

Weatherhead MBA Program – Case Western Reserve University

The competency-based curriculum of the MBA program at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management makes the promotion of social and emotional competence an integral part of a student's education. The faculty-driven curriculum change evolved to address the criticisms that graduate management education has encountered over the years. They have created a program that adds value by explicitly targeting competencies that are related to superior managerial performance. And the Weatherhead program was the basis for a program that now is being offered more widely through the consulting firm Hay/McBer. The social and emotional competencies addressed in the program include: accurate self-assessment, achievement drive, conflict management, empathy, self-confidence, networking (collaboration and building bonds), flexibility (adaptability), developing others, self-control, initiative and innovation, and social objectivity (communication).

At the onset of MBA training, all students are required to participate in the Managerial Assessment and Development course. The goals of this course are "to learn a method for assessing one's knowledge and abilities relevant to management," to develop "plans for acquiring new management-related knowledge and abilities throughout one's career," and to become more aware of "one's own values and the values of others" (Boyatzis, 1994, p. 305). By relying on the individual's own perspective, the views and reactions of others, and the assessment data from this course, the student learns a great deal about his or her strengths and weaknesses in those areas that are most critical for superior managerial performance. This self-knowledge then becomes the basis for a Learning Plan that will guide the next two or three years of MBA study.

During the first week of the course, students get to know one another through introductory exercises. The next two weeks are spent completing a wide variety of assessment exercises and tests, including the Learning Skills Profile, the Learning Style Inventory, Adaptive Style Inventory, the videotaped presentation exercise, the videotaped Group Discussion Exercise, the audiotaped Critical Incident Interview, and many more. The students then spend a week learning about the model of management on which the course is based. This model includes the 12 competencies that previous research shows are critical for superior performance in a managerial role (Boyatzis, 1982), as well as 11 knowledge areas and five value themes.

Because feedback serves as a central component to the program, the next six weeks are devoted to interpreting the feedback that students receive from the assessments. The feedback process is designed to empower students to move at their own pace. With the exception of faculty and facilitators of the course, the students are the only recipients of their assessment data. However, any information or data that are observed through more “public settings,” such as the videotaped Group Discussion Exercise or Presentation Exercise, are subject to discussion and more open, group feedback. With the support of faculty and facilitators, “individuals determine when, if, and how they discuss or invite discussion of their information in the Executive Action Teams” (Boyatzis, 1994, p. 310). Students may discuss the results of their assessments with the faculty and facilitators if they so desire.

Students then spend the next four to five weeks using what they learned from the feedback to develop their own personal Learning Plans. Based on self-directed learning

theory, this course encourages students to take control of their learning experience and to choose those developmental activities that relate most closely to their personal situation.

In implementing their Learning Plans, students are helped through another important component of the program, the Executive Action Team (EAT), which is comprised of approximately twelve randomly assigned students, a corporate executive advisor, and an advanced doctoral student who serves as a facilitator. The facilitators have training and experience in working with small groups and they typically possess skills as career counselors. The corporate executive advisors are either CEOs or people who report directly to such an office of a private or public organization. They provide a valuable opportunity for students to develop meaningful relationships with working professionals. The EAT helps students integrate knowledge from the various courses they take as well as from other types of experiences such as internships, mentorships, and clubs. The EAT also provides students with a positive peer group. The faculty help insure that the EATs are effective by encouraging them to develop activities such as network and communication workshops.

The development of a Learning Plan provides an opportunity early in the program for students to think deeply about their values and how they relate to the students' future career interests. The creation of a Learning Plan integrates one's set of ideal values and visions with one's real understanding of personal strengths and weaknesses. The learning plan begins by discussing how life and career goals are related to the values, visions and mission in the individual's life. After having the students list their personal and career goals, they are asked to discuss which abilities or knowledge areas are relevant for achieving these goals. By establishing small, clear, and attainable goals, students use the

Learning Plan to provide them with a structure for thinking about the ways in which they intend to maximize the use of their MBA training. “The Learning Plan should provide a method for on-going (i.e. lifelong) self-directed development and function as a type of learning contract for the students” (Boyatzis, 1994, p. 316).

The competency-based curriculum at the Weatherhead School of Management is being evaluated through a fifty-year longitudinal study that will follow the development and careers of its graduates. Both full-time and part-time MBA students and Professional Fellows are involved in this study. Results for students who went through the program have been compared with those of students who previously went through the traditional program. Outcome measures include a critical incident interview exploring the students’ effective and ineffective work or school experiences and a videotaped group discussion exercise. These are coded for the competencies that are critical for managerial success (most of which are related to emotional intelligence). Students also complete the Learning Skills Profile, which is a card-sort of 72 statements of skills related to the individual’s levels of skill acquisition and mastery.

Preliminary results suggest that the new competency-based program has resulted in full-time students improving on 71%, and part-time students improving on 81%, of the abilities assessed (Boyatzis, Leonard, Rhee, & Wheeler, 1996, p.31). Furthermore, the competency-based approach has been more effective than the traditional approach used in the past in its impact on social and emotional competence. For instance, full-time students in the competency-based MBA program experienced a marked improvement in networking, developing others, self-confidence, oral communication, flexibility, and initiative, while students in the traditional program improved only in self-confidence.

Part-time students in the competency-based MBA program increased in initiative, self-confidence, empathy, flexibility, persuasiveness, networking, oral communication, and developing others, while part-timers in the traditional program only improved in flexibility.

Other benefits of the new competency based-program are suggested by the 75% increase in applications to the full-time program from 1989-1990 to 1995-1996. This increase occurred at a time when there was a 17% decrease in the number of people taking the GMAT, suggesting that the Weatherhead School had increased its appeal at a time when MBA programs in general were losing some of their appeal.

For more information, see:

Boyatzis, R. E. (1994). Stimulating self-directed learning through the Managerial Assessment and Development Course. Journal of Management Education, 18(3), 304-323.

Boyatzis, R. E. (1996). Competencies can be developed, but not in the way we thought. Capability, 2(2), 25-41.

Boyatzis, R. E., Cowen, S. S., & Kolb, D. A. (1995). Innovation in professional education: Steps on a journey to learning. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Boyatzis, R. E., Leonard, D., Rhee, K., & Wheeler, J. V. (1996). Combined faculty impact on improving abilities through an MBA program . Cleveland, OH: Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University.