

Integrating The Executive MBA Curriculum: Tales Of The Cat Herder

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ABSTRACT

Continuous improvement has been a strategic priority for Loyola College in Maryland's Executive MBA (EMBA) Program since the program's inception in 1973. In the summer of 2008, Loyola began an intensive EMBA curriculum review. The process resulted in a recommendation to make a significant shift in the curriculum's emphasis. This paper reports on the factors involved in that review process and the leadership lessons learned from the endeavor. The lessons learned are reported using the metaphor of tales of the cat herder in reference to a widely-held belief among academicians that working with faculty is like herding cats.

Keywords: EMBA, executive education, curriculum design, change management, change models

THE CONTEXT: WHY CHANGE?

Loyola University Maryland is a comprehensive Jesuit university located in Baltimore with graduate program satellite campuses in Timonium to the north of the city and in Columbia to the south. Following in the 450-year tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the university delivers liberal arts and professional education with particular emphasis on leadership, communication, reflection, and social justice development. Loyola first offered the Master of Business Administration (MBA) in 1967. The Executive MBA program was introduced in 1973, the first of its kind in the Baltimore-Washington area and one of the first five EMBA programs in the country. All Loyola business programs are fully accredited by AACSB.

The market for the EMBA in the Baltimore/Washington corridor is experiencing an increase in competing providers and an increase in total market potential. As the regional market leader, Loyola has enjoyed a robust applicant pool and ongoing organizational support from businesses, governmental agencies, and non-profits. However, as economic pressures increase, students and companies demand a higher quality executive program that justifies its premium tuition over the traditional part-time MBA program. The faculty partners of Loyola's EMBA program engaged in a multi-faceted curriculum review:

- In response to student feedback formally collected on an annual basis;
- In response to benchmarking efforts against highly ranked programs;
- In response to comparisons of programs similar in mission and focus to ours;
- As a systematic continuous improvement effort required of AACSB accredited schools;
- And to increase differentiation between Executive MBA and other MBA programs.

The revised EMBA program is significantly different from the previous one. It includes four progressively challenging assignments that integrate materials covered within one of four modules (semesters). It also adds a team coaching component. At the same time, the revised program has kept a similar flow of curriculum content as the previous program and incorporates key success factors of the existing program: the Executive Leadership residency, end-of-program reflective retreat, international field study, and domestic field study.

The revised program was designed to:

- Reflect trends found in the best programs
- Increase and enhance the quality of the faculty/student learning partnership
- Make Loyola more competitive regionally
- Have soft and tangible payback potential for students and companies
- Keep most of the existing program structure
- Integrate learning to a greater degree
- Provide times for both synthesis & development of important contemporary topics
- Be more congruent to the Jesuit ideals of integration, reflection, and continual improvement as a person and leader that build successful graduates
- Be theme-oriented and cohesive
- Develop increased personal effectiveness

The revised program may be challenged by the following known limitations:

- Not all students currently strive to be CEO.
- The learning curve may be a bumpy ride.
- It creates courses that are different from our other MBA programs.
- Some faculty may be less than effective in the required curriculum integration program components

This paper reports on a review and revision of the Executive MBA that took place through the summer and fall of 2008, was approved by the faculty in early 2009, and went live in its pilot cohort in the fall of 2009.

THE MODEL FOR CHANGE

The Loyola University EMBA has undergone curriculum review and program improvement consistently since its inception. AACSB and Middle States accreditation both require review and improvement. Most often, annual improvements are made within a course, within the administrative pieces of the program, or with student satisfaction factors based on student and faculty feedback. Periodically, programs must undergo a comprehensive review to determine whether they effectively meet the learning objectives or whether they need to meet newly introduced objectives. This overall review is the type we undertook to increase the program effectiveness in obtaining the learning objectives. When the curriculum began, faculty sought an overarching program vision that would resonate as vital to faculty, students, and business leaders alike. The guiding thought for our review became the simple question “What do effective CEOs do?”

The faculty of Babson College, in their highly visible EMBA curriculum development effort (Cohen, 2003), describe curriculum change as a process undertaken by those most vested in sustaining the status quo and that is led by those with influence but no authority. This notion has been the basis for one concept of faculty leadership described as akin to herding cats. Despite this notion, when faculty efforts are aligned with the strategic intent of the business school, much progress can be made. Loyola’s EMBA faculty searched the literature to identify a successful process for MBA curriculum review (Kleiman and Kass, 2007), and for a robust model of change that has proven its efficacy over time.

The change model that guided our efforts was developed by John Kotter (1995). The Kotter model articulates the eight steps that should be taken in sequence to create conditions for transformational change. Those steps are:

1. Establish a sense of urgency
2. Form a powerful guiding coalition
3. Create a vision
4. Communicate the vision
5. Empower others to act on the vision
6. Plan for and create short-term wins
7. Consolidate improvements and produce more change
8. Institutionalize new approaches

ESTABLISH A SENSE OF URGENCY

All change begins with a felt need for change since this provides the energy to unfreeze key stakeholders from maintaining the status quo. (Kotter, 1995). In our case, the Loyola EMBA had been in place for a number of years during which minor weaknesses were revealed. These were not drastic in nature; the program was successful. How might there be urgency for change when the product was well-received in the market? The need was realized with the confluence of three events. First, a new dean with experience in executive programs arrived and indicated that the time was right for a program review. Second, the faculty analyzed the program feedback and discovered that fewer than 90% of graduating students would recommend our program to a friend or colleague. Since differentiated programs like our EMBA rely heavily on word-of-mouth promotion, this feedback indicated a level of dissatisfaction that was not acceptable. Third, the faculty began to feel the time pressure of the upcoming AACSB reaffirmation of accreditation. The accrediting body is critical of those programs which have had little or no formal and documented review.

FORM A POWERFUL GUIDING COALITION

As with any program of higher education, the executive curriculum is owned by the executive faculty. In the past, a small group of faculty has been selected to engage in the program review as representatives of the program and of their disciplines. In our case, since much of our work was to be done over the summer, and because the participation of faculty is key to getting buy-in for change, we decided to invite all faculty who were currently teaching in the executive programs to participate in the curriculum review. On occasion, this meant there were twenty faculty in attendance; other times there were as few as four. However, all were kept informed of progress through meticulous attention to meeting notes. Perhaps above all else, this one factor created a sense of inclusion and ownership among the faculty that formed the coalition guiding the change.

CREATE A VISION

The MBA degree is now more than ever required for entre to top level positions in organizations as a basic indicator of the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to effectively lead organizations (Kleiman and Kass, 2007). Yet the MBA should teach students leadership skills by having them actually practice leadership and the specific KSAs that effective CEOs have and use (____, 2008). This insight required our faculty to arrive at a guiding vision of what we wanted our ideal executive MBA program to reflect. We decided that our work should focus on answering the question, “What do effective CEOs do?”

COMMUNICATE THE VISION

Our curriculum review took place over summer months with a wide breadth of faculty participation. Frequent electronic and in person communications were a key enabler for moving the process to fruition. The faculty spent several sessions revisiting and regrouping the KSAs identified as those that were important to include in the new program (Kleiman and Kass, 2007). Additional information was shared electronically through meeting notes and e-conversations. The focus on “What do effective CEOs do?” reduced typical silo and turf protection battles among faculty. Everyone’s content area was important; the task now was essentially a challenge of recasting specialty areas into a new model. Identifying the essential structure of this new framework was the next major challenge for the faculty.

The change recipients, the new students arriving on campus in 2009, also had to be included in the communication. The incoming cohort understands that they are in the pilot year for the new curriculum, and that they are co-change implementers and recipients (Jick and Peiperl, 2003; 174) of the revised program. They take their role as advisors seriously, creating an interesting dynamic between students and faculty. Faculty remain the subject matter experts; students are the process experts. Faculty and students share the responsibility willingly for mutual benefit. The explicit sharing involves multiple phases and types of communication.

EMPOWER OTHERS TO ACT ON THE VISION

A literature scan followed by brainstorming sessions with faculty and students arrived at the collection of KSAs in Appendix A that address the vision question. In an iterative fashion, the faculty shared, discussed, revised, and clarified the KSAs found in the literature and reflected on their perceived importance in the program curriculum content. In follow-up sessions, students, business and community leaders were asked for their lists of key CEO characteristics. The final compilation of this list demonstrates the convergence of thought across the constituent groups and the literature findings. Each set expands and operationalizes the other, to arrive at a comprehensive list of desirable knowledge, skills, and abilities that answer the question, “What do effective CEOs do?”

The most interesting component of the KSA articulation was the realization that while traditional content areas such as marketing and operations were viewed as important knowledge, equal value was placed on less tangible and measurable skills such as building relationships and leading change. The next step was to determine which of the KSAs were already included in the current program. It was determined that most were there, but that there were two groups of KSAs missing – content integration and interpersonal skill development. The faculty recognized that these two critical KSAs were included in our learning objectives but essentially had been left up to the students themselves to tacitly extract from the course content and apply in a capstone project at the end of the program.

The faculty decided that content integration is a key skill that needs to be explicitly learned and reinforced throughout the program, not just at the end. The revised product was a program that includes four application assignments at the end of content modules that specifically integrate the course materials of that module. The faculty also decided that interpersonal skill development was a key factor in leadership success and that an important context for the development and growth of those skills was in the learning teams. These teams have been an essential component of our EMBA program for many years. However, we also recognized that we were not teaching or facilitating interpersonal skills consistently and effectively across the curriculum. A program enhancement was the inclusion of a non-faculty member team coach who would guide learning teams in developing skills such as relationship building, developing influence, conflict management, negotiation, managing diversity, effectively delegating, and adaptability.

PLAN FOR AND CREATE SHORT-TERM WINS

The program planning intentionally created short-term wins by evenly distributing the contact hour changes among the disciplines. This level of cooperation was possible only because we had been inclusive in our faculty participation. As we moved toward the desired end state of an integrative program that educated managers to become leaders with the guiding question of “What do effective CEOs do?” all those involved were able to create their own contribution/enhancement to the revision. Working hand-in-hand with the Curriculum Committee, the short-term win was to get the program concept approved by the faculty as a whole, with an overriding framework in place, but without belaboring over the nitty-gritty details. Once the concept was approved, all involved considered themselves “on board and in the boat.” Once everyone is in the boat, no rational person is going to shoot holes in the boat. Everyone works hard to make sure the boat is secure, floats, and can be propelled toward the goal.

The next short-term win was to arrive at integrative applications that consolidated the materials for the entire semester into one deliverable. The four integrated applications of the program, one for each semester for two years, were dependent on and flowed into each other. The faculty *worked together* to construct the assignments and grading rubrics for the students as well as the guiding principles for faculty inclusion in this effort. To do this, faculty had to communicate effectively by having respectful conversations about their content areas to determine how their session materials contributed to the integrated application, and how they could assess their material when it was embedded in the assignment. Then all the faculty needed to conceptualize and formulate how the four application assignments would link together over the two years. The conversations and outcomes were transformative for the program and for the faculty who learned much from each other and who gained much from the integration.

CONSOLIDATE IMPROVEMENTS AND PRODUCE MORE CHANGE

The consolidation of improvements has just begun. Faculty have joined in semester teams to facilitate the implementation of the new design. Each iteration brings new conversation to clarify what should actually happen with each integrated application. Because there is a vested interest among all to make the program work well, the energy level has been high.

Technology enhancements have been used to reduce the stressful components of program redesign. More communication has occurred electronically rather than through meetings. Even though all the faculty in a semester are responsible for evaluating the integrated applications, they don't have to attend all the presentations. Instead, the application deliveries are video-taped and made available to the faculty through the course management system for evaluation. This has reduced the stress on the faculty who already put in long contact hours and who have competing demands for their time.

INSTITUTIONALIZE NEW APPROACHES

As we learn more about how the revised program will work, we begin to understand the structural requirements to make it work. For example, faculty who teach a content area are also required to participate in the integrated application. This has become an important requirement because if faculty can opt out of the integrative component, there is not the same vested interest in preparing the students for the assignment and in assessing whether the material has been appropriately applied. Other similar events and requirements will reveal themselves throughout the pilot year of the program.

SUMMARY – USING KOTTER'S MODEL

In creating a shared vision of the desired program outcome, in being inclusive of all faculty and creating ownership of the program, in constructing early wins and opportunities for success, the Kotter model has provided an initial design that has faculty and student support. The benefit of integration has succeeded beyond expectation because of the particular efforts of the faculty engaged in the very first integrated application. They know they are setting the standard for those to follow. Peer pressure and professional integrity guide them to the best possible outcome for everyone.

A Compelling Metaphor: Tales of the Cat Herder

There have been additional lessons learned in leading this faculty endeavor that we have labeled as the tales of the cat herder. These are not based on research findings but on the experience of this program revision and on reflections of working with faculty over twenty years in similar projects.

Upon the solid rock I stand. Just like creating the shared vision of the outcome, it is also critical for faculty to understand the framework in which the work is taking place. We used the Kotter model, but there are other models that might have worked. The important thing is to lay out the process to be followed and to continue to link activities and decisions to that process. This provides faculty with the confidence to know that things are moving systematically and their contributions may be added at multiple steps along the way even if they can't be present for all the meetings.

Why is there air? Each endeavor of faculty work begins with the challenging of basic assumptions. Without an understanding of the drivers of change, without the sense of urgency, without a common understanding that the work to be done is important and what makes it important, the faculty will not engage in the process. Generally, there are one or two faculty members in a group who raise the basic questions. Early in the process, if these questions are not answered, they can and will derail the project later on.

Is it hotter in the south or in the summer? Faculty have an inherent need to be heard. It is the nature of thinkers to express thoughts and to engage in the mental gymnastics of thinking and expressing for its own sake. If suppressed, the faculty become disengaged with the process. If supported too long, the faculty get bored and lose the sense of

urgency. Faculty leaders need to tactfully assess and support a balance between inquiry and advocacy (Garvin and Roberto, 2001) making sure everyone gets heard while ensuring the emphasis on task completion remains paramount.

Prego – it's in there. Once all the discussions have taken place, it's important to return to the rule book to determine whether everything required has been included in the new program design. This is usually the responsibility of the leader in close cooperation with the Curriculum Committee. University standards, accreditation standards, state higher education commissions - all impose requirements on programs. Nothing can kill a faculty effort more quickly than violating one of the ground rules. It's important for the leader to make sure that the group doesn't lose face publicly. Rather if there's something that needs correcting, tend to it thoroughly before the final approvals are sought.

Sweat the small stuff. There is no substitute for preparation and the willingness to take on the details of a faculty project. Providing agendas for meetings, distributing notes of the meetings, delegating sub-tasks, writing up proposals for approval, and taking on all the mundane administrative tasks provides the faculty leader with a wide assortment of currencies that purchase collegial capital (Hill, 1994). These currencies are the things that the faculty don't want to do. Perhaps they can be accomplished by a highly engaged administrative assistant; but usually only the leader has the engaged knowledge to recreate what has happened in the meetings and make it available coherently to those who haven't been able to be present. Swift and accurate execution of the detailed tasks is perceived as organized thought, competence, and leadership. It also means that faculty will be willing to work with the leader again because the experience has been positive and the leader has earned their cooperation due to the accumulation of collegial capital. It's important for the leader not to underestimate the power of this collegial capital in getting things done and in influencing outcomes for the program.

Like Nike – just do it! At certain points along the way, it's important to collect the data, consolidate the plan, and then move forward to implementation. Faculty projects can frequently expand to fill all the time allotted, no matter how generous that time allotment seems in the beginning. Faculty can get mired down in analysis paralysis, wallowing in details that never quite get accomplished or that grow bigger than their actual value to the process. Again, the faculty leader must assess the balance between participation and completion. Without the drive to completion, many well-intended projects get lost in delay and fail to be realized.

Power to the People. When all is said and done, many heads are better than one and multiple perspectives create the best outcomes. It is the leader's role to create and sustain an environment of mutual respect and collaboration even in the midst of compromise. The project here worked because all the faculty persisted through all the compromises. They all believed in the outcome and in the process undertaken to get there. The faculty understood the value of collaboration with students to insure the best product and process. These basic core values are shared and reinforced throughout this revision process.

CONCLUSIONS

The faculty at Loyola University have engaged in an important curriculum revision that has resulted in an improved, integrated program. They have worked together in new ways to understand how their content areas relate to the other disciplines of business that have always been in the program. Faculty completed the program revision and started the pilot in just over a year. This was accomplished using a change management model/process from the literature that brought out the best thinking and collaboration of the faculty in an atmosphere of trust and respect. This endeavor has resulted in the lessons learned expressed in this paper as well as a profound appreciation for the experience, expertise, and energy of all who participated.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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APPENDIX A

Barrett & Beeson (2006)	Kotter (2001)	What did we say? (Faculty and Students)
Master Strategist	Setting a direction	Develop organizational vision and mission; lead organizational strategy(ies)
		Understand and communicate your business, business model, and business design
		Role modeling – walk the talk
	Aligning people	Plan resource allocation
		Create and sustain culture
		Set and sustain corporate social consciousness
Change Manager	Leadership = coping with change	Match leadership style to its context appropriately
		Monitor business environment
		Identify change and the need for change; lead change management
Relationship Builder		Influence and report externally
		Network among CEOs to learn precedence
		Represent the organization
Talent Developer		Mentoring and coaching
Cognitive ability		Think and teach thinking
Strategic thinking		
Analytical ability		Monitoring includes analysis
Decision-making in uncertainty	Managing/coping with complexity	Critically evaluate reports and information received and used for decision-making
		Enterprise risk management
Communication skills	Motivating	Leadership includes communication of outcomes of analysis
	Inspiring	Public speaking
		Lead meetings and set agendas
Influence and persuasion	Motivating and inspiring	Persuasion/influence/ manipulation
		Negotiations and conflict resolution
Managing in diversity		
Delegation		
Recognize and develop talent		Locate and nurture talent
Adaptability		Be flexible enough to handle topical issues

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities of CEOs