Executive education – not a one-time event

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People often talk about “executive education” as if it were an event which takes place and is then over. The truth is that executive education is only going to work if it is regarded as a process rather than an event.

This fundamental lesson is one which organisations need to re-learn all the time and bear in mind throughout any process of executive education. In this article, I discuss the RHR International business-linked executive development model and explain how it operates in practical terms to provide executive education which is very much a process rather than a one-off event.

One of the obvious problems here lies in the way organisations often present the whole concept of executive education to their managers. When the organisation sends managers out of the office on a course, it is inevitable that managers tend to associate the course with their education process and when the course is over similarly assume that the education is finished.

As a result of this mistaken assumption on the part of organisations, it is all too often the case that managers who receive the opportunity to take part in an executive education programme behave as if all learning took place in the classroom.

The outcome of this is that the course participants go back to work believing that the learning process is over and that all they have to do is implement what the experts have taught them.

Inevitably, when these managers try to implement the new ideas they have learned into their business environment they naturally meet resistance. They find that no one else has changed. The business has simply gone on operating as normal while they were away on their course.

No one sits down with the course participants and their resisting colleagues to discuss their differences and to ensure that both parties learn from the interaction. In one example known to the author, more than 1,000 senior managers of an extremely large organisation enjoyed thoughtful, lively and highly-educational discussions in a classroom setting. However, when they returned to work, suddenly no one had the skills, time or courage to understand why the learning was never allowed to be implemented. Instead of experiencing
differences of opinion as learning opportunities (as they did in class) they became disappointed and gave up.

No one had sanctioned learning on the job. The managers still believed that all learning comes from outside experts. For example, several months after the course, participants continued to ask for “tools” or “tricks”, believing that if they could just learn the latest in leadership “techniques” they could finally make a difference in their workplace. They believed that what they needed was more time with the faculty. In reality, however, it really did not matter how many new techniques they learned. Without on-the-job support, the chance of successfully applying what was learned was limited.

Follow-up and systems support were not provided because the senior HR executives who had initiated the development process also subscribed to the idea that learning only takes place in the classroom. Their idea was to send the participants away and have them come back transformed. When nothing changed, the senior officers were disappointed with the participants – but not with the faculty who taught the “right” material and received rave evaluations.

As a result, participants were disappointed with the HR department and the HR department was disappointed with the participants because they did not transform the organisation. To a large degree, however, the problems came about because everyone made erroneous assumptions about where learning really takes place.

This is not to imply that classroom learning is not valuable. Classroom learning is very valuable. People are better able to relax, open up, and feel safe enough to try new ideas and risk new behaviours when they get away from their performance-based work environment. On-the-job experiences are also valuable, but often people do not have the skills or time to learn from them. It is only when classroom learning is integrated with on-the-job learning that the full value of each is achieved.

In RHR International’s experience, to get the most out of an executive education experience, organisations need to do the following:

- **Explain the purpose.** Participants, their superiors, peers and subordinates must understand the purpose and reasoning behind strategic change before they will make a real effort to adopt new ways of working and learning together. The link between the course and the organisation’s new strategic direction should be clearly communicated. Conversely, everyone needs to realise that failure to implement these changes will have negative results for themselves and the organisation.

- **Spend the time to customise.** It is essential that organisations discover and articulate the specific leadership behaviours that are needed by an organisation’s leaders in its particular competitive environment. It is necessary to prioritise course content by evaluating which skills are most important and which are most lacking in the organisation. The faculty should know how the course links with the organisation’s strategy and what new skills are needed to achieve success.

- **Use action learning projects.** An action learning project is a group assignment that allows participants to practise new skills and behaviours while working on a company issue. For example, if a company needs leaders who can run manufacturing units in a global organisation, its list of skills may include the ability to work in cross-cultural teams. An appropriate project would require a group of managers from different cultures to create a global supply chain project for a set of products. While experts might teach participants about global supply chain management and cross-cultural issues, other faculty would help groups work through cross-cultural and project management issues as they occurred. Projects would be worked on in class as well as back in the work environment. Action learning projects are excellent learning vehicles for linking classroom and workplace education. Participants not only learn the concepts, but also are allowed to practise, working on real issues in a realistic, yet safe, learning environment. Also, by practising on true strategic issues, the participants are adding value to the organisation by working on and solving real problems.

- **Gain top management buy-in.** The learning experience must be backed by top management in both the relatively safe
environment of the course and on the job. Once management is committed to a common set of strategic initiatives, they should be involved in determining the necessary leadership skills and course content. If action learning projects are used, senior management should sponsor projects and be responsible for them. In this way, both senior management and participants have stakes in the programme’s success. As a result, if participants run into resistance from others or find that organisation systems do not support their efforts, senior management will work to make the necessary changes.

- **Match the learning process with the organisation’s needs.** An organisation must be sure to choose the type of programme that meets its strategic needs and budget. If the need is for a group of 20 or more people to learn new skills and behaviours, then a customised programme is probably best. If, however, it has five or six people who need a learning experience, a customised programme could be too expensive and a typical off-the-shelf course may be too limiting. An alternative would be one provided by learning experts who could find other non-competing companies with similar needs. In this way, portions of the programme could be customised to each company’s particular requirements without the expense of an entirely customised programme. During evening sessions, for example, each individual organisation could work on firm-specific action learning projects. Finally, if only one or two people have specialised developmental needs, sending them to an off-the-shelf programme may be the best alternative.

- **Provide follow-up support.** Learning, whether it occurs off-site or on-the-job, must be supported after the experience. First, new ideas will be resisted by others who have not been through the same experience. People need help in adapting these new skills to the context of the job and their relationships to other people. Also, performance may drop somewhat as people try to implement new skills and behaviours. Supervisors need to allow for mistakes and risk taking lest people revert back to their old behaviours. Participants need the time, space and support to experiment and apply what has been learned to the organisation’s strategic initiatives.

Figure 1 shows the RHR International model of business-linked executive development in action. We see the model as consisting of four stages, which are fully explained and accounted for in the figure. The first three stages of the model are accompanied by details of proprietary methodologies which may be brought into play on behalf of a client organisation. It is essential to remember, though, that axiomatic to this approach to management psychology and executive development is the principle that methodologies should not and cannot be identical, inflexible procedures that are deployed without any customisation on behalf of all clients. Instead methodologies should be simply a useful basis for detailed and comprehensive investigation of the development needs of the organisation prior to developing an executive education programme which meets those needs on a bespoke basis.

Incidentally, this is why most successful executive development programmes are tailor-made precisely to the client’s requirement. It explains why we have limited faith in books and courses. These, by definition, offer a standard and general type of stand-alone, single-event approach not linked to the individual’s development and the organisation’s business objectives.
The methodology described in Figure 1 has been found to provide organisations with development programmes that are all of the following:

- tied specifically to the organisation’s strategic objectives;
- in tune with the most pressing issues facing the organisation’s industry;
- tie in with the organisation’s culture;
- whose economic value-added can be measured.

In summary, executive education carried out with the assistance of corporate psychologists who have extensive experience of working with executives and who regard executive education as an ongoing process rather than a one-off matter can be an extremely effective agent of change. A course is just one part of a developmental process that begins and ends on the job. If used properly, executive education, like any good investment, can yield extremely high dividends.