lebas and Weigenstein, 1986). These islands can be an advantage when they are adapted to the goals of the leading unit, but can also be a danger to the assimilation of necessary changes, and consequently to the survival of the organisation itself.

The differences and the gap in the perception of organisational culture may be expressed in different perceptions of the role played by function-based departments and ranks – managers or workers. In certain cases, these sub-units are even organisational sub-cultures that have different characteristics (Tierney, 1988). These groups may have different norms and values, or may colour them different shades and emphases, notwithstanding their belonging to the same organisation. In this way, organisational sub-cultures can develop.

MBA students need to be aware of the need to examine the translation and implementation of the organisational vision by its stakeholders (both employees and clients): from "speaking vision" to "doing vision".

## Recommendations for designers of MBA curricula and concluding comments

In line with Kaplan and Norton (1996), who claim that the ability of managers to exploit intangible assets has become more important than their ability to manage physical ones, this paper suggests that this ability is part of the set of capabilities of a leader in the act of leadership rather than management. The great challenge facing MBA schools is primarily how to develop an awareness of the human aspect in the implementation of organisational change, through the development of leadership abilities. Creating an awareness of the need to observe the leadership act and the management process can make an important contribution to future generations of managers. Their ability to measure the assimilation of the organisational vision into the day-to-day practices of the organisation is the key to leading successful change. This competence has two aspects: the ability of the manager to move away from day-to-day work and observe it from a distance, and the ability to delve into the depth of the subjective perceptions of others in the organisation.

MBA programs should consequently include attention to the development of reflective skills: the skill of being able to observe what is happening and to ask the

right questions, while being able to take a step back from the day-to-day work, is an important tool in the hands of a talented manager.

Heifetz *et al.* (2009) note that in order to be able to diagnose oneself in the midst of action, an individual needs to create some distance from the occurrence in question. In this sense, leadership is both active and reflective, meaning that a leader has to alternate between participating and observing (Heifetz, 1994). Heifetz *et al.* (2009) used the metaphor of "getting on the balcony" above the "dance floor" to depict what it means to gain the distanced perspective a leader needs in order to see reality. The development of these observational and thinking skills can be achieved through group dynamics and individual efforts.

Second, the development and adoption of these patterns will enable managers to diagnose what is happening in their organisation and lead others in similar reflective processes. The business school "sows the seeds," and exposes the manager to different methods. For example, included among the skills the future manager may be exposed to during his studies might be intra-organisational dialogue skills that enable a shared learning processes, for example by means of case studies. A discussion of these cases in an organisation can serve as an opportunity to investigate patterns of thinking and action. The cases can surface emotionally charged situations, while studying them together can break the ice and promote frank and candid discussion (Shapiro and Hassinger, 2007). Discussion of the cases enables visualisation, a process of creating a mental picture of what a person feels or wants to happen (Sherman, 2008). Visualisation can also help solve problems, reduce anxiety and increase effective planning (King, 2001; Sherman, 2008). Hart and Bredeson (1995) consider visualisation an important tool for managers that can help them to create greater correspondence between values and action plans.

Managers can train themselves or receive further training by working with organisational consultants in the role of mediator. Of course, it is very important to create an open atmosphere that will enable people to express themselves frankly and to voice their real opinions, for example by ensuring anonymity and creating a secure environment. Each manager must choose a method he finds most appropriate to implement these processes within the organisation he is leading. In doing so, the managers will gain the critical skills they need to manage human assets, including learning to understand and be aware of situations from the perspective of the workers they are leading.

An essential requirement for MBA graduates is an awareness of the need to translate vision into practice by engaging employees in the process of creating organisational values derived from the vision, and an organisational culture to match. This awareness will lead to the forming of skills that will enable processes that connect the vision to daily practice. These skills may vary from one manager to another and from one organisation to another, since they are come in response to different needs and challenges facing the organisation.

To sum up, business schools need to train future generations of managers to ask the right questions and to design processes that will enable them to observe what is happening at different points in time, from different perspectives and at different levels. These observations will provide them with valuable information on the human assets that lie at the heart of the organisation and the principal means of advancing the organisation's goals and realisation of its vision. In this way, leaders will be able to

develop the infrastructure that is essential to the work of their organisation and to enable the existence of a reflective view of inter-organisational dialogue.

This array of skills among managers will enable them to implement and lead organisational changes and at the same time, overcome resistant islands of organisational culture. Educating managers to face these challenges will enable them to be better leaders who can effectively react and initiate change in the face of the ever-changing environment. A shared vision will be translated into organisational values and adopted by the organisations' members, institutionalised in the organisational culture and translated into daily practice. Thus, an education process including the development of awareness of the human factor in the organisation, and the skills to engage in a meaningful dialogue that encourages a deep identification with the change, independent of formal mechanisms and authority, may be the missing component in MBA programs.

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