

Creating Your Own “Internal University”

Getting into the “University Business” makes great sense for boards, managers and club members.

Creating your own internal university for your management team, supervisors and upwardly mobile line employees makes great business sense. Managers will become more knowledgeable because they’ll have to research what they’re teaching; the staff’s intellectual capital will be released, honed and amplified; the employee team will see that routine stuff isn’t routine and will get fired up about the business; the turnover rate will slow to a drip; the members will get a more competent and unified staff; and the board will be able to bask in the reflected glory of the university system. The costs are minimal and the benefits are huge. Talk about a return on investment!

Remember those upper division classes in college, seven people in the room, a dynamic professor asking questions, reading quotes, provoking, probing, exploring, forcing one’s participation? Remember how close you all felt by the end of the semester? Remember how you’d crash through walls to attend each of those seminars? Remember the buzz you got and how that buzz followed you around campus that day? Remember how devoted you became to the professor and your classmates? Nothing mysterious about the response. And there’s nothing mysterious about the response you can expect from the same type of classroom setting--- manager as professor, employees as students, club as the campus---when you begin your own internal university. Classroom sessions will build team through the shared experience. The interchange of ideas and the flow of substantive conversations will weld a disparate group of employees together in a unique and altogether special way.

But education can be a sink hole for dollars and time with questionable qualitative or quantitative returns. Sending people elsewhere for their educational moment is a production. So why do “the education thing” internally when every vendor in the world offers to do it for you? Isn’t the outsourcing of education a corporate trend these days? Bringing outside educators in to teach is a one shot deal and even more expensive than shipping your troops out to one of those heavily advertised educational sessions available from a national purveyor of education in one of your local hotels. Dollars fly out the door, most of the day is wasted in the commute and the issues discussed are usually abstractions that don’t seem to relate to the here and now of their own lives and their own club. There’s no follow-up on-the-job to see that the academic lessons are applied to the job. Where’s the positive behavioral change in that? There’s value in their going, but the cost-benefit equation is less benefit than cost.

You know they need the education, the exposure, the reflective opportunities. But there needs to be a better way. My suggestion is that you bring the educational encounter to your people and create your own internal university.

Nuts and Bolts.....

Convinced that it’s worth giving this university thing a go? Want to try a cheap and dirty prototype? Need an outline to guide your efforts? Ponder the following and get your program under way.

Who should be teaching at this internal university? The most important professor will always be the general manager. This character has (or should have!) the most experience, the best education, the most enthusiasm, the most anecdotes and the most to gain from the teaching effort. Next comes the senior managers who are (again, they should be!) knowing, experienced and enthused. They fill in for the big cheese when he or she is gone and provide specialized insights into their area of expertise. Given the seminar format, it might also be wise to have supervisors lead a session or two of their own, thereby encouraging their reflections, their articulation skills and their status within the management pyramid. And when the senior professor / manager / supervisor is gone, the seminars should go forward in the same spirit of but with a different personality from the lead professor / manager. Remember that these are seminars not lectures. Substitute teachers need question skills far more than lecture skills and shouldn’t be intimidated by leading a two hour session. After all, the students will be speaking most of the time.

Why does teaching help the teacher? Teaching is a learning tool for teachers. People who teach get deeply into what they're teaching. No one wants to look like a fool when they're standing in front of twenty people for two hours. Ask any professor ---who is also a career practitioner---why they teach and they'll tell you that they teach to make sense of the experiences they've had that week, month or year. The act of reflection in preparation for the class and the actual lecture provided during class provide insights into and enthusiasm for the business they're in. There's something profound to be found in every day details and teaching forces one to explore and to amplify those issues. And teachers have symbolic power, demonstrating that education is a core value for them, the administration, the board and the club membership. Every manager should see teaching as an opportunity, not a burden.

Who should attend each session? The classes should be available to any employee in the organization with all senior management, supervisors, targeted line employees and interns strongly encouraged to attend. Although the warm academic embrace will be offered to everyone, it's realistic to suppose that most who will attend will do so because they've already shown an interest in and an aptitude for learning, personal growth, management and leadership.

When should the classroom sessions be held? The day and time will be dictated by club patterns. When will the largest number of managers be present in the club and what time will they be least encumbered by operational concerns? Keep in mind that the key issue is not the day and time but the **regularity** of that day and time. Having the discipline to stick to the schedule is the issue as is the ability of all to fit the meetings on their personal calendar's each week.

Where should the meetings be held? "Sacred spaces" sanctify the acts occurring within those spaces. Every club has "sacred spaces" that lend weight to any gathering. How about the general manager's office, the most sacred of spaces for the employee team? What about the Board Room, the most sacred of spaces for the member community? Which ever site is chosen, the teacher and / or teachers should be comfortable there and appreciative of the value given their teaching effort by the space itself.

What books should be used? Every manager should have their own list of "great books" addressing the human condition (**On Human Nature** by Edward O. Wilson is a good example), the universal organizational condition (Machiavelli's **The Prince** would definitely fit the bill) and the club condition (Norm Spitzig's **Perspectives on Club**

Management is a good example as is my own---free via the internet!!!---**Reflections on the Club Experience**). On top of that, each manager should use periodicals, both within and outside of the club business (Surprise---**The Harvard Business Review** is a remarkably good club publication) as ongoing reference documents.

What type of outline should be followed for each class? My teaching experience has lead me to believe that people with common anecdotal experiences---such as your management team---benefit most from the Socratic Method. The teacher leads with a scenario and then engages each student with questions, the answers from which immediately lead to the next question. Students are engaged because they're active contributors to and participants in the experience. The teacher uses real world anecdotes that are current, local and personal for the attendees to dramatize the points being made, to lead the questions being asked and to affirm and amplify what has been said. The meeting has a direction---the theme identified at the start of the class---but the process is more organic than linear, less a structured lecture than a focused reflective opportunity.

What type of assignments should be given? Assignments don't exist. There are no reading assignments or writing assignments. Tests are taboo. Accept that people are busy, that they have varying degrees of academic experience or interest and that they're in the real world because they prefer it to the traditional classroom adventure. Besides, assignments and tests can intimidate people, create a world of intellectual have's and have not's and thereby destroy the very sense of team you hoped to create. Limit your reading assignments to the quotes you've placed in your weekly agenda and focus your testing impulse on the questions you generate during the classroom experience.

Should you require participation? Participation should be strictly voluntary. If the employee is bored by the format or the topics, they needn't come. If they're busy, they needn't come. This puts a premium on the teacher's ability to engage the students / employees, to provide meaningful insights and to inspire the reflective part of each person's personality. Before you can educate you must entertain. Entertainment engages people, heightens their awareness, gets them enthused. Great leaders tend to tell great stories--- Franklin Roosevelt is a brilliant example---and the professor / manager needs to develop the art form to succeed. People will want to attend if for nothing more than the "buzz" they get by doing so.

Should the semester's seminar topics be identified and scheduled in advance? The participants need to be involved in the experience and in creating the anecdotes which are current, local and personal enough to engage them as a team. People who help create a class or meeting tend to own the process and the outcomes. That being a truism, don't outline an entire semester's sessions in advance. It's unlikely that you'll predict the big issues that will surface in two weeks, much less those which will become scintillating two months in the future. So avoid the impulse to plan everything now for sessions six months away. Nobody cares what's been scheduled in the distant future. What they care about is whether the ideas being discussed ***right now*** have any relevance to them and their team. Make up the sessions as you go along each week but keep a file on seminar ideas that might resonate with the staff once the proper anecdote / situation comes along in the future.

What "Great Books" Should be Used in the Classroom? Each manager should, during the course of their career, generate a reading list he or she believes to be fundamental to their understanding of people, the relationships between people and the characteristics of organizations. There are no "absolutes" beyond the pursuit of a liberal---meaning wide ranging and comprehensive--- perspective. My own list is intended to provoke discussion, stimulate reflection and provide quotes for the illumination of contemporary issues. These books have been a comfort to me throughout my career and are offered here as a starting point for your own internal university.

1. ***Hoosiers***: a movie, but nonetheless the finest "anecdotal management experience" available on any book / movie shelf.
2. **Burmese Days**-----George Orwell.
3. **The Prince**-----Machiavelli
4. **On Human Nature**----Edward O. Wilson
5. **Consilience**---- Edward O. Wilson
6. **The Theory of the Leisure Class**--- Thorsten Veblen
7. **Civilization and It's Discontents**---Freud
8. **Tuesdays with Morrie**---Mitch Albon
9. **Contrarian's Guide to Leadership**---Sample
10. **Essays**--- Montaigne
11. **The Old Testament**---***Note: Should be read as a revelation of the human condition and not as a religious text. This might be difficult for some and this one should therefore be considered "optional." However, I've found most of the great themes in people and organizations discussed at great length in the Old Testament. The key is how one is "mentored" through its reading.***

What type of agenda should be created for each class session? First off, each class agenda should be typed and distributed, preferably a day or two in advance. Each session should have a theme drawing all quotes, anecdotes and questions together for a common purpose. ***Qualities of a Great Supervisor*** might be an excellent case in point. The teacher should start each classroom session with a quote from the “great books” listed above. The professor should read the quote and discuss the idea in the abstract---what does this mean in general? Then discuss it in the particular---how does this quote relate to people we know and situations we’ve encountered? Then the agenda should include three or four questions specifically focused on the topic at hand---Who is a great supervisor at this club? How did this person get to be a supervisor? What behaviors does this supervisor demonstrate? How does one *continue* to be a great supervisor once you’ve become a great supervisor? These questions force the attendees to answer the questions themselves. The agenda should end with a simple question---what have we learned today? The notes from this section become the debrief section for later distribution. This is not a lecture outline but rather a discussion outline that requires continual probing by the professor / manager to engage each of the participants.

How long should each session be? Although participant attention spans are directly related to the quality of the instructor and the “engagement factor” of the agenda, it’s reasonable to assume that a one-hour session is about right until the professor / manager and their student / employees get the hang of it. Thereafter, my recommendation is that the sessions be scheduled for one-and-a-half hours of classroom time and thirty minutes of unstructured, after the class “yack time” amongst employee / students. People should anticipate blocking out two hours on their calendars, one day a week.

Should the ideas be recorded and distributed? The classroom discussion will be wide ranging if the teacher / manager does their job effectively. That means that there’ll be lots of good ideas floating around that deserve to be documented, distributed and used for reflective opportunities sometime in the future. All of which suggests that the teacher / manager should take notes and write them up once the session is over. For example, an agenda entitled ***Behaviors of a Great Supervisor*** should be followed up with a document entitled ***Behaviors of a Great Supervisor...The Debrief***. Writing the debrief will be a reflective act amplifying what was said, which makes it another learning opportunity for the professor and an ongoing entertaining reference for the student / employee.

Just Do It.....

Managers and boards are catalysts who help individuals and institutions realize their potential. Boards should encourage their managers and the managers should encourage their boards to start their own internal university. Once the “big guns” buy into the idea, the rest is detail---establish a time, a location, the attendees, the reading list, the format, the themes, the anecdotes and the professors for the coming semester. Then, with a minimum of fanfare or expense, start the program rolling and enjoy the stimulation and upside surprises that come from running your own internal university.