

Three Simple Ways to Reinvent Business Education

By Josh
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It used to be that an MBA from a prestigious business school guaranteed success for both the MBA holder and the organization that hired him. That's no longer true. The business climate has changed, and that makes continuous reinvention necessary for organizations, careers, and yes, even business schools.

We live in a world of dizzying speed, exponential complexity, and ruthless competition. Educational models designed for days gone by have lost their potency and relevance. Here are three suggestions to overhaul an outdated system:

Focus on Creative Problem-Solving Instead of Just “Hard” Skills

There's no longer an operating manual for success. Future leaders must learn to improvise with the proficiency of a graffiti artist—to innovate in real time. To prepare for tomorrow's challenges, B-schools must prepare students to think instead of just mechanically do. Coursework and projects that develop students' creative muscles and build experience in making decisions in the face of ambiguity will deliver far more value than rote discounted cash flow calculations.

Suggestion: Add a course entitled Making Mistakes, where students learn how to take responsible risks and solve creative challenges. Include workshops in comedy improv to sharpen on-the-fly thinking.

Train Jazz Musicians, Not Orchestra Conductors

Traditional B-schools turn out leaders in the classical conductor model—a single person, the conductor (aka, the boss), leads her team. No longer playing an instrument herself, she works to get her team to adhere to the notes on the written page with precision and accuracy. While that approach may have worked in the past, today's leaders need to be more like jazz musicians—small groups engaged in an ongoing process of creativity and exploration. When responsible risk-taking trumps compliance, innovation flourishes. And so does the bottom line.

Suggestion: Offer a full-semester residential option called The Creative Leadership Experience. Students live together and share a series of immersive experiences including visits from live jazz performers and excursions to companies wrestling with innovative solutions to pressing business problems. Through full immersion, students learn how creative cultures such as jazz combos, artist collaboratives, and startup companies foster breakthrough thinking and fresh leadership approaches.

Develop Leaders That Grow Other Leaders, Not Management Systems

Creating tightly functioning, repeatable systems was the mainstay business model of the past. But in the fluid, global markets of today, leadership is more about talent development than building fault-tolerant processes. Blind adherence to rigid management processes has given way to ongoing creative disruption as the currency for success. Today's successful leaders maximize their impact by the people they develop, not the rules they enforce. Modern organizations need leaders who can expand leadership capacity, not just comply with mandates.

Suggestion: Develop a series of workshops around becoming a “coaching leader.” Interactive sessions designed to build empathy and help students learn how to empower and lead others instead of just managing them. Sessions on giving direct feedback, hosting productive one-on-ones, and helping others reach their career goals should be mandatory.

For B-schools to remain an important stable in leadership education, they must adjust their approach. Creative leaders who reinvent, disrupt, and transform on an ongoing basis are the ones who will enjoy the spoils. Administrators and faculty must do the same if they want to claim credit for the success of tomorrow's great leaders.

It's time for B-school version 2.0.

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