
From management to leadership



By [Angela Garvey Hammond](#)

Self-examination is the key to successful leadership and it starts in business school, according to new research.

It's three years ago this month since panic struck the financial world and the American banking giant Lehman Brothers collapsed. The image of top executives and hundreds of junior staff leaving the investment bank with their cardboard boxes of belongings shocked the global markets. The ins and outs of how and why it happened have been analysed and re-analysed, along with the stark lack of any real leadership or control from those at the top. Since then the political climate has changed but the world economy is still in a mess, the markets are in a constant state of panic over the Euro crisis and politicians and financiers are at odds over how to lead us out of the troubles.

It is little surprise then that there are calls for stronger leadership around the globe and questions about whether business schools - where, after all, so many of the world's top financiers and politicians have learned their skills - are really producing the best leaders.



INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour, [Gianpiero Petriglieri](#), along with colleagues Jack Wood from IMD and Jennifer Petriglieri from the Harvard Business School, recently published award-winning research on leadership, focusing on what it takes for MBA courses and executive programmes to “transform” managers into leaders.

The authors followed a group of 55 high-flying managers over one year in an international MBA programme. In the study, entitled “Building Foundations for Leaders’ Development through the Personalisation of Management Learning”, every student was given the rare opportunity to work regularly with a psychotherapist. Their conversations and the issues that evolved were closely examined, along with the students’ ambitions, personal dilemmas and growth over the year. The process was part of a course “Personal Development Elective” and sat alongside the mainstream courses of management learning and analytic skills. As one student put it, “Before I came to [the MBA programme] I pictured myself studying a lot and finding a job. I never imagined thinking about myself, having a moment in my life to get away from everything and really focus on who I am, what I want.”

The process of personalisation

By the end of their year, the students had gone through “a process of personalisation”, reporting in the study three broad outcomes: stronger self-awareness; self-management - being more equipped to manage their own feelings and behaviour; and third, revisiting their own life story. Through the year the students came to understand how their own life stories could influence their current behaviour and that consequently enabled them to avoid self-defeating habits.

Petriglieri acknowledges there is already a “burgeoning stream of academic work supporting the theory that the individual’s inner world and life story play a central role in the development of managers.” So how different is this study and how much of an impact can it have on aspiring leaders once they leave the MBA “bubble”?

David Duffy recently completed his MBA at a British university. He leads a team of a 140 people in London, specialising in finding careers and leadership roles for military personnel who are moving into civilian life. As an ex-Navy man, he recognises the need for a strong chain of command, from the top down. He believes that “a leader needs to have a vision and the

conviction to see it through, especially in the current business climate”. By his own admission he is not a charismatic leader, but he is highly trusted and highly regarded by his staff. “It comes down to knowing where you are taking the company and your staff believing in you.”

However he admits he has learnt this over time, rather than from any course. “There was an element of naval-gazing and looking in the mirror on my MBA, but the impact on me was intangible. I could spot the bright students in my class but, in all honesty, I couldn’t see many potential great leaders. The emphasis was on honing our managerial and financial skills rather than exploring our leadership qualities. Given that the jobs market is so fluid and pressurised now, though, I think it is critical to be more self-aware and really know your failings, as well as your talents.”

Character counts

More and more business schools are beginning to offer a smattering of leadership development because of the jobs market, Petriglieri says: “We have re-discovered that character matters in leadership”. Cast your mind back to Lehman Brothers CEO Richard Fuld, who was punched while on the treadmill in the gym hours after the bank filed for bankruptcy. His leadership abilities and personal character were dissected and criticised by an array of parties in the aftermath of the bankruptcy. More recently Tony Hayward, the former head of BP, became the subject of vehement criticism in the US for his apparent lack of strong leadership or empathy with victims when responding to BP’s oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico last year.

For Petriglieri, “exercising leadership effectively and responsibly involves a leader’s whole self”. In the study, students were not put to the test in the same way as Tony Hayward or the former head of Lehman Brothers. Their troubles and dilemmas on the MBA were more personal and of course far less significant to the outside world. However, co-author Jennifer Petriglieri, of Harvard Business School, says the students still had to face unsettling experiences and “examine them closely to figure out what they meant ... emotional tensions, moral dilemmas and tough questions are part and parcel of leading in a turbulent world”.

The study is keen to portray management students as more than the shiny high-flyers in pursuit of a seat in the boardroom and the rich benefits that go

with it.

A personal journey

The authors suggest that to churn out effective and responsible leaders, business schools need to continue to challenge the emotional side of students' work and life rather than simply the academic. It's a view endorsed by leadership consultant Daniel Hammond. He was an executive at Novartis, for many years running the Australian operations of the pharmaceutical's eye care company. He now heads the UK arm of the international consultancy group LIW, running leadership programmes for multinational companies and governments around the world. "I meet very smart executives in their 40s and 50s who have been successful, but are struggling. They don't know themselves or really where they are going, and that's where we come in."

His programme is all about setting your own compass, being clear about where you are going as a person and a leader, knowing your purpose, vision and values. "It's all about the individual's own experience and using that to get everyone on board to achieve the company's strategy," he says.

"I borrowed huge sums of money to do my MBA in Milan back in the 1990s, and it was all geared to the corporate route. There is still a real "sheep-dip" experience in many business schools with the assumption that every student has the same goal from the course. I find the concept of personalisation exciting and only wish it had been part of my management training."

With the new crop of MBA students settling into their first term around the world, Gianpiero Petriglieri suggests perceptions around leadership are changing amongst academics and the wider general public. The subject is no longer out of bounds in the classroom. "It is fascinating how in most top business schools leadership courses used to be considered soft. You rarely hear that today or you hear it only from the least sophisticated of our students."

"People who believe there is no longer a need to question themselves, or that their development is complete, are often the most foolish, not the most sane."

MBA or not, perhaps we should all get to know ourselves.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/management-leadership>

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