9

Paradoxes in Executive Development

Alan Matcham

Previous chapters have explored how crises are a demanding test of leadership, and offered advice regarding the nature of a leader's relationship with his or her team. Fear and pressure, we have learned, can at times be felt most acutely by the leader, placing a much greater reliance on the team to collaborate and problem-solve effectively. Hierarchy is of limited value in such circumstances, and cooperation often proceeds more effectively without it. Teams can collaborate to determine the objectives, scope, and ideas for dealing with the crisis—aspects more traditionally associated with the leader. Breaking down traditional boundaries between functions, departments, and dispersed operations, as well as hierarchical inflexibilities are an essential precedent to unleashing the potential of a significantly under-utilised resource—our people.

As more frequent major change becomes necessary to counter volatility and complexity in the markets, industries, and the environment, it is essential that we examine how executive education can best contribute. This chapter explores that question with a focus on the way in which executive education can assist organisation leaders in facing unprecedented challenges.

This chapter will seek to help you answer the following questions:

- How can executive education create the conditions and mindset for effective and rapid change?
- How can the role of collaboration and challenge be captured and directed?
- What is the role of 'executive education' in breaking down traditional boundaries associated with hierarchies and functional, departmental, and geographic boundaries?
- How can executive education create opportunity out of complexity?

Introduction

As executive development seeks to innovate and move forward, corporate learning professionals and programme designers are faced with several interesting paradoxes. This chapter will focus on five in particular:

1. The problem to solve.
2. The focus on hierarchy.
3. The fixation with leadership.
4. The search for certainty and answers.
5. The obsession with content.

Before exploring these paradoxes, it is worth understanding the context within which Executive Development finds itself today.

The Changing Nature of Executive Education

Amongst the most established business schools, it is hard to identify any significant differentiation in terms of content, design, or delivery. All have excellent faculty and subject expertise, and all operate within similarly well-choreographed and administered pedagogical models.

As suggested by Thomas et al. (2013), the main drivers of executive education within business schools tend to be strongly aligned with rankings, revenues, space occupancy, and faculty utilisation over challenging prevailing wisdom and resolving major organisational challenges and bottlenecks.

At an aggregate level, MBA programmes remain popular, whilst Open Programs appear to be in relative decline. Custom or tailored programmes

enjoy a better position, however, all is not well, according to Stefan Stern (2010): '*There is a paradox here. The world remains hungry for MBAs and other accredited management qualifications. Business schools are in demand. And yet many of the most distinguished schools are themselves deeply concerned at what they teach, and the way they teach it.*'

The Returns on Executive Education

In my experience, the aims of many executive education programmes are defined in terms of individual learning outcomes and learner satisfaction. Often, they include generalised requirements to:

- Develop broad leadership capability.
- Increase personal understanding of leadership and strategy.
- Stimulate personal growth.
- Become enthused.
- Strengthen the delegates' role as a change agent.
- Reward the staff to improve retention.
- Expose the delegates to the latest thinking.

Millions of dollars are invested each year on executive education, yet the returns remain hard to define.

The impact of most executive education programmes on individual delegates tend to fall into one of three outcomes:

1. Delegates go back to work with greater enthusiasm and try hard to bring about meaningful change. After a period of time, they get sucked back into traditional ways of working and look upon their experience with merely fond memories.
2. Delegates go back to work with greater enthusiasm and try hard to bring about meaningful change. After a period of time, they realise nothing is really going to change. They have 'crossed the Rubicon', there is no going back and so seek to leave the company for pastures new.
3. Delegates go back to work with greater enthusiasm and try hard to bring about meaningful change. After a period of time, they have had some degree of success but realise the ability to change the organisation goes way beyond their individual efforts and frustration grows.

Organisations, particularly in a climate of austerity, now demand the demonstration of a stronger and more direct relationship between their development investments and the performance of the business. This is a challenge for business schools and requires both the shaping of a new relationship with clients as well as a more effective set of design rules for management education.

Time for a New Contract Between Industry and Academia?

At the beginning of November 2010, The European Foundation for Management Development held a one-day conference in Berlin. In attendance was an impressive collection of academics, including business school deans. The aim was to discuss how to remain relevant and effective and avoid the outcome presaged by one senior corporate executive who commented: '*The relationship between business and the school was a kind of co-alcoholism— each dependent on the other, and not in a good way*'.

As the world of work changes, there is an increasing appetite for a new form of engagement between industry and academia. I received a recent request from a major European organisation that highlights this changing shift of emphasis:

Most of the managers have already been through leadership development programs. They understand how they work, but at the same time, pose a challenge: how do we come up with something new and, more importantly, something with high impact? Firstly, any interventions should contain the following aspects:

- An intimate and safe atmosphere in which to be open about personal development.
- Address mind, body, emotions, and soul. Challenge intellectually and explore emotional Intelligence, health (the corporate athlete) and spirituality.
- Action learning to embed in practice as well as the use of new technology in learning.

Their requirements reflect a growing ground swell in the need for management education to link business education with results, to redress the balance between theory and practice, to focus on the whole person not just the intellect, and finally to move from a traditional set of design rules to something more appropriate.

Time for a More Helpful Set of Design Rules?

All approaches to executive education design are underpinned by a philosophy which guides the pedagogical shape of the learning intervention. Historically, design has been shaped by a philosophy more closely linked to that described in the left-hand column of Fig. 9.1. In the context of shifting client needs, where the nature of our relationship with work is changing and where the relentless tides of change seem to be getting stronger, executive education might be better served if it were guided by the design rules summarised on the right-hand side of Fig. 9.1.

Executive education becomes more about exploring complex challenges than seeking one-size-fits-all answers, more about releasing potential than working harder and more about developing greater originality of thought rather than the acceptance of prevailing wisdom.

Paradox 1—The Problem to Solve

The paradox—Executive development is often seen in isolation of context and is all too often characterised as a set of formulaic personal leadership characteristics that will ensure success in any context. Yet understanding context and the nature of the problem to be solved can be the most helpful guide to set the frame for the type of leadership required.

LESS OF THIS	MORE OF THIS
Teacher and Lecturer	Guide and Facilitator
Content Driven, Passive Taught Experience	Discovery driven active lived experience
Learning Outcomes	Performance outcomes
Pre-defined methodology	Co-creation of methodology
Answers without from "experts"	Answers within from knowing self
Best practice - copying others	Original practice - interpreting signals
Outcomes toward corporate learning objectives	Outcomes toward solving serious corporate problems
Transmission of knowledge	Transference of capability
Theory led	Theory challenged
Inspiration from orthodox places and experts	Inspiration from unorthodox places
Lecture theatres	The real world
Judgment of delegates	Unconditional positive regard
Projects	Experiments and tests
Focus on the person	Focus on the person and context

Fig. 9.1 Old and new design rules

Today's business leaders and corporate learning professionals are so busy that the temptation to reach out for ready made, prescriptive, best practice solutions to complex problems is overwhelming. Universities, business schools, consultants, and gurus earn a healthy living off the back of such demand. Consequentially the bookshelves (or Amazon warehouses) are full of 'how to' advice with some of the more familiar titles including:

- The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (Stephen R. Covey, 1989).
- Stepping Up: How to Accelerate Your Leadership Potential (Sarah Wood, 2017)
- Leading Transformation: How to Take Charge of your Company's Future (Thomas Zoega Ramsoy, Nathan Furr and Kyle Nel, 2018).
- Pivot Points: Five Decisions Every Successful Leader Must Take (Julia Tang Peters, 2014).
- How to Reposition Today's Business While Creating the Future.
- How to win Friends and Influence People (Dale Carnegie, 1936).

Consequentially this leads to the creation of a form of 'plug and play' leadership culture. There is no doubt we all need help in dealing with the complexity of managing and leading in today's exponentially changing world, but it is important we don't ignore the unique context in which we work or the nature of the challenges we face. In the search for the 'right' leadership model, the nature of the problem to be resolved is underestimated at best and overlooked at worst. When discussing executive development, one of the most important questions to ask is: 'What is the problem to which executive development is the answer?'

One of the more common models of leadership is the need to develop 'ambidexterity'—that almost superhuman breed of person who can focus and deliver short-term operational KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), whilst simultaneously serving as an innovative, dynamic, long-term strategic thinker and visionary creating the business of tomorrow.

Perhaps we expect too much of our leaders in asking them to intellectually, behaviourally, and emotionally bounce between the two contexts of running Business As Usual (BAU) whilst trying to create Business As Unusual (BAUU). In doing so, they often fall short on both the operational as well as transformational goals they pursue.

At the conclusion of any executive development programme, it's wonderful to hear delegates say how enjoyable and insightful the experience has been. However, that is frequently followed by, '*But it's back to the grind tomorrow*

and it's going to be difficult to find the time and space to implement our new insights'. This reaction could either be a reflection on the inability to deliver an effective learning experience or a sign of the pressure and tensions facing today's executives. There is a significant and growing body of knowledge, along with anecdotal evidence reported in mainstream media that points towards increasing levels of work-related stress, mental illness, anxiety, burn-out, and lack of engagement—in short, all is not well emotionally.

Figure 9.2 is an abbreviated excerpt from a genuine role profile of a senior executive within a European-based multinational corporation highlighting the seemingly contradictory demands placed on their business leaders.

On the face of it, the individual profile objectives and behavioural characteristics seem perfectly reasonable. My argument is not with the individual profile requirements but with the way they are bundled into one role profile.

- How well does tolerating failure sit with stretch targets?
- How well does taking smart risks sit with leaner ways of working?
- How well does challenging the status quo sit with operational excellence?
- How well does accelerating change sit with performing beyond expectation?

Goddard and Eccles (2013) explain there are two dominant contexts executives inhabit to greater or lesser degrees—the context of dealing with today (business as usual) versus the context of creating tomorrow (business as

- Drive **Operational Excellence** I am always looking to improve the way we do things
- I share know-how and ideas and collaborate **improve processes**, drive speed and increase quality
- **Deliver Results** I stretch myself and others to perform beyond expectations
- I am accountable, acting with urgency and resilience to **deliver on commitments** with the available resources
- I hold others accountable for **stretch targets** and coach them through ambiguous or adverse situations
- I challenge others to learn from past performance and achieve **leaner**, more collaborative ways of learning
- Create Meaningful Innovation I create fresh ideas and open up new possibilities

- I generate **fresh ideas** and take smart risks to open up new possibilities
- I champion entrepreneurship and **tolerate failure**
- I envision and build growth platforms that create sustainable value and **differentiation**
- **Lead Change** I create and support lead change
- I am positive about change, make it a reality in my work and rally others to support change initiatives
- I accelerate change by mobilizing and **challenging others** to change, aligning efforts across boundaries
- I **challenge the status quo**, create a transformational vision for long-term success, and bring others on the journey
- I move the enterprise to out-perform expectations by creating **opportunity out of complexity** and uncertainty

Fig. 9.2 Role profile for senior executive

**BUSINESS AS USUAL
OPERATIONAL
NARRATIVE**

**BUSINESS AS UNUSUAL
EXPLORATION
NARRATIVE**

What are the targets?

What are the questions to ask?

How do we measure them?

How do we generate ideas?

What do we get in reward for their
achievement?

Can we test the ideas through
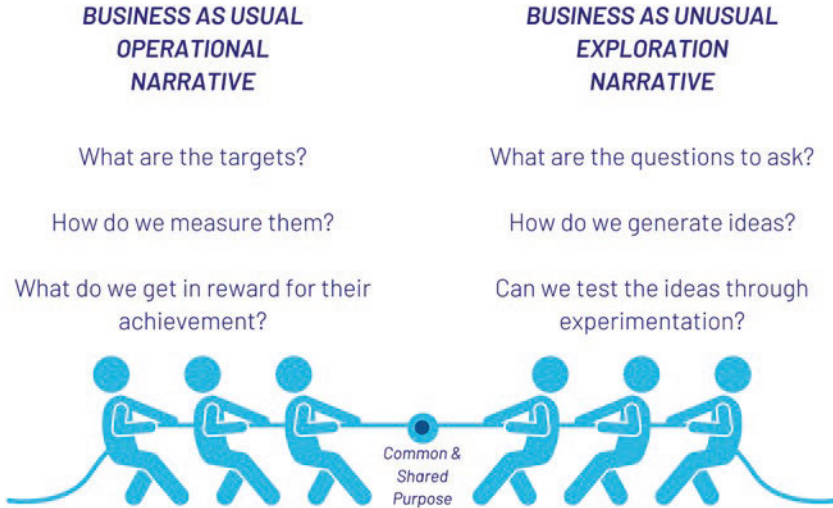experimentation?

Common &
Shared
Purpose

Fig. 9.3   Business as usual/business as unusual

unusual). This thinking is visualised in Fig. 9.3. Its simplicity belies its signifi-
cance in helping unpick why leaders often fall short in finding the right bal-
ance to deal with the challenges they face.

The two contrasting but complimentary worlds, connected through a com-
mon and shared purpose, provide the paradigms to both operate an existing
business model and reinvent the business model in the face of an exponen-
tially changing world. You could describe the operating side as aspiring to a
'well-oiled machine', and the exploration side as the model for 'out of the box'
thinking. Therein lies the essence of many fundamental differences which
leaders are finding hard, if not impossible, to reconcile.

Organisations want their executives to transform, be more strategic, more
agile, more innovative, more adaptable, more collaborative, more inspiring
and differentiated. All are characteristics the exploration side are designed to
achieve. However, having asked many delegates, '*Where do you spend most of
your time on a day by day, week by week or month by month basis?*' The answer
is always the same no matter what the industry—'*We try hard to find the time
to innovate and change but constantly get sucked back into business as usual*'. In
effect the priorities, rewards, recognition, and behavioural triggers of the
operating side regularly over-ride those of the exploration side. This often
means leaders frequently find themselves in a vicious 'no win' circle.

Causes of Tension and Trade-offs

Focusing on today's issues is only half the story, and not enough to build an organisation with the capability to respond to complex, often unknown, challenges. History is littered with organisations that have been outmanoeuvred and out thought by those competing for the same space. From the point of view of the business, the ability to navigate the tides of change and thrive over the long term depend on a different set of capabilities and skills to those required in the achievement of more immediate goals.

Of the many tensions and trade-offs between these two paradigms Fig. 9.4 highlights some of the main ones.

The Mindset and Learning Logic

The predominant mindset of running most organisations on a day-to-day basis is, '*We run this business as efficiently as possible, we know what we do, and we'll do it better than anyone else by achieving our KPIs. We need to defend our position in the market and fight all competition that threatens us*'.

The culture is one of implementing against clear guidelines, targets, and rules with limited tolerance or scope for ideas that go against the grain of

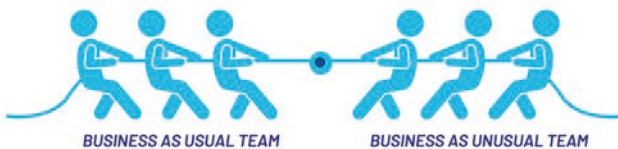| Business as Usual Team	Business as Unusual Team
Generates Money (hopefully)	Spend Money (short term)
Dominant Mindset - Protect the business model	Dominant Mindset - Challenge the business model
Strategy - Linear extrapolation from the past	Strategy - Future thinking backwards
Challenges - Solutions are known from previous experience	Challenges - Solutions unknown requiring experimentation
Engagement - Compliance and diligence dominate	Engagement - Initiative and creativity are essential
Competitors - Known	Competitors - Unknown
What is Valued - Alignment, consistency, diligence	What is Valued - Original thinking and creativity
Leadership - Authority based on hierarchy	Leadership - Authority based on the ability to engage others
Recruitment - Industry knowledge and expertise	Recruitment - Diverse and not embedded in industry orthodoxy
Measures of Success - Contractual compliance and hitting targets	Measures of Success - Generation of new insights, ideas and options

Fig. 9.4 Tensions and trade-offs

prevailing wisdom. The learning logic is, in effect, a single loop process and broad acceptance of known strategies and assumptions.

The opposite is the case when it comes to leading a group with a mindset dedicated to challenging, new ideas, and experiments. Building a business for the future means: '*everything is challenged. From the assumptions we make about who are our competition to how value is generated, we need to relentlessly try new ideas, experiment, and learn through failure. In doing so, we will stand a better chance of creating competitive advantage. If we don't do it, someone else will*'.

The learning logic is double loop where prevailing wisdom and assumptions are challenged. If leadership is to be ambidextrous, to challenge underlying assumptions one minute, then be asked to implement a corporate standard approach the next requires almost saintly skills and can be a cause of much anxiety for many leaders.

Leadership and the Problem to Be Solved

For many aspects of running 'business as usual', the problems to solve are those intended to incrementally improve what is done already. The conversation can become dominated by best practice and the implementation of the known solutions around established problems.

In the case of unpicking the challenges posed by an uncertain future, the nature of the problem is significantly more ambiguous, uncertain, and far from clear. How to respond to climate change? What are the impacts of emerging technologies? How will consumer profiles shift? Who will be our competition? The resultant implications for style of leadership are profound.

You cannot cost cut your way out of complexity. Leadership's value is based in adopting a highly collaborative, trusting, and facilitative approach, creating the environment for innovative practices and ideas to flourish. Writers such as Ronald Heifetz call this 'Adaptive Leadership'. Less is more in the sense of letting people have the freedom, autonomy, and ability to make decisions in a space where mistakes are expected as part of the process. Any notion of leadership control becomes a function of the individual's approach to building trust and respect, not their role, title, or rank.

The work of Heifetz et al. (2009) and Grint (n.d.) brings into stark relief the importance of understanding and clarifying the problem to be solved before doing anything else. From this, the appropriate leadership approach makes much more sense. Figure 9.5 demonstrates how a 'formulaic' approach to leadership and its development, irrespective of context, is ill-conceived.
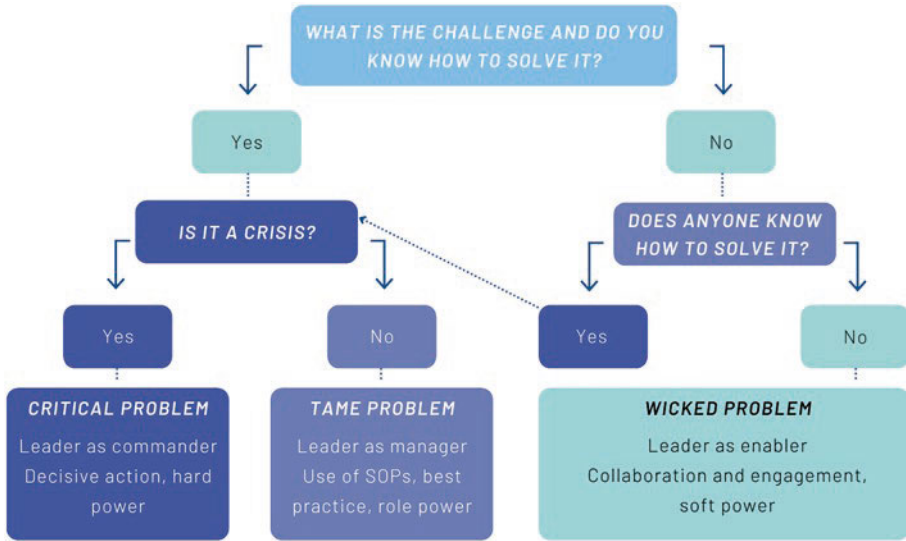
Fig. 9.5 Formulaic approach to leadership and its development

If the problem to solve is a critical one, where life could be at risk with a need for immediate and decisive action, then probably being an experienced, knowledgeable, and skilled dictator would work very well. If it is a problem of a tame or technical nature and you have had experience resolving it previously and there are known solutions, then the leadership role is more about following process and procedure. Finally, if the problem you face is wicked, complex, and adaptive with no known solution, then leadership style favours a collaborative, engaging, and facilitative approach to harness the diversity of talent and perspectives available. The real problem occurs when styles get mixed up with problems—you cannot solve a complex problem by following process or dictatorship and you cannot solve a critical life-threatening problem through endless collaborative meetings.

Whatever the problem and whatever the appropriate leadership style adopted, a shared problem galvanises effort and sharpens the mind like no other issue. It clarifies the nature of the leadership required and what it takes to resolve it.

Three Top Tips

• Understand the context you are working in, as that will help explain and resolve the tensions between seemingly conflicting interests.

- Understand the nature of the challenge or challenges to be resolved because they are a significant determinant of how leadership adds value.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all formulaic solutions, particularly in relation to leadership and the nature of the problem to be resolved.

> *A business is a community of people working together to create value for other people—customers, team members, shareholders and communities.* (John Mackey, Founder and CEO, Whole Foods Market)

Paradox 2—The Focus on Hierarchy

The paradox—*We work in multi-layered, cross-functional teams and communities yet we learn in hierarchies and role-based silos. Organisations consistently struggle to overcome challenges such as silo mentalities, trust, collaboration, diversity of thought, innovation and agility so why not have cross functional teams as part of the construct of the learning experience?*

There is an almost unquestioned belief that differing layers of seniority require differing levels of insight and knowledge into how organisations, markets, and people work. This often taken for granted principle behind custom or open executive development programmes takes high potentials and senior managers from the organisation and puts them into discrete cohorts full of people like themselves. We develop executives based on their position in the hierarchy, yet back in the workplace people spend much of their working lives immersed and engaged with teams and communities across the business.

Following Brexit, politicians and business commentators across Europe proclaimed regularly and vociferously that "*markets don't like uncertainty!*" This may well be the case but, whether they like it or not, we live in a far from certain world. Uncertainty is becoming the norm; both governments and business leaders would be better served to think more about how best they can work with, and through complexity, rather than trying to make it go away. Forward thinkers such as Professor Nick Barker at Tomorrowtoday, Professor Ian Goldin at Oxford and Anton Musgrave at FutureWorld spend their careers analysing major global trends and conclude that volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) conditions will become more common not less, occur faster not slower, and have greater impact on the way we live and work.

I'm not saying hierarchically oriented leadership development has no place; it has. But given the nature of the challenges faced by most organisations,
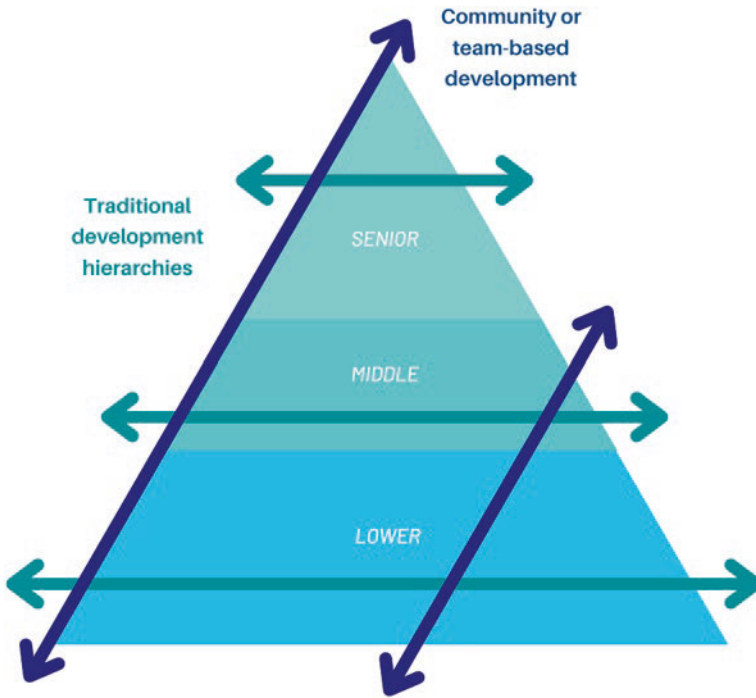
Fig. 9.6 Rebalancing the executive development effort

Fig. 9.6 shows how the executive development effort can be rebalanced from the 'elite' in the hierarchy to cross functional teams and communities, involving all those who do the work, learning together to combat shared business challenges.

A cross-functional community or team is a group of colleagues who share a common aim and are interdependent in the achievement of that aim. They may well be from within the same organisation or include suppliers and partners involved in the collective endeavour. These groups are not to be confused with intact teams of functional specialists such as executive teams, IT, accounts, operations, marketing, sales or finance. They are instead people from across the business, encompassing all functions. The glue that holds them together is a shared business-wide challenge (or opportunity), the type of challenge with no obvious solution, requiring significant amounts of creativity, collaboration, diversity, and perspective.

It is reassuring to hear Heads of Talent Development express their views on the business challenges their talent strategies need to address. The conversations I have been a party to go along the following lines: '*We need to transform the culture of our business and design interventions that enable our leaders to*

break down silos, collaborate more, improve agility, creativity, engagement, inno-vation, responsiveness and ultimately productivity'. This is of course perfectly sensible and in a VUCA world few would disagree. The *ends* are consistent yet the *means* in terms of executive development remain stubbornly fixed on developing individual leaders held together only by their similar level of seniority within the hierarchy.

The work of Gratton and Scott (2016) indicates that people and their working life are changing dramatically. Social media trends tell us people are better connected, they collaborate and network more easily, are generally better educated, technically literate, more informed, and have access to unprecedented amounts of information. More of the workforce are 'born digital' and brought up valuing freedom and autonomy over being managed and led. They prefer discussion over prescriptive direction, creativity over process, volunteerism over conscription, and meritocracy over length of service. They are extremely comfortable working in multiple teams, virtual or otherwise; a VUCA world sits more easily with them. These broad observations hold a central truth about our changing world. We are seeing the emergence of a labour force that has less need to be managed and led by a hierarchical elite whose development occurs independently of the broader team or community working relationship.

Why Do We Persist in Developing Leaders in Isolation?

It is right to support any individual who wishes to develop their leadership capability. I have invested many years of my life in designing and delivering leadership programmes for companies around the world. I am, however, of the opinion that delivering learning experiences in a hierarchical model unintentionally creates a disconnect between what is learnt by an elite cohort and what changes back in the workplace. It reinforces the difference between leaders and the led and can build further barriers between those 'that know' and those that 'don't know'.

The work of Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) highlights some of the myths that sustain this hierarchically oriented model of development. They emanate in part from military history and have become embedded into management thinking through the industrial revolution. They are now starting to be seen as increasingly unhelpful in a time of different employee expectations and capabilities, a time of more complex challenges, a time of less dependence and deference towards seniors and authority.

Four commonly held myths include:

- *Myth 1—Leaders are essential.* Self-organising and self-regulating groups and communities of people do not need one leader. Different individuals rise to the challenge supported by colleagues in a common bond or cause. There are many examples of this exemplified by the Dutch healthcare supplier Buurtzorg.
- *Myth 2—We can control performance through strong leadership.* There are so many variables impacting the creative and dynamic process of running a business. The context we operate in and the principles, processes, and practices we work with have all been seen to have a significantly greater impact on human performance than 'strong leadership'. The work of the late Professor W.E. Deming and latterly Paul Dolan, Professor of Behavioural Economics at the LSE, suggests context is well over 80% responsible for performance particularly when undertaking complex interdependent tasks.
- *Myth 3—People like being managed and leaders motivate people.* Organisational health Index research by McKinsey & Company back in October 2013 suggests most senior people and leaders have an over inflated view of their importance, impact, and influence on others in getting work done. It is also well documented that a significant proportion of people who leave organisations do so because of a poor relationship with their boss not because of the organisation. For many leaders doing nothing is not a natural option; bosses find it difficult to just get out of the way.
- *Myth 4—Leadership is all about the individual.* Organisations are communities of people, not collections of human resources. What Professor Henry Mintzberg feels required is greater 'communityship'. It cannot just be about the individual and their unique talents; it is about the release of potential from the entire group and their collective 'leadership' contribution to a cause worth serving. Leadership needs to evolve into becoming a corporate capability not something resident in the few.

If these myths persist, executive development will continue to be structured along traditional lines and hierarchical structures. My contention is that these myths are just that, not absolute facts of life that are true all the time under all conditions. They might hold some truth some of the time but increasingly less so, particularly in a VUCA world. The time has come for a new approach to challenge these myths with one that supports a more team and community-based approach to developing leadership capability.

The Benefits of Cross-functional Team/ Community-based Development

By taking a cross-organisational/cross-functional slice of people and developing them as a cohesive cohort, there are significant benefits that can accrue which include:

- *Breaking down silos and stimulating collaboration*—One of the most common issues in all large organisations is the 'silo mentality'. Bringing cross-functional teams together defuses and reframes this mentality.
- *Building mutual respect, trust, and understanding*—A shared intellectual and emotional experience, if executed well, builds close bonds and ties. Effective learning requires personal disclosure and taking risks which cannot normally be achieved in the working environment.
- *Replicates the real world*—It becomes much easier and quicker to translate from the intervention to the workplace. The learning that takes place in many development programmes has a very short half-life beyond the programme. People get sucked back into the prevailing culture of day-to-day work and find it very difficult to put new insights into practice. Having all the key players together establishing new norms greatly increases the chances of success.
- *Diversity and perspective*—One of the keys to improving creativity and innovation is diversity of thought, values, and experience. The resolution of complex adaptive challenges will not emanate from a group of likeminded individuals. Constructing a learning experience with people from a variety of backgrounds within and across the business adds to the richness of the debate and hence options available.
- *Opportunity to work on genuine shared challenges*—This is the glue that bonds teams and communities. Having a common focus is one of the most powerful ways of translating new insights into positive change and reduces the rhetoric/reality gap often found in many development programmes. The gap between what is said and what is done narrows if the team collectively learn by doing.
- *Reframes the nature of and responsibility for leadership*—Bringing together cross-functional, interdependent teams allows the opportunity for leadership to be understood and practiced by everyone, not just the most senior people. Opening up to new ways of thinking requires leadership, the courage to speak up requires leadership, the organisation of activity requires leadership, and the creation of new solutions requires leadership. This has a chance to come from the many, not the few.

Case Study: Experimental Development Programme

During 2020, I was engaged to deliver an experimental programme involving 21 delegates from five different organisations. The delegates were drawn from different levels of seniority and ranged from departmental heads of multinational corporations to champions of the rights of minority groups.

The key things they had in common were:

- A mandate to lead and enable 'change'.
- A thirst for learning, but knowledge that they needed further help and support.
- A curiosity about what others were doing and thinking.
- An intrinsic sense of purpose and motivation towards the impact they could make.

Mainly due to COVID-19, this experimental programme was delivered online over a period of nine months and contained a combination of online seminars, 1:1 development dialogues and virtual action learning set sessions. Over the life of the programme, a deep level of intellectual intimacy was attained between all those involved allowing trust, respect, and collaboration to thrive. The myth that delivering online cannot replicate the face-to-face experience was shown to be a half-truth at best.

The outcomes delighted all those involved and include:

- Learning from each other by being exposed to many different perspectives and hierarchical positions.
- Feeling connected and not alone by realising they had so much in common.
- Making real change by understanding how to influence without line authority.
- Realising seniority is not that relevant in the pursuit of knowledge and enablement of change.
- A collective shift in thinking from 'What do I want to do' to 'Who do I want to be'.

Three Top Tips

1. If your organisation wrestles with a silo mentality, agility, responsiveness, innovation, and lack of cross-border collaboration, then look to include all the main players in your development efforts. Draw from partners both within and outside the organisation.
2. Make explicit and challenge the prevailing wisdom and assumptions that shape the nature of your approach to executive development. You may well find they are unhelpful or obsolete.
3. Listen carefully to the voice of the new generation of employees, particularly what they value, how they work, and what they need from an employer. They have been brought up in a different context to that of previous and current leadership.

> *Leadership is focused on the individual. What we need is communityship. Organisations are communities of people not collections of human resources.* (Henry Mintzberg)

Paradox 3—The Fixation with Leadership

The paradox—*There are a plethora of books, articles, videos, and blogs on leadership. At the last count, a mind boggling 2,500,000,000 results for "leadership" on Google. Many are authored by commentators, sports professionals, academics, former captains of industry or business leaders. Yet it is very hard to believe that people are born with an overwhelming desire to be led or managed by another individual. It is difficult to find anything written on leadership by those who spent a lifetime being led and managed.*

Henry Mintzberg (2009) suggests that we are in danger of being over-led and over-managed as a working population. What is proposed is a rebalancing from developing individual capability, towards developing 'context architects'—people who create meaning and purpose at work and the conditions for colleagues to flourish. Mintzberg comments that leadership and management are indivisible. *'You can't have a leader who doesn't manage because they won't know what's going on and you can't have a manager who doesn't lead because that would be demoralising'.*

A New Context

Most commentators agree that modern leaderships roots were established during the industrial revolution, reinforced by generations of societal norms ingrained with a deference to authority and servitude towards hierarchy. These forces have undoubtedly contributed to a post-industrial fixation with the 'leader and the led' model, coupled with a dominant paradigm based on efficiency—in effect, 'how do we get more from our people'.

Explicitly or implicitly the legacy of such a fixation remains within many of today's organisations and is visible within organisational charts, role profiles, audible through corporate language and experienced through bureaucracy. Whilst there are many great organisations trying to develop a more enlightened leadership approach there is still a deep seated, often unconscious belief within many of the business elites that the use of authority and imposition of control over subordinates is the main tool for mobilising work.

What Is Leadership's Value Today?

Leadership's value is often justified by stating it provides direction, motivation, decision making, resources, information, control, vision, and strategy. The trouble is that these value points are now under severe threat from a society that is more educated, has access to more information, more communication tools, more ideas, more connectivity, and creative experiences than ever before. I hesitate to label this population as Generation X, Y, or even Z because it is not just about the internet generation.

The ability of people to look after their own affairs, manage their own lives, make their own decisions is constantly underestimated by business leaders and managers.

Case Study: Drachten

Drachten is a small town in the Netherlands which, over time, became crowded, congested, and unpleasant to be in. It was crammed with traffic management signage: no entry, stop, directions, cross here, no parking, one way, speed restrictions, and so on.

To make the town environment more attractive, a more pleasant place to live, work, and visit, and after lengthy debate, the council decided to remove all the traffic management signage. The outcry from many leading local dignitaries was anticipated—"*There will be an increase in accidents, death on the road, control will be lost, chaos and carnage will ensue!*"

The reality was completely the opposite. There was a decrease in accidents, a compliance with speed limits and an increase in wellbeing. Why was this? Responsibility for behaviour was transferred from the traffic management signage to the citizens and visitors. Over time people took more care, became more cautious and respectful of others. They demonstrated they were perfectly capable of managing their lives without being told where to go, when to stop, and what to do.

In short, leadership and management came from within and between people, not externally imposed.

Academics call the Drachten experience an example of a self-organising system. What was once thought fanciful is now a reality. We are seeing the emergence of a global population that is increasingly self-confident, willing, and able to be:

- *Self-managed* in terms of how group/team decisions are made, and resources allocated. Control is exercised through consensus and transparency not by imposition.

- *Self-motivated* in terms of what they do and why they do it. Research studies over the years suggest people tend to leave bosses not organisations because they are treated as human resources rather than resourceful humans.
- *Self-directed* in terms of setting their own goals and priorities. As humans, we tend to expect more from ourselves, setting tougher and more demanding targets than others do.
- *Self-oriented* in terms of their learning and development. Steven Pinker (2019) makes the case for human progress and societies being more educated than ever been. Self-actualisation increasingly comes about as a consequence of finding your own purpose, meaning, and belonging.
- *Self-assured* in terms of independence of thought, contributing to debates, and not having ideas imposed.

Jules Goddard (2006), Fellow at London Business School, makes the point that deference towards all forms of authority and the institutions they represent is diminishing as is the sense of servitude towards hierarchy. People are looking for a greater sense of meaning (purpose), a sense of self (identity), and affiliation (belonging) in their life, which are not fulfilled through corporate life or indeed many of the traditional institutions in society that historically have been provided by organisations or movements such as the church.

What Does This Mean?

Many organisational agendas and hence executive development objectives are focused on some form of transformation as organisations seek to become more collaborative, agile, innovative, digitally savvy, adaptive, and creative.

The response to developing these capabilities is unlikely to be found in a 'leader and the led' model but in a new performance paradigm based on: 'How do we inspire people so that they give their talents and efforts willingly?' We are in a new context and leaderships' challenge is to reposition its value proposition if it is to remain relevant and impactful.

In the face of this shift, leadership's opportunity to establish its contemporary value is threefold:

1. **The creation of meaning and purpose**

This is not to be confused with the communication of corporate values, mission statements or corporate social responsibility initiatives. It is the requirement of leadership to provide a deeper sense of meaning as to why

work is important and how it can support a greater sense of individual and collective identity.

W. L. Gore is recognised as one of the most sought-after companies in the world to work for. They are a non-hierarchical organisation based more on a lattice network of relationship with no traditional role titles other than associate. They embrace the changing nature of leadership. If someone wants to hold a meeting and nobody turns up, then the matter is deemed not that important. However, if people do turn up, then the matter is deemed 'important', consequentially the meeting host is likely to become the de-facto leader if things move forward.

2. The creation of context

The work of Dr. W.E. Deming in relation to quality and continuous improvement plus the work of Daniel Kahneman and the Behavioural Economics movement remind us that contextual conditions are over 80% responsible for driving performance, not the well-intentioned and often 'heroic' efforts of individuals and their leaders. This alone should inform executive development professionals to rethink where to focus the executive programme effort when it comes to improving performance.

By any measure, the internet is the most powerful example of context providing a liberating and enabling space on a global scale. It has truly changed everything. Never before have people had access to so much information, the use of so many creative tools and are able to freely express their point of view without having to be told, have direction, or set targets.

Organisations find it hard to transform because the change in paradigm from leader as master to leadership as enabler is too big a jump. It was only when HCL Technologies, one of the world's leading software service's companies, was on the brink of collapse did they invert the pyramid and implement their 'Employee first, Customer second' philosophy making all managers and leaders answerable to employees.

3. The creation of a new leadership paradigm

Goddard and Eccles (2013) conclude that '*Ordinary people in extra ordinary organisations consistently outperform extra ordinary people in ordinary organisations*'. Not seeing leadership as a set of personal characteristics imbued within specific individuals but as an organisational capability within the collective talents of everyone.

This means avoiding building organisations and teams that are dependent upon the heroic actions of the few in favour of building an organisation or team where everyone is capable of great things. Leadership is distributed, and the organisation thrives in the face of personality changes. As a result, share prices don't plummet when a CEO decides to leave.

Case Study: Lithuanian Basketball Team

Basketball is the most popular sport in Lithuania, despite not having any individual world-class players and, for such a small country, it is immensely successful in international tournaments.

Almost irrespective of who is playing, they have developed a system which brings out the best in each player, both individually and collectively. Lithuanian American basketball coaches and players in the 1930s helped the Lithuania men's national basketball team win the last EuroBasket tournaments prior to World War II, in 1937 and 1939, causing a massive impact in Lithuanian society and a basketball popularity spike. Since then, despite Lithuania's small size, with a population of almost 2.9 million, the country's devotion to basketball has made them a formidable force across Europe and internationally.

After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, the national team was resurrected, with their first official tournament being the 1992 Olympics, where they won a bronze medal. The Lithuanians have since won another two bronzes at the Olympics, a bronze medal at the 2010 FIBA World Championship and five EuroBasket medals, including the country's third title at FIBA EuroBasket 2003 in Sweden.

Three Top Tips

- Think less of leadership as a set of skills imbued within specific individuals and more as a capability across the whole organisation.
- Avoid over emphasising the leadership card and place more faith in people's ability to manage their own circumstances. When they leave work, they manage a plethora of complex situations from personal finance to bringing up families, why should that change when they come to work?
- If you feel you have 'mission critical' employees, then you have consciously or otherwise built weak links into your organisation and not a system that is more resilient and taps into the available collective talent.

As managers most of what we take as fact is not so. It is no more than a naive theory of human behaviour. (Jeffrey Pfeffer)

Paradox 4—The Search for Certainty and Answers

The paradox—As insight and knowledge grow a realisation dawns that there is so much more to learn and understand—"the more you know the more you realise what you don't know". From certainty emerges uncertainty, from knowing emerges not knowing, more questions and more enquiry. Executive development becomes best served by being a never-ending journey of exploration, not an ad hoc refuelling station for the latest answer.

Fashions and Fads

The literature on leadership and management development is littered with 'the latest thing', fuelled, in part, by research from institutions and academics across the world. Such fashions and fads are designed to offer business leaders certainty, solutions, hope, and answers to the challenges they face. One minute, it is all about customers, quality, empowerment, and wellbeing, and in the next phase, the focus is on re-engineering, sustainability, resilience, and purpose—the list is seemingly never ending. Commentators such as Richard Pascale have mapped such changes since the 1950s showing that the production of business fads and fashions equates to almost one per year.

What is driving this relentless pursuit of trying to find certainty, the answer or one best way? At one level, it can be seen as part of the healthy overall development of insights through research and a growing appreciation of how the world of work works. Insight builds upon insight, and we start to put pieces of the jigsaw together. At another level, it plays directly into the hands of how we are as humans. Behavioural science, particularly the work of the UK Government Nudge Unit and their MINDSPACE model (n.d.), demonstrate nine generic principles of the human condition. As a species, we like to be liked, we do not like uncertainty, our minds tackle the future by referring to the past and we like to be the same as others.

A Far from Certain Science

Unlike physics where the outcomes of any action are more certain and predictable, the art of leadership and the management of others is a social science with no absolute right answer, no absolute truth, and no absolute right way. Jeffrey Pfeffer (2018) illuminates this as shown in Fig. 9.7, an adaptation from his work to show how leaders often base their decisions on 'naïve theory',

BELEIFS AND ORTHODOXIES COME IN MANY FLAVORS

Fig. 9.7   Beliefs and orthodoxies come in many flavours

natural bias and beliefs grounded in dogma, axioms, superstition, and hypothesis.

Every leadership team I have worked with has to some degree been influenced by what I refer to as 'the forces of sameness'. These forces are beliefs, norms, and behaviours which feed off our natural desire to follow the crowd, to be the same, to be identified as one of the team, for example:

Best practice—this has become an industry within its own right and based on the principle of 'who is doing the best out there and let's copy them.' In effect, outsourcing one's creativity, innovation, and thinking to keep up with the crowd.

Behavioural norms—we are heavily influenced by the way others behave particularly if it's someone we relate to, trust, and can identify with. It is not unusual for aspiring business leaders to unconsciously adopt the approach of others they admire.

Addiction to consultants—organisations purchase consulting services because they feel they neither have the time or expertise to do it for themselves. The assumption being that purchasing from a consulting firm will provide some guarantee or certainty of outcome. In truth, consulting firms sell the same services to many different clients levelling the playing field as they go.

IT solutions—like consulting, IT firms sell more or less the same solutions to many different organisations such as HRM, supply chain CRM, and finance systems. It is often said that an IT director has never been fired for implementing Oracle, SAP, or Microsoft.

The Value of Business Schools

In the face of this tsunami of bias, fashions, fads, initiatives, and behavioural influences, it is remarkable to think that the strategic *raison d'etre* of most organisations is to be different rather than the same as its competition. Marketing theory tells us competitive advantage via developing a unique selling proposition is crucial to success, yet that requires leaders and leadership to be and think differently not the same.

In this context, the role and value of business schools in developing leaders should not be to proliferate best practice but explore new practice, not to accept orthodoxy but challenge it, not to teach theory but experimentation, not to learn from the mainstream but from the unorthodox. It becomes less about the pursuit of certainty and more about living with uncertainty, the development of a leadership culture which embraces curiosity and doubt in seeking more helpful and innovative ways of thriving in an exponentially changing world.

A key component of developing new perspectives is the ability and willingness to step out of your own shoes and into someone else's, to see the world afresh, to see the world from a new perspective—this is called discovery learning. Albert Szent-Gyorgi, the Nobel prize winning biochemist, calls discovery, '*Seeing what everybody has seen and thinking what nobody has thought.*' It is the relentless search for new insights and perspectives. And once identified, it is then to test new hypothesis and see if they can provide different answers and solutions to the challenges faced.

I have led discovery learning experiences all over the world, a selection of which is given in Fig. 9.8. Each experience was specifically designed to provide a different and unique perspective on a significant corporate challenge.

The principle of discovery is to seek learning in everything and, in doing so, challenge the prevailing orthodoxy in which many leadership teams find themselves mired. It is rare to find innovation and creative thinking stimulated where everyone is aligned, thinking, and behaving in the same way. The challenge for business schools as they create their executive development programmes is to rethink their own value proposition and to not be led by rankings, faculty utilisation, and space occupancy. These will follow if the proposition is right.

DISCOVERY EXPERIENCE	NEW PERSPECTIVE ON...
Junior school in rural China	Challenging and changing the system of learning
Monastery	Reflection and contemplation
IT firm run by disabled people	Overcoming adversity
Flower market in Holland	Rapid decision making and precise process execution
Blind/sight impaired community	Working with all of one's senses
Earth Hour (part of WWF)	Influencing with impact and limited resources
Creating and reciting poetry	Effective communication, confidence building and meaning making
Rowing	Team work and co-ordination
Playing jazz & blues	Creativity, agility, and team work
Prisoner reform group	Changing behaviours and mindsets
Oil company	Innovation at scale

Fig. 9.8 Discovery learning experiences

The Implications for Leadership

It has been said that 'Wise leadership acknowledges the frailty and fallibility of its own judgement'. This is counter intuitive to many schools of thought which espouse a view that leadership needs to have the answers and failure is not an option. Today's operating environment is far from stable and far from predictable making fallibility and frailty an asset as we seek new ideas, new insights, and new ways forward.

Three Top Tips

- In the social science of leadership and management never assume anything is fact and correct all the time.
- In today's operating context, embrace and work with uncertainty; it will prove to be a much more healthy, productive, and enlightening path to follow.
- Commit yourself and your colleagues to seek learning in everything, particularly away from the mainstream. It will build up your personal and collective capability to see the challenges you face from new and diverse perspectives.

> *The truth is that today's executives are cognitively fit, but emotionally troubled—and in need of help.* (Jules Goddard)

Paradox 5—The Obsession with Content

The paradox—*Unique executive education content is important, after all there is no learning without theory, but in a world of information overload, demanding performance targets and growing levels of anxiety, leaders increasingly value networking and sharing personal experiences over the injection of yet more content, more concepts, and more models.*

The pressure to perform and hit targets, goals, and milestones is felt by everyone in organisational life, not just leadership, and this shows no signs of abating. According to Jeffrey Pfeffer (2018) *'Many decades of research and teaching by both myself and colleagues around the effect of high-commitment, or high-performance work practices on productivity and other dimensions of organisational performance had resulted in little or no positive change. Notwithstanding the publication of numerous books on this topic, workplaces were, if anything, getting worse with less employee engagement and satisfaction and diminished trust in institutional leadership'.*

Edward Segal (2021) refers to a study which includes data from 15,000 leaders and 2102 human resource professionals representing more than 1740 organisations. To summarise:

- Nearly 60% of leaders reported they feel used up at the end of the workday, a strong indicator of burnout.
- Approximately 44% of leaders who feel used up at the end of the day expected to change companies in order to advance.
- 26% expected to leave within the next year.
- Only 20% of surveyed leaders believed they were effective at leading virtually.

Further insights come from an article on the BBC website, 19 November 2019: '*Meetings at work should be seen as a form of "therapy" rather than about decision-making, say researchers*'. Academics from the University of Malmo in Sweden say meetings provide an outlet for people at work to show off their status or to express frustration. Many managers do not know what to do and people like to talk as it helps them find a role.

Case Study

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic 2020/21, I led an online leadership development programme consisting of 25 delegates from a large European services company. It quickly became apparent just how much pressure the delegates felt under to not just undertake the programme and juggle complex personal issues, including childcare and home schooling, but also to deal with the unrelenting pressure to deliver on their work commitments. Many delegates felt they had no choice but to miss programme sessions because of these conflicting pressures.

As the programme progressed, a survey was undertaken to understand exactly how the delegates were emotionally. The results were concerning yet not surprising with feelings of exhaustion and frustration leading the way. The respondents were asked: 'Think back on your last two weeks of work. How did work make you feel?' They were then asked to choose a maximum of five emotions from a long list to indicate their most frequent emotions. Those emotions with the highest per cent by far turned out to be 'frustrated', 'anxious/worried/fearful', and 'drained/exhausted'.

Allowing for the unique and quite exceptional context COVID-19 created, this was a group of highly talented business leaders at the limit of their tolerance, trying to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable priorities despite best efforts. This, unfortunately, is not uncommon in modern corporate life.

Delegates attending executive development programmes are already often physically and emotionally exhausted, only then be met with a barrage of topic-specific content ranging from strategy to high-performing teams, innovation to agility, and employee engagement to decision making. It is often the case that the delegates undertaking such programmes have already had some form of further education, been on other courses and attended a variety of in-company programmes. On top of all that and thanks to the internet, they now have unprecedented access to a vast range of materials from Ted Talks to journals, from periodicals to papers, and from blogs to books. Just about every topic you can think of which is relevant for leaders to know about is available and accessible. Business executives, in the main, do not suffer from a lack of content; quite the opposite, they can and often do feel overwhelmed by what is available. The value therefore that business schools can bring should not be to add yet more content. They should spend time helping delegates navigate through it but importantly focus time on the emotional dimensions of being a healthy, well-adjusted human being.

The Implications for Executive Development

Increase networking and peer-to-peer conversations—The opportunity to network invariably scores high on feedback sheets. It is recognised that leaders learn more on the job and from each other than in classrooms. Anyone who has taken part in an executive education programme will have noticed that the level of energy, noise, interaction, and conversation rises significantly during the coffee breaks and informal sessions. Once back in the classroom its back to the serious business of learning and content absorption. Trying to apply oneself to what is being taught is an altogether different feel and atmosphere. I have spoken often to my fellow Programme Directors about what lessons we can learn from the coffee breaks. Lesson one is to not over-engineer programmes and build in time and space for emergence. Lesson two is to not lecture delegates; the teacher is best served taking the position of a fellow learner and facilitator. Lesson three is to build in more purposeful coffee breaks, giving the delegates a focus for their conversation. Lesson four is to reverse roles and allow the delegates time to be teachers.

   Find time for emotions—Over the years, my colleagues and I have often commented that certain programmes have felt more like therapy sessions than a learning experience. Having a pent-up desire to get things off their chest, have a good moan and offload their frustrations. I have grown to appreciate just how important this is. An essential pre-requisite is to find time and space to give the delegates a 'damn good listening to' before moving forward. In addition, it is helpful to provide delegates with a clear, more academic, understanding of the role of emotions and feelings, particularly in the context of decision making. This combination of informality, timing, and formal understanding can then clear the path for other issues and topics to be explored and discussed.

   Release the fear of 'failure'—Fear of failure is a cause of anxiety and stress. Success is rewarded and failure frowned upon in many organisations; yet 'failure' is the essential ingredient to uncovering new insights and the lifeblood of innovation. The late education guru Sir Ken Robinson in one of his many Ted Talks said, *'If you are not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original'*. Unfortunately, fear of failure runs deep. From the day we enter school, we are taught there is a right and a wrong answer and the whole education system is based on that premise. Unfortunately, this paradigm then continues into the world of work. A time to break that fear should be integral to an executive development experience by providing a safe place for freedom of thought, freedom of expression, the ability to challenge prevailing wisdom and experiment with new ideas.

Reduce the content—No one doubts the value of great content, that which reveals new insights and perspectives; however, there is a better balance to be found building in more time for delegates to talk about themselves and their context, to share their life experiences, and to realise they are as much a teacher as they are a pupil. The maxim of 'less is more' is increasingly appropriate. In their working life, most of what executives learn is done on the job. One of the most effective tools I have come across to unpick the emotional, experiential, and intellectual journey of delegates is the 'lifelines' model which highlights the main events in someone's life that have shaped who and what they are today. It depends on the delegates as to how much detail they wish to include, but the process invariably leads to a deeper and quicker appreciation of what is really going on with delegates and also helps build trust long before more academic subjects are discussed.

Teach faculty how to teach—My former colleague at London Business School, Jules Goddard comments: *'As teachers we lecture far too much. As a result, our students learn far too little'*. At the beginning of my Programme Directing career, this came as a bit of a surprise but as the years rolled by, I began to understand the wisdom of his observation.

University lecturers, subject matter experts, and specialists are rarely taught how to teach. Despite that, they end up at the sharp edge of delivering most executive development programmes. These are individuals who, because of having 'unique' insight into a particular subject area, are known for what they know. As such, many have a vested interest in lecturing or telling others what they know rather than engage in debate, questioning, and exploration.

We learn very little from being lectured at and somewhere down the line this seems to have been lost. Confucius summed it up well when he said: *'I hear, and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand'*. It is time to ensure all teachers are taught how to teach executives, how to engage business leaders and how to bridge the divide described by Jeffrey Pfeffer as 'The Knowing-Doing Gap'.

Rethink the learning environment—Behavioural science tells us we are much more creative, more engaged, and more expansive in our thinking if we work in large, well-ventilated open environments versus more enclosed, regimented spaces. It is one of the unconscious 'nudges' all humans respond to which makes us feel more human and more connected.

Universities and business schools invest heavily in physical infrastructure, state of the art classrooms, lecture rooms, and amphitheatres where they ask delegates to sit in uniform rows of seats within often bland, sterile environments. It is almost as though they are designed for control not collaboration with the lecturer being the focal point of attention. Knowingly or otherwise,

they accentuate the teacher and the taught, the master and the pupil, those who know and those who do not know. In the world of executive development, this is spectacularly unhelpful and does little to help delegates engage, network, and debate.

Case Study

In 2016, I was working for an independent leadership development company that was primarily made up of freelance experienced programme directors. Traditionally, we delivered programmes on the client site or in hotels around the world. The opportunity arose to design a leadership programme for 26 delegates from a large European-based financial services company. The client wanted it 'to be different'.

All the delegates were UK-based but half of the programme was delivered in The Netherlands. The site we chose was a renovated warehouse next to a canal in central Amsterdam. It was a building constructed in the eighteenth century with all its stunning character preserved. There were rich oak floors scarred with history and a large open-plan space where we could reconfigure the furniture to suit our needs. We could write on the walls, use the latest technology, enjoy the refreshments on hand, and open the windows onto the canal to soak up the atmosphere of this remarkable city.

It was a space that lifted the spirits and engaged everyone, a place of learning the delegates loved. It was different, it was new, it was inspiring. Above all, it was as far away from corporate life as you could get.

The late Professor Sumantra Ghoshal from London Business School sums up the feelings we had in Amsterdam from his own experience: *'I now spend a lot of my time working at INSEAD in the beautiful surroundings of Fontainebleau and when I can I go home I go to see my family and friends in India. When I'm in India, the temperature is high, it's very humid and oppressive and I spend most of my time resting and giving the appearance of not doing much at all. When I go back to work in Fontainebleau, the air is cooler, the environment more pleasant and generally less oppressive, in fact I get up much earlier and jog to the office sometimes. I feel much more alert, bright, and alive in such conditions.*

Interestingly, I am exactly the same person in India as I am in France and yet my whole level of wellbeing and activity is significantly different from one place to the other'.

Three Top Tips

- If you try to make learning a purely intellectual exercise it will fail. Ample time needs to be found for delegates to recharge their emotional batteries.

- The context within which we learn is crucial; there is a direct relationship between the emotional and intellectual engagement of delegates and the space within which it takes pace.
- Teachers and lecturers should not sit outside the learning experience but be an integral part of it just as much as the delegates. In doing so, this enhances learning to build empathy, trust, and mutual understanding.

Summary

Life is full of paradox and the world of executive education is no exception—it simply reflects the nature of life itself. However, an increasing amount is expected from those in positions of influence and leadership today which provides both a challenge and an opportunity for those of us who commission, design, and deliver executive education programmes.

What seems to be evident is that many of the paradoxes I have described can be resolved and reconciled. They do have solutions and they do have alternatives. My contention is that to stay relevant, viable, and valuable, business schools need to reflect deeply on their role in helping delegate organisations fulfil their ambitions and resolve their challenges. That shift in proposition includes:

- Moving from a focus just on the individual to a greater focus on the context.
- Moving from cohorts of 'sameness' to cohorts crossing over hierarchies and functions.
- Moving from leadership as a set of individual skills sets to an overall organisational capability.
- Moving from offering 'how to' solutions to developing originality of thought, greater curiosity, and the capacity to learn continuously.
- Moving from teaching research and case-based content at an intellectual level to conversations which are emotionally enlightening and reassuring.

I offer the above not as either/or choices but as options to rebalance the nature of how executive education can enhance its value. Business schools who have the courage to test and experiment with these propositions could well find they, the delegates, and the organisations they represent will all have significantly more enjoyable, fulfilling, and productive futures.

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