

Thinkers & Leaders

When business schools introduce MBAs to the competency-based assessment programs used in the corporate world, students quickly develop their leadership skills.

by Julie L. Scott

Mottoes for MBA programs frequently imply that schools are focused on creating leaders. My alma mater uses the tag line “Where thinkers become leaders”—which is wonderful and punchy, especially if it is true.

But since graduating from b-school and entering the working world, I have discovered that MBA programs face an inherent limitation in their goal to develop leaders. Most MBA programs are founded on quantitative rational analysis; they assume that their graduates will be able to motivate people by providing data to support logical arguments. Rarely do MBA students learn about their own strengths and weaknesses, let alone the strengths and weaknesses of other people. Even more rarely do they learn how to develop the skills they actually need to lead people.

As a consultant in organization and leadership development, I’ve learned that the first goal in leadership development is to *learn about people*—first oneself, then others. As a group, MBA students tend to be high-achieving go-getters. They also tend to be among the types of people least aware of how others perceive them. But these individuals can be turned into better leaders through self-assessments, 360-degree feedback systems, and individual development plans.

Assessment and competency-based development tools are used by corporations around the world to turn their employees into leaders. Because all of these tools help participants think about themselves and others in new and different ways, the earlier people encounter them, the better. I believe it would be relatively easy for any school to incorporate similar tools and assessment methods into its two-year MBA program, thus developing students who have the potential to really know how to lead.

Learning About Oneself

Any leadership development program has three parts: self-assessment, external assessment, and competency development. A program like the one I envision would begin as MBA students start their first year. They would begin their self-assessment stage by going through a development-focused Myers-Briggs Type Indicator analysis.

I recommend MBTI because it has the advantage of being built on decades of data collection, which offers interesting analyses and comparisons. MBTI poses the same set of questions to each person. When the results are analyzed, each learner is typed into one of 16 categories, each with distinct characteristics represented by a four-letter code. Typing is based on participants’ responses to four polar choices—extroversion or introversion (E or I), sensing or intuiting (S or N), thinking or feeling (T or F), judging or perceiving (J or P). The new Step II test provides more detail about each of the four choices, while offering less labeling and better insights into what individuals do well and not so well.



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What makes a very strong case for using MBTI in an MBA program is evidence that people who pursue MBAs tend to have very different personality profiles from the general population. Data from 1,925 MBA students in one study have been cross-tabulated with a large national sample, taken in 1997, of general MBTI type distribution. The frequency of MBAs who are categorized as “thinking” instead of “feeling” is almost twice the national average.

The emphasis on “thinking” continues to show up in MBAs as the categories are combined. Among MBAs, the preference for “thinking/judging” is double what is expected in the general population, and the “thinking/intuiting” combination is three times more frequent. Finally, the “intuiting/thinking/judging” combination makes up 14 percent of the MBA population, but only 3.9 percent of the general population.

Here is why this is important: MBAs who use the MBTI tool learn that they operate in a rational way, and they simultaneously learn that there are others who operate in a more emotional way. If they want to be leaders, they will need to understand and work with all of the people in the organization, no matter what preferences they bring to the table.

In addition, business leaders must recognize that while their logical, solution-oriented approaches may be helpful in some situations, at other times, different skill sets will be more valuable. They must capitalize on their employees’ unique skills and know when to compensate or add another perspective. They need to know when to go with their natural impulses, when to hold back, and when to let someone else step in. To do this well requires understanding individual preferences, and a tool like MBTI helps them develop that framework of understanding.

But it’s not enough for MBA students to understand the strengths and weaknesses of various personality types—they need to work toward their own self-improvement. Roger Pearman, a longtime MBTI guru, has collaborated with co-authors to produce a recent book called *You: Being More Effective In Your Type*, which has the sanction of Isabel Briggs

Myers herself. Not only does the book describe the different strengths of the 16 MBTI types, it stresses the areas where each type needs to improve and offers simple suggestions on how to do it.

For example, my preferences come up as ENTJ—which stands for extroverted, intuiting, thinking, and judging—a relatively common typing among MBAs. Most ENTJs need to be more conscious about expressing appreciation and caring to those around them. They especially need to show, in ways that are meaningful to others, that they are listening to what other people say. This skill set comes much more naturally for other types.

Students should start learning about development-focused MBTI at orientation, at the very beginning of their MBA

program. Then, students should be coached to continue developing their skills while working in diverse study group sessions and during other school experiences. The study group system has long been an intrinsic and valuable part of the full-time MBA curriculum, but a deeper understanding of human differences and intentional steps to improve interaction within groups would provide an even better training ground for the real world of work.

Learning from Others

External assessment is the second key part of leadership development. At the end of year one, students should be assessed by other people through a modified 360-degree feedback process. In

a corporate setting, 360-degree feedback refers to around-the-compass assessment from bosses, peers, and direct reports. For comparison, it also includes a self-assessment. Feedback like this is critical because research results repeatedly demonstrate that most people are accurate about how others perceive them only 50 percent of the time.

Because the school setting includes no bosses or direct reports, the 360-degree assessment needs to be modified for MBAs. It should still include confidential feedback from at least eight people who know the student from different situations. These might include fellow students, professors, friends, former co-workers, or former bosses, all of whom have known



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the student for between one and five years. For the 360-degree results to be credible, students must choose raters who are familiar with how they respond and function in life.

A key decision in the 360 process is choosing which competencies will be assessed. Competencies aren't about specific business skills like financial analysis or market research, which MBA schools already effectively cover. Instead, 360-degree assessments focus on measuring other characteristics that are related to success, such as behavioral skills, attributes, and attitudes.

These are critical. The authors of a September 2006 *Wall Street Journal* article asked 4,125 corporate recruiters about the top five attributes they look for when hiring MBAs. In order, the answers are communication and interpersonal skills; the ability to work well within a team; personal ethics and integrity; analytical and problem-solving skills; and a strong work ethic. All good research-based competency systems will assess abilities in these areas. And while life experiences help most people improve in these areas, b-schools can give students a head start—especially if a modified 360-degree assessment has helped identify skills that need work.

To integrate a 360 process into the two-year MBA program, schools might ask raters to complete their confidential and anonymous online assessments over the summer between years one and two. Such a task would involve some administrative support, but it could be accomplished fairly easily via e-mail. At the beginning of year two, students would receive their feedback reports, typically more than 100 pages of analysis with development recommendations and steps.

Ideally, the 360 reports are presented one-on-one in a facilitated session, but it's also possible to give feedback to groups of 15 to 20, which would be more realistic for an MBA setting. It's essential that feedback facilitation be handled by someone who will command the respect of graduate students and assist them in understanding their reports. Strong-willed MBA types may have more to learn about themselves than they realize. If presented incorrectly, the results of a 360-degree evaluation can be potentially devastating, rather than developmental.

The goal of the process is to motivate students to improve the skills that they need as they enter the messy world of work, where IQ is not a strong predictor of success. Many corporate managers experiencing 360 for the first time have said with feeling: "If I had gone through this sooner, I wouldn't have made so many mistakes."

Some MBA programs already offer 360-degree assessments, but schools need to be very deliberate about the instrument construction and content they choose. I rec-

ommend one of the many research-based systems available instead of homegrown systems. Not only are research-based systems accurate and reliable, they provide quality content and offer comparative data. In addition, students are likely to encounter such systems on the job, and it's helpful if they become acquainted with these tools while they're still in school.

Developing Leadership Skills


After students learn about their highest—and lowest—scoring competencies, they can create a development plan. Development of any competency is possible if learners are motivated and very specific how-to steps are provided.

For example, students who are interested in improving their listening skills might want to focus on how to avoid giving chilling nonverbal cues and to refrain from interrupting others. Those wanting to make decisions more quickly might want to determine what reasons lie behind their tardiness—perfectionism, procrastination, disorganization, and so on—and take concrete steps to change.

Students who know their strengths and weaknesses can also benefit by comparing them to corporate position profiles. Corporations and competency experts have created lists of the abilities essential for success in hundreds of different corporate positions. For example, the top competencies needed for a vice president of sales or finance are already well-known. Students interested in such positions could use their final year in school to develop the skills for that job as well as the right language to use in resumes and cover letters. Students who have developed those skills and who understand the language of competency-based assessment are also likely to do well in interviews with recruiters, who tend to use the same language and look for the same competencies.

Creating Leaders

If business schools truly want to develop leaders, they may want to implement some of the assessment and development techniques already widely used among corporations. They could implement these systems in three or four specific sessions during the two years of the typical program with some outside assistance and administrative support.

Thinkers indeed can become leaders. But to do so, they must learn more than the language and analytical tools of business. They must also learn about themselves, others, and the competencies needed to lead effectively. 

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