
There's More Than One Way to Make the Most of an MBA



By Benjamin Kessler , Asia Editor and Digital Manager

Success in an MBA programme may hinge on mastering a friendly sort of rivalry.

The tail end of summer is a special time of year at INSEAD and business schools around the world. It's when classes resume and a new crop of students set out on their MBA journey.

2017 is a more exciting year than most to begin an MBA. Politically and economically, the world is in transition. The pace of change is faster than it's been in decades. The careers of aspiring global managers, already unpredictable, seem headed for even greater uncertainty.

MBA programmes are designed to equip graduates for the challenges they'll face as managers and leaders. But in these highly uncertain times, it's increasingly unclear what those challenges will look like. Will the future environment demand more adaptability or more authenticity? Should the emphasis be on maximising financial performance, or holding on to one's integrity no matter the cost?

In principle, the answer is this: Hard as it might be, any good leader should be able to do both. INSEAD and many of its peer schools are aware of this. They build their curricula with a dual mission in mind—placing roughly equal importance on honing professional skills and assisting personal development. Students are urged to master management tools while also engaging in heavy-duty self-discovery.

At first glance, the two pursuits may seem complementary. However, according to a new study co-authored by INSEAD's [Gianpiero Petriglieri](#) and [Jennifer Petriglieri](#), many budding business leaders won't focus on both—especially in demanding, fast-paced and high-pressured MBAs like INSEAD's.

Instead, soon after starting, they'll set out on alternative paths. And while they might suffer from 'Fear of Missing Out', their MBA journey might be all the more fruitful for it. As long as their school, their classmates—and themselves—acknowledge the equal value of both paths, which is the hard part.

Meet the “hunters” and “explorers”

For the study, the Petriglieris and their co-author, Jack Denfield Wood of CEIBS, followed 55 students before, throughout and soon after a one-year MBA programme. The school, which they call “Blue” for the purposes of the study, is highly reputed and traditionally places graduates in top global companies.

Before their programme began, the authors found, most participants expressed multiple aspirations. They envisioned future career achievements, for sure. One incoming MBA candidate said: “I really want to become a general manager that has in his backpack the MBA of a good and famous school.” At the same time, they were curious about what they would discover about themselves. “I am hoping that Blue will take me a step further. I don't know what that step further is,” said another participant.

Fairly early on in their programme, however, the students became polarised. Plunged into the high-intensity, high-visibility environment of Blue, their insecurities came to the fore. Each student began to wrestle with his or her individual self-doubt. Perhaps as a coping mechanism, their anxieties started to cohere around one or the other of Blue's dual aims. Some worried they couldn't live up to the high performance standards. Others felt they were not

clear enough about their true selves.

By the midpoint of the programme, the students had split into two informal but quite distinct camps. Those who measured themselves by performance became what the Petriglieris and Wood call “hunters”. Hunters placed high value on acquiring skills that would make it easier to claim titles like “leader”, “manager” and “international.” They sought to transform themselves into the sort of professional who could successfully lead no matter where they ended up. For them, soul-searching had become a distraction. They were intent on persuading those around them of their “leaderly” qualities.

Participants who felt most challenged by the self-discovery side of Blue’s mission became “explorers”, primarily focused on finding and expressing who they really were. Where the hunters sought fulfilment through external achievements, the explorers looked within, engaging in “internal struggle, questioning, and self-doubt”, as one put it. They chafed at the pressure to rack up accomplishments within Blue’s microcosm of the business world. To explorers, the prizes and praise available at Blue represented what they were expected to want, a pale substitute for the treasure of self-knowledge.

A fruitful symbiosis

As you might expect, the split between hunters and explorers was reflected in the students’ socialising. As one said, “A lot of the people that I am close to all have a similar motivation for spending a year doing this. That is probably the biggest thing [that brings us together].”

Despite the two tribes being more at ease amongst their own kind, the somewhat cliquish atmosphere never developed into overt conflict or out-and-out exclusion. One student described the dynamic as “competitive friendliness”. Hunters and explorers seemed to respect each other’s differences even while not completely understanding the other group’s motivations.

To the Petriglieris and Wood, this makes perfect psychological sense. By remaining close enough with one another to perform social comparisons, both camps sustained clarity and confidence about their own choices despite the stresses of their academic environment. Each group member’s focus was strengthened by contact with peers from the other group. And both groups were grateful to Blue for it.

The “portable self”

Although splitting into sub-groups served key psychological needs, both hunters and explorers were doing the same thing, argue the Petriglieris. They were forging “portable selves” that could help them chart a course through the oceans of uncertainty their future career might hold in store. For hunters, the portable self was anchored to their ability to adapt their leadership portfolio across various contexts. Explorers pegged their portable self to a refusal to compromise core values.

In both cases, the outcome was a sense of self-determination that would not have been possible had they tried to balance both of Blue’s sets of demands. If Blue could not give them certainty about the future, it could at least give them clarity as to where they were going, how, and with whom.

Happily, all but a few not only succeeded in crafting a viable portable self, but also talked positively about Blue as a community, despite all the challenges. One participant said, “I was able to connect with people throughout the world, and that will give me a sensation that I can always count on somebody.”

Mastering the friendly rivalry between hunters and explorers, it seems, lets both types get a sense of ownership and direction in their careers—and relationships that can sustain their pursuits. Those are precious assets for aspiring leaders in a fluid and uncertain working world.

In short, regardless of brochures and stereotypes, not every MBA wants to become a CEO or entrepreneur, or dig deep into their soul to find out who they want to be. That is OK, but only schools that make equal room for those pursuits will help both hunters and explorers thrive.

As they gear up for the rigours of their programme, then, the main question for MBA candidates should be not, “Where will I be in five years?” but “Who will I be in five months?”

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