Integrating The Curriculum: Executive Education In The 21ˢᵗ Century

Lindsley Boiney (Email: lboiney@pepperdine.edu), Pepperdine University
Mark Mallinger (Email: mark.mallinger@pepperdine.edu), Pepperdine University

Abstract

Executive education programs are becoming more innovative, learner centered and relevant to strategic organizational issues. They require action learning and greater customization to the executive's organization. This study presents an integrated design of two courses from different disciplines that extend over two trimesters. Student assessments of their organizational culture in part one are integrated in part two with quantitative performance measurement. Interweaving culture and performance measurement in the context of their own organizations helps executives see how culture influences "bottom line" issues of performance and results. Their resulting recommendations for organizational change address underlying causes, rather than superficial symptoms.

Introduction

Executive education programs are becoming more innovative, learner centered and relevant to strategic organizational issues than in the past (Conger & Xin, 2000). Twenty years ago, education for executives focused primarily on seminars offered by specialized training organizations (Bolt, 1993). The emphasis was on learning contemporary theory and management practice through the use of case study and lectures by nationally renowned academics. Current studies suggest that today's executive education program has shifted from functional knowledge of management, finance, etc., to a more strategic analysis of leadership and organizational change. In addition, pedagogy has transformed from teacher-directed to learner-centered and from case study to real-life challenges executives face (Conger & Benjamin, 1999; Stopper, 1998; Vincere, 1998).

The research of the International Consortium for Executive Development Research (ICEDR) concluded that the learning needs, learning content and pedagogy associated with executive education need to be evaluated to determine the relevance of the curriculum to the demands of the dynamic business environment. (Conger & Xin, 2000). The study suggests that learning needs require executive education to move away from the theoretical to the applied, with attention directed toward strategy, leadership and organizational change. Regarding learning content, the study recommends greater customization; programs should be related to an investigation of the student's organization. Finally, the ICEDR suggests that pedagogy be driven by action learning. That is, projects that are both relevant and significant to the executive and his/her company should be part of the program. These learning experiences based on actual and current challenges have enormous appeal and utility.

The purpose of the current study is to examine learning content and pedagogy of an executive education program at a west coast university that has not only incorporated the recommendations of the ICEDR, but has enhanced the course structure. Specifically, this executive education program has integrated the design of two traditionally unconnected courses that extend over two trimesters.

The Executive Education Program

The Executive MBA program (EMBA) is a 50-unit curriculum that provides a multi-functional framework

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for the strategic management of an organization. EMBA is designed for the experienced practitioner and planned around small group seminar sessions (class size ranges between 22 and 30 students). The program is offered over a five-trimester period. Executives enroll in each trimester in two four-unit courses and one two-unit course that meet on weekends (2:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. on Friday and 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday) five times per trimester at three-week intervals.

In addition, each EMBA class begins with a four day, live-in workshop designed to review the entire program and develop working relationships with faculty, introduce the Strategic Management Model upon which the program is based, and build an executive learning team by developing skills in collaboration and consensus problem solving.

One of the key requirements for graduation is a written project detailing a strategy formulation and implementation for the executive's organization. The project is expected to demonstrate the student's mastery of program content and reflect a capacity to think and manage change strategically. Portions of the project are completed each trimester.

The following sections of the paper examine the first two trimesters of the program. We describe course content and pedagogy as they relate to, and go beyond, ICEDR guidelines, focusing on the integration of the Organization Behavior (i.e., managing change) and Designing Decision Systems (i.e., quantitative) courses.

Managing Innovation and Change (The First Trimester)

The first trimester's emphasis is on enhancing leadership skills and recognizing the implications of organizational culture. The course objective is to prepare self-aware, enlightened leaders able to create organizational cultures that stimulate innovation and change in response to dynamic environments. A strategy project that requires executives to analyze organizational culture is the capstone paper for the first trimester. The analysis is used to determine the extent to which the culture is in line with the organization's goals and mission. The culture/goals fit becomes the cornerstone for the development of a plan for strategic change.

To assist the executive in developing the skills needed to prepare the project, four papers/presentations are assigned during the trimester. The first three assignments build upon one another such that executives are able to enhance analytic skills as they work toward the fourth, capstone assignment. The first paper asks students to carry out a family culture study. The second assignment is an investigation of the organizational culture of the business of a fellow student in the EMBA class. The third assignment requires students, working within a learning team, to conduct a cultural analysis of an organization of their choice. In most cases, the company selected is that of one of the members of the learning team. Executives visit the designated company, identify the artifacts, values and basic assumptions of the organization (Shein, 1999) and then apply the Integrated Cultural Framework (Mallinger & Rossy, 1999).

The final capstone paper extends the previous work by requiring executives to consider the strategic implications associated with organizational culture. This exploration of culture's strategic impact will be revisited in the following trimester and linked to organizational performance.
The Integrated Cultural Framework (ICF)

The framework created by Mallinger & Rossy (1999) offers a means for measuring culture and drives the strategy project for the first trimester. The six dimensions of the framework are derived from a consolidation of the Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961) and Hofstede (1980) models for assessing culture. To better understand the model, a brief review of the ICF is presented. All six dimensions are measured using a series of questions on a 5-point Likert scale.

Ability to Influence: The extent to which organization members have an opportunity to influence decisions. Questions that determine ability to influence include:

- Where are decisions made within the organization?
- Is the organization centralized or decentralized?
- To what extent do members perceive they have an opportunity to change procedures and policies?

Comfort with Ambiguity: The extent to which the members of the organization are comfortable with uncertainty and risk taking

- Are there lots of rules and regulations that define the way "things" should be done?
- To what extent is risk encouraged?
- To what is extent is the organization comfortable with uncertainty?

Achievement Orientation: The extent to which members are assertive, goal directed and achievement oriented

- Is there a high expectation of achievement?
- Do organization members strive to attain goals?
- Is there a high degree of assertiveness?
- Are increased levels of performance encouraged?

Individualism vs. Collectivism: The extent to which individual versus group loyalty exists

- Are rewards individual or group based?
- To what extent to members work as a team?
- Do members identify with being part of a team or is teamwork perceived as an obligation?

Time Orientation: The extent to which the organization's goals/mission is focused on values from the past, present or future.

- Is the vision based on the values of the founders (i.e., the past), the current environment (present) or an estimation of the future?
- Is the implementation of the strategy past, present or future oriented?

Space Orientation: The extent to which physical layout of the organization is public, private or a mix of both

- To what extent is office space shared?
- To what extent do you see closed versus open doors?
- To what extent are members territorial, that is, protective of their space?

The ICF thereby assesses culture and becomes the linchpin in determining culture/mission fit. In the second trimester the results of the organizational culture study are integrated with the course content of Designing Decision Systems. The integration demonstrates the interrelationship of course material and allows executives to recognize the value of systems thinking (Senge, 1990) in managing change.

Systems Thinking

David Hanna has developed an Organization Performance (OP) model that incorporates systems thinking. The basic underlying philosophy is that there are always inputs to any system (such as an organization), some type of transformation of those inputs, and outputs from the system to its environment. A graphical overview of the OP system is shown in Figure 1. Starting at the first "box" in the upper left is the environment, or business system. As we proceed counterclockwise, each factor is thought to "cause" the next factor and to be the "effect" of the immediately previous (clockwise) factor.

For the purpose of our study, Hanna's design elements, culture, and business results are particularly relevant. His OP model proposes that design elements such as organizational tasks, technology, structure, rewards,

people, information systems and decision-making processes, each influence the organizational culture. Similarly, the culture influences the business results and outputs. To assess an organization, one can work backwards (clockwise) through the OP model: to understand outcomes, look at underlying culture. To understand drivers of that culture, look to the design elements, and so on.

This systematic framework underlines the importance of exposing students to the interplay between culture and outcomes, rather than viewing each independently. We believe that awareness of organizational culture will help executives recognize underlying drivers of organizational performance, which they will study in the second trimester, and ultimately create effective solutions for improving that performance.
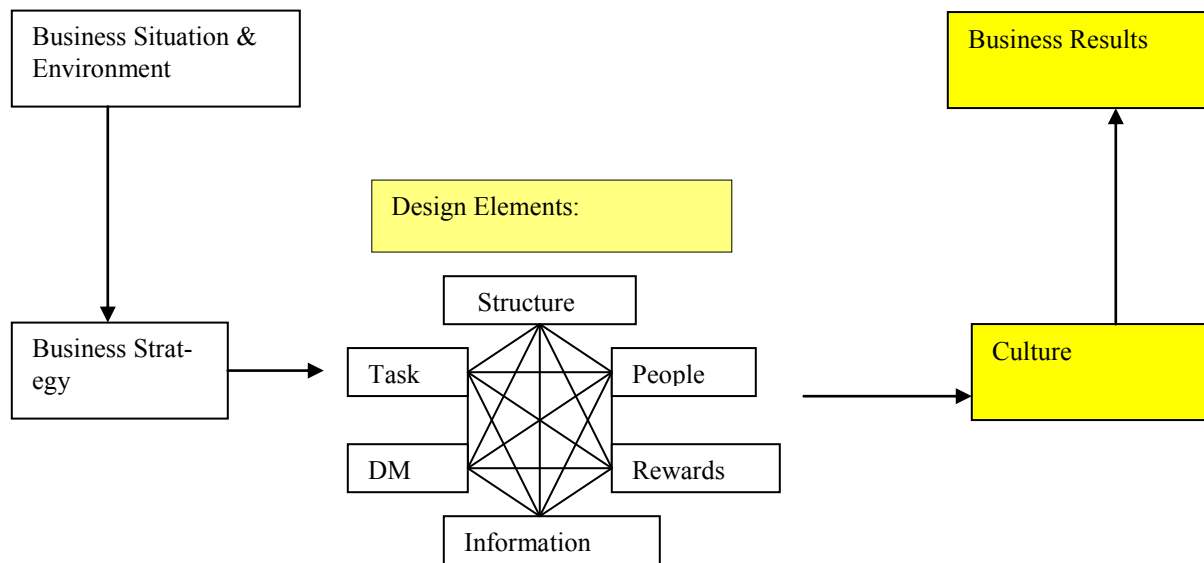

Figure 1. Hanna's Organizational Performance Model

Internal Business Perspective (The Second Trimester)

The second trimester focuses on internal business processes and outcomes. The Designing Decision Systems course provides executives with some statistical tools (e.g. mean, variance, charts, correlation, regression) for analyzing data. To make the course more learner-centered and customized, the analytical techniques are demonstrated using the students' own previously gathered ICF culture measures where possible, as well as other business data. The executives are thereby learning more about their organization while developing their analytical skills. As a result, they participate fully and enthusiastically, spontaneously generating relevant questions and insights. The assessment and analysis of culture gets them thinking about other hard to capture organizational characteristics they might wish to bring into their performance measurement system.

The Decision Systems course stresses that having appropriate business data to work with is as important as the process of analyzing those data. Therefore, the executives are introduced to the "balanced scorecard" framework for performance measurement (Kaplan & Norton, 1992) that promotes a broad, systems wide view of the organization to properly assess performance. It includes four categories of measures:

Financial Perspective

- How do we look to our shareholders?
- These are the most traditional performance measures and focus on profitability, growth, and shareholder value.
- Measures may include cash flow, quarterly sales growth, operating income by division, return on equity, or market share.

Internal Business Perspective

- What must we excel at?
- These measures focus on critical operations that influence processes, decisions, and actions occurring throughout the organization and influence customer satisfaction by improving cycle time, quality, employee skills, or productivity.

Customer Perspective

- How do our customers see us?
- These measures capture the customer's perspective on the organization. They tend to fall into four categories: time, quality, performance and service, and cost.

Innovation and Learning Perspective

- Do we continue to improve and create value?
- These measures focus on the ability to innovate, improve, and improve by such actions as introducing new products, improving operating efficiencies, creating more value for customers, penetrating new markets, or increasing revenues and margins.

Managers can think of the resulting scorecard of measures as the dials and indicators on a dashboard or in an airline cockpit. The "pilot" (manager) must be able to view multiple dials simultaneously while minimizing information overload. Kaplan and Norton argue that "the scorecard brings together, in a single management report, many of the seemingly disparate elements of a company's competitive agenda: becoming customer oriented, shortening response time, improving quality, emphasizing teamwork, reducing new product launch times, and managing for the long term. Second, the scorecard guards against suboptimization. By forcing senior managers to consider all the important operational measures, the balanced scorecard lets them see whether improvement in one area may have been achieved at the expense of the other."

Applying the Balanced Scorecard to Executives' Organizations

Given this framework, we ask the executives to investigate their own companies to see which measures, if any, the organization currently gathers in the respective scorecard areas. Part one of their assignment is to discuss what they found and indicate any significant gaps or areas for improvement in their organization's measurement system. The goal is to have them visualize an ideal measurement/decision support system for their organization. Students learn a great deal about their organization's performance from this activity. Some find very few measures at all and are able to make valuable suggestions to the organization. Others find the business is inundated with data that are collected but rarely used effectively. Others discover very thoughtful measurement systems and are able to share examples with classmates.

The second part of the project involves selecting from existing, readily available measures to create the most complete scorecard that is practical (though rarely ideal) in the time available. Students pull the relevant data into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Because this learning task is customized to the executive's business environment and industry, each person will be selecting from completely different sets of possible measures. Students

struggle with this task and extensive faculty interaction is helpful. Finally, students analyze their chosen data and arrive at overall evaluations of organizational strengths and weaknesses.

Systems Thinking: Integrating Measures of Culture and Performance

The next stage of the project is critical to integrating the curriculum and encouraging systems thinking. Executives summarize their organization along both the six cultural dimensions and the four performance perspectives. With the Hanna OP framework in mind, they are asked to discuss potential links they see between culture and performance.

One powerful teaching intervention is to combine all the students' data files and look at class-wide correlations between the ICF culture measures and the scorecard performance measures. This not only helps students internalize the concept of correlation, but leads to lively discussions about relationships between the six cultural dimensions, as well as between culture and performance. Regression analysis can be brought in to investigate which cultural factors help "explain" a particular performance outcome.

Example

In our class, one student observed that her company was very strong in terms of financial performance indicators, but appeared considerably weaker in terms of innovation and customer satisfaction output measures. She simultaneously observed that the organization's culture was oriented toward the present and past (rather than future), had little tolerance for ambiguity in its procedures, was geared more toward individualism than collectivism, and offered employees relatively little ability to influence decisions.

The linking of the culture and performance measurement content in the two courses/trimesters, along with a systems thinking approach, enabled her to make some important hypotheses. Financial measures are based on past performance, and the company's focus on the past and present was consistent with strong fiscal results. But she also felt that the uneasiness with ambiguity, combined with a focus that neglected the future, were likely sources of stifled innovation and did not bode well for future performance. Similarly, since employees worked within a culture that did not encourage teamwork or give much ability to influence decisions and procedures, employees had little incentive or ability to spontaneously address customer concerns or complaints. Therefore, her analysis not only identified areas of sub optimal business performance (innovation, customer satisfaction), but also began to suggest underlying causes within organizational culture (behaviors involving time, ambiguity and teamwork) and organizational design (decision making procedures, organizational structure) that could be addressed to improve those performance areas.

Outcomes and Implications

Our experience with this intertwining of traditionally separate behavioral and quantitative content suggests several valuable outcomes.

- ✓ Students, particularly executives, appreciate the behavioral content more when they see how it influences "bottom line" results.
- ✓ Students appreciate the quantitative content more when they experience its application to their own organizational data and can see how "softer" factors, like culture or innovation, can be folded into the analyses.
- ✓ The emphasis on data analysis encourages students to consider relationships between typically hard to grasp cultural dimensions.
- ✓ Students report greater flow and less disconnect between the behavioral and quantitative content in the program. They recognize that both contribute to the broader purposes of organizational assessment and change management.
- ✓ The systems view that relates organizational design, organizational culture, and performance outcomes encourages students to think in terms of cause and effect, rather than making more superficial observations of symptoms.

✓ Performing the culture and outcomes assessments on executives' own organizations is challenging for students and faculty alike, but the process is stimulating and feels nothing like an "academic exercise." Many executives forward their recommendations to their superiors or implement them themselves. 📖

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Notes