

Journal of Executive Education

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 3

November 2013

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Recommended Citation

Gropper, Daniel M. (2013) "Training New Executive MBA Faculty and Staff: A Case Approach," *Journal of Executive Education*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/jee/vol3/iss1/3>

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Training New Executive MBA Faculty and Staff: A Case Approach

Daniel M. Gropper

Introduction

Teaching new faculty and staff how to handle Executive MBA students can be an interesting challenge. Even skilled and experienced educators may not be prepared to translate what has worked well for them with other student groups to the EMBA world.

It is generally well established that case teaching can be an effective way to teach Executive level students (Barnes, et. al. 2001). They engage in active learning, and often can bring their experiences to bear on issues in a case that others did not see.

Why not use case teaching methods to help train new faculty and students as well? The following case was developed to be used by both new faculty and staff, perhaps in a joint setting, to aid in the discussion of a variety of issues germane to the unique needs of Executive MBA programs. As with other cases, a full discussion of the (A) case should be conducted before introducing the (B) case. Suggested questions are provided, but one should not limit discussion to the issues raised in these questions.

Section II of the paper tells the story of a crisis in the classroom and how the professor reacted. Basically a reengineering story, old ways were set aside and new ways adopted, initially more on faith than on proven principle, in the quest for a dramatic improvement in student

learning. The form of the new course structure is provided in detail. This transformation happened more than seven years ago and the time lapse allows presentation of numeric evidence on student satisfaction in about equal portions for before and after the change.

An earlier version of this case was presented at the Southeast Regional EMBA Council meetings in Tuscaloosa in 2003. My thanks go to all who participated in those meetings, but especially to Susan Carver, Maury Kalnitz, and Kim Kuerten.

THE CASE

Dr. Christine Black (A)

Mike Stevens pulled his cellphone from the clip on his belt. *“Hold on just a moment.”* Mike pushed back his chair and strode out of the classroom. From the whiteboard at the head of the classroom, Dr. Black’s gaze followed Mike into the hallway. Her jaw tightened as she scanned the room; nobody else in the class said a word. Dr. Black continued working through the assigned forecasting problem from Chapter 2 – *“...so you see, constructing a 95% confidence interval around the point prediction from this model indicates that we can expect sales to be between 110 and 126 units per day.”*

Mike’s rising voice could be heard from around the corner, *“...just make sure the modifications are made! The mold temperatures*

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*need to be correct, or the defect rates will continue to be too high.....look, I am sick and tired of this, no more *#%* excuses, just get the *#%* job done! I don't need....."*

Just as Dr. Black decided she should go close the door and spare the class this tirade, Chris Robinson, a student in the class, got up and closed the door himself. She caught his eye and nodded at him in appreciation; the obvious irritation in his expression softened slightly, and he nodded back.

An award winning teacher for a dozen years at the undergraduate level, Dr. Christine Black was new to teaching the Executive MBA students at Heritage State University. Her excellent publication record, consulting experience, and multiple teaching awards had made her seem a natural choice to teach EMBA's. Dr. Jim Johnson, her Department Head and mentor, had been a legendary EMBA teacher in the Quantitative methods area before he decided to retire. Jim's mentoring advice to her had been short and sweet. *"Just trust your instincts. The EMBA's may think they are more knowledgeable, but most of them need just as much help with the statistical and quantitative material as the undergraduates. Sometimes they need even more help, because their skills are rusty."*

Dr. C, as she had long been known to her students, had been looking forward to the EMBA teaching experience. Now, she was wondering why she had agreed to give up every other Friday and Saturday for the next couple of months to teach such a disrespectful bunch. The additional money hardly seemed worth it. Her syllabus clearly prohibited *"...cellphones, pagers, or other electronic devices which would be disruptive in the classroom"* and no student had ever deliberately ignored her directions and challenged her authority like this.

"Any more questions about this problem? OK, then let's take a 10 minute break."

Now she would have a chance to pull her thoughts together and deal with the disruption Mike's cellphone call had caused. At lunch that day, things had seemed fine, but Dr. C had a sense they were not going quite as well as her classes usually did. She wanted to get this class back on track, and felt that she needed to remind the students about the ground rules and re-establish control over her classroom.

Questions to think about:

1. If you were Dr. Black, what would you do during the break? After the break?
2. What would you do for tomorrow's classes, and the sessions to come in 2 weeks?
3. Is this just about the cellphone call, or are there other issues as well?
4. As program director or faculty colleague, what advice would you give Dr. Black about handling this situation? How would you handle that interaction?
5. What do you make of Chris Robinson's actions?
6. How does the overall EMBA program structure impact this situation?
7. What about faculty mentoring in this case? In general?
8. What about policies for the EMBA program? Who develops and enforces them? Is this a program or a collection of classes?

Dr. Christine Black (B)

Chris Robinson's mind was drifting in and out as Dr. Black continued working through the problems from the back of the assigned chapters in the textbook. Geez, he thought, how long will this go on? We have got to have a break coming up soon. This is just agony! Lunch had been good, but he wasn't used to having so much to eat at noon. And the strawberry cheesecake, which had tasted so great, was now weighing heavily on him.

"...constructing a 95% confidence interval around the point estimate....."

Chris's mind dropped back in on the professor, and just as quickly, bounced back out. There are a ton of things going on at the office, and my division's quarterly reports are due next week. The last thing I need to be doing is neglecting those things so I can watch our professor work problems from the back of the chapter.

Mike's voices rising in volume and intensity from the hallway outside the classroom broke through his reverie: *"....look, I am sick and tired of this, no more excuses....."*

Chris got up from his seat, grateful for an excuse to move, and closed the door. It is irritating, but at least Mike is getting some real problems resolved, Chris thought. So far, this class has been a complete waste of my time, and this weekend is shaping up to be no better than the last. I have got to talk to the EMBA Director about this class. Hopefully we will have a chance to talk at the Dean's Dinner tonight.

Out in the hallway, Mike Stevens was wrapping up his call. A 15-year veteran of the tire industry, he had just been promoted to general manager for one of the largest tire manufacturing plants in the Southeast. This plant had been on Goodtire's list to be shut

down, but the company decided to give the new plant manager and his team one year to get things straightened out. Their quarterly goals were very demanding, but not impossible. This plant had long been plagued by a host of problems, both major and minor, and Mike's no-nonsense reputation for quality and integrity was the key element that helped him get the job. A West Point grad, he had a large personal stake in getting this plant turned around. However, he recognized, his workplace commitment was imposing on Professor Black and his classmates. He was enjoying the class....it had been a while since he had solved problems like these which had relatively crisp, clean answers. And, he thought, I believe I will be able to use some of these techniques to address some of the issues I am facing at the plant.

Generally a stickler for rules himself, he knew he had violated the professor's announced rules. However, his future, and the futures of over 900 employees at the plant and their families were at stake. Some reasonable compromise had to be made. He knew he had to take a few minutes and cool off first, but he resolved to apologize as soon thereafter to Dr. Black for any interruption to the class which he had caused.

This case is designed only for discussion purposes. All names and some facts have been disguised.

Questions for part (B)

1. What do you make of Chris Robinson's actions?
 2. Where are some superficial and underlying problems in the class?
 3. What can the administrative side of the program do to help Dr. Black better manage this class?
 4. What other issues do you see arising?
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