

Your Turn

by Lew Hofmann



I Putting Students Behind the Wheel

At a recent meeting of the management faculty at our business school, the topic of discussion was “learning outcomes for management majors.” What did we want them to know, we asked ourselves, and what did we want them to be able to do when they graduated with an undergraduate degree?

When you put nine people around a table, regardless of purpose, the discussion rarely stays on track. One individual mentioned her work with inner-city kids. She told us she had put considerable effort into developing techniques for teaching them how to swim without using a pool. She had them lie on the floor and practice the various swimming strokes. After the laughter subsided, I made the comment, “*Isn’t that how we teach management?*”

Think of the definitions of management. One popular definition is “*Getting things done through people.*” And yet, in many management education programs, students often don’t get the chance to manage people. Furthermore, they’re unlikely to do so in their first jobs out of college. But teaching management outside a business setting is just like teaching swimming without putting students in the water.

It’s also a bit like teaching driver’s education without putting students in a car. How can they learn to drive an organization, if they’ve never even been behind the wheel? Perhaps that explains why most of us who have worked for a living can recall a lot more examples of bad management than good management. No one is teaching people

how to manage—they’re only teaching them how to go through the motions of management.

Just as driver’s education programs teach potential drivers the rules, procedures, and do’s and don’ts about driving, we teach students the skills that managers should know, like organizational behavior, strategy, and even leadership. Essentially, we prepare them to take the written test. But driver’s education students still can’t

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drive until their teachers put them in cars to learn how those skills work in traffic. If those textbook drivers got into a car without any driving experience or accompanying instruction, they would most likely crash.

We do the equivalent with our management students. We expect them to be able to manage as soon as they are put behind the supervisory wheel. But once those students enter the workforce, they are unlikely to be transformed into effective managers simply by observing the process of watching others manage, just as nondrivers don’t learn much about driving from watching others drive.

So, you ask, how do we teach students to manage? The simple answer is, “*We can’t.*” But what we can do is spend more time teaching students what to expect and how to navigate successfully in a management environment. Medical schools require each student to do a residency as a

part of the general curriculum. Schools of elementary and secondary education require that each student complete a practicum. As a result, when their stu-

dents graduate and go into their professions, they have already experienced what it’s like to be a doctor or teacher. They are familiar with what to expect and how to react to different situation-specific scenarios.

I can’t help but relate this metaphor to my own educational process. I got an undergraduate degree, an MBA, and then my doctorate with the goal of becoming a professor. It’s true, I’ve been teaching for almost a quarter of a century, but I’ve yet to meet another professor who took a course in how to be a professor. We learned by doing, not by watching from the sidelines.

If business schools don’t ensure that all students, management students in particular, get this type of exposure through a required practicum of some form or fashion before they graduate, then we have failed them. We often talk about internships, but only if internships are a required and integrated part of the curriculum can we ensure that every student benefits from the experience.

Many educators entertain the assumption, a false one, that with enough knowledge about how to do something, one can do it. Well, folks, if you believe that works, read everything you can about flying and then go jump off a tall building.

It’s time to rethink how we prepare people to manage. It’s time to really put our students behind the wheel. ■

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