

Boardrooms in Wonderland

Board meetings can be as unpredictable as the Mad Hatter's tea party in *Alice in Wonderland*. So, to help executives better understand and manage the vagaries of boardroom behavior, an Australian school has created an exec ed course that engages participants in a scene straight out of Lewis Carroll's famous children's book.

Faculty at the University of New South Wales' Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM) in Sydney worked with Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) to write a play adaptation of the Mad Hatter's tea party. The play is the centerpiece of a one-and-a-half-day program, "Achieving Board Effectiveness: Influencing the Board," first offered in August 2009. The course's 15 participants play roles at a whimsical board meeting run by the capricious Mad Hatter himself.

The tea party serves as the perfect metaphor, explains Rosemary Howard, executive director of AGSM's executive programs. "It reflects just how crazy board meetings can be," she says. And, just like the tea party, she adds, a board comprises individuals each with his or her own idiosyncrasies and agenda. "To influence a board effectively, executives must learn how to influence each one of its members."

Students act out the play in a small theater. While onstage, they must think about the sound of their voices, their physical movements, and the personas they're projecting. "We want executives to understand that



The Australian Graduate School of Management worked with Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Art to develop role-playing exercises for executives based on the Mad Hatter's tea party from *Alice in Wonderland*, re-enacted here by NIDA staff.

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the board meeting is a kind of stage," Howard says. "They must decide how they want to act as leaders in that spotlight."

The day after their performance, students meet to analyze the experience and discuss the styles of leadership that emerged. They explore issues of board governance, the role of the board in the organization, their roles as leaders, and the value they add to boardroom discussions. The course also includes a visit from a CEO who explains how he or she manages board dynamics.

In 2010, AGSM once again will partner with NIDA to create several other courses with dramatic components. In addition to "Influencing the Board," it will offer "Making Change Happen," "Achieving Board Effectiveness: Performing as a Board," and "The Strategic Marketer: Leader, Innovator, and Growth Driver."

AGSM is placing such a strong emphasis on performance because it's a powerful way for students to develop communication, presentation, and engagement skills—all critical to great leadership, says Howard.

Recently, Howard met an executive who had participated in the first offering of "Influencing the Board." He described a particularly difficult real-life board meeting he had endured after taking the course. "He said that the Mad Hatter's tea party actually prepared him to deal with the craziness of his own board meeting," she says. "We couldn't ask for more than that." ■

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