

Covid-19 and Survival of MBA, EMBA, and Leadership Short Courses

With Covid-19 massively disrupting business, government, and nonprofit organizations, one industry fighting for legitimacy, relevance, and survival is today's college and university on-campus educational programs. In addition, those businesses that provide leader development short programs may be in jeopardy as well.

As a professor of behavioral science, a former faculty and chairman of the Department of Strategic Leadership at the prestigious Eisenhower School in Washington, DC, and former CEO of a training and development firm, I've been contemplating what the impact could be for traditional business schools' MBA and Executive MBA (EMBA) programs, as well as short leadership courses as a result of Covid-19. As such, I thought I'd share some thoughts and ideas to stimulate your thinking and reflection.

All education and training providers are struggling to meet financial and student enrollment goals. This certainly applies to business schools and training institutions. Most colleges and universities have invested large sums of money to migrate their on-campus programs to online classes. This creates an uncertain future for all colleges and universities.

This is especially true for MBA and EMBA programs. Most of the prestigious business schools, e.g., Harvard, Wharton, INSEAD, and Stanford, rely on a diverse student body that includes many international students. Travel restrictions certainly curtailed foreign student participation. Furthermore, with social distancing requirements, many classrooms are restricted in the number of on-campus seats available for students. Without a known reliable and available vaccine and with some medical experts warning of a potential second wave of the virus in the fall, MBA and EMBA programs may continue to struggle for the foreseeable future. Complicating the business school's goals is that many students are losing interest in the typical MBA programs.

With the above in mind, I offer the following seven (7) factors to stimulate ideas and reflection regarding the future of MBA and EMBA programs, and leader development short courses.

1. **MBA/EMBA Programs.** Over the years there have been many articles and books criticizing MBA programs as no longer useful and relevant. For example, see Duff

McDonald's 2017 book, *The Golden Passport: Harvard Business School, the Limits of Capitalism, and the Moral Failure of the MBA Elite*. Regarding his book, Amazon states, "An HBS degree is, as the New York Times proclaimed in 1978, 'the golden passport to life in the upper class.'"

Consequently, the majority of those paying six-figure enrollment fees at elite business schools expect their attendance guarantees prestige and respect—and a healthy income. So, what do these programs look like?

For example, Harvard's two-year MBA program provides a major emphasis on finance and accounting. Other modules include marketing, leadership and organization behavior (building relationships, performance management, and creating a vision and motivating people to reach it) as well as corporate accountability (legal, ethical and economic responsibilities and the influence of personal values), technology and operations management, and how to manage one's career. The final portion of the two-year program is a semester-long course where students are paired with a company with a product or service challenge for students to address.

Harvard also offers an accelerated alternative to an EMBA program—the Program for Leadership Development. Harvard states that this program "is specifically designed to fast-track your career by addressing your leadership objectives, business challenges, and professional development goals."

The program features two on-campus and two distance-learning modules. The 7 July 2020 to 29 January 2021 is already filled (cost \$52,000). The first module (12 weeks online) focuses on basic skill building in business, finance, accounting, identify and work on a customized opportunity case facing the student's organization, and a 360-degree assessment. The second module (on campus two weeks) explores strategy, marketing, operations, finance, accounting, and corporate accountability. The third module (14 weeks online) focuses on completed self-directed work, exercises, and economics. Module four (on campus 2 weeks) focuses on change management, innovation, and the student's presentation on his or her customized case. There is an optional module five

(two weeks on campus) that focuses on self-awareness, emotional intelligence, negotiation, and decision making.

While the above is a simplistic overview, it illustrates the basic MBA and EMBA programs students are getting today. While I concur that the topics are valid, I question their overall usefulness for a student succeeding as a leader in the “new normal.”

- While leadership is included in both programs, the MBA program is more generalized and more about management rather than leadership. While some argue management and leadership are the same, I strongly disagree. You can manage people, things, resources, time, etc., but you can only lead people. It is people who get the job done and if led well will go the extra mile for you. Management is knowing the “business of business.” Both are important and an MBA program will help make you competent at managing, but not leading.
- Both programs provide overviews of various leadership concepts and approaches. But it is learning how to be a strategic and systems thinker that will be critical to a leader’s success. The strength of a leader’s cognitive and social capacities will determine success or failure. Furthermore, there should be a focus on how to build an agile mindset and organization, essential for success in the “new normal.”
- Missing from both programs is what organizations need. Today, CEO’s and government agencies are looking for people who are knowledgeable and have the necessary mindset and skill sets for digital transformation, machine learning, artificial intelligence, and other important technologies. Not offered in these MBA or EMBA programs.

Considering the above, students should consider tailored master’s programs that prepare them for the jobs and leadership positions they are in or will apply for.

2. **Online MBA/EMBA Programs.** Some students will rejoice to take online MBA programs. They can stay closer to home. This is especially true for international students where they can stay in their country and still obtain a good MBA degree. However, others are asking to have their programs deferred or want their money returned (which most business schools will refuse to offer).

- 3. Elite MBA/EMBA with Online Programs.** I've stressed to students at National Defense University to focus on developing relationships with other students. At the Eisenhower School we have students from major corporations, foreign military senior leaders, US Government senior leaders, and military senior leaders. Building strong trustworthy relationships will be invaluable as they climb their respective organizational ladders. They can lean on each other for candid discussion about proposed strategies, actions, and decisions. The bonding that takes place during the in-depth learning at Eisenhower will assist their decision making in the future. I advise they consider developing their own kitchen cabinet (advisory team) where they can help one another learn and grow during the school year, while forging a strong relationship that can continue to advise one another as they assume senior-level positions.

This is why students are willing to pay the high price to attend an elite business school. They are there to meet with fellow high-performing students from around the globe and who are involved in a variety of industries, military, or government. It is through "face time" on campus that makes these MBA and EMBA programs important for students and for those organizations that sponsor them. Viewing Harvard's accelerated EMBA program, would it be worthwhile to spend \$52,000 of your organization's critical resources to send one of your leaders to a MBA program that is primarily online? A program that restricts interfacing with faculty, students, business leaders, guest speakers, as well as building a professional network?

- 4. Corporate/Government Programs.** With the need for upskilling and reskilling both leaders and workforce, many organizations have developed or have contracted out highly respected education and training programs. Therefore, there is a diminished demand to send organizational leaders to MBA or EMBA programs that are more generic and not tailored to the organization's current and future needs.
- 5. Internships.** One of the key losses due to Covid-19 is the availability for MBA students to seek internships. Most businesses and government organizations have shutdown their internship programs.

6. **Millennials and Short-Term Programs.** Millennials and many GenXer's live in a microwave society. They are used to having information and solutions at their fingertips. Moreover, they often have short attention spans. As they and GenZer's move up their organization's ladders, they will demand streaming short learning courses on an ongoing basis. Business schools will need to think how they will meet this demand.

National University (a private school in California) provides their MBA students either online or on-campus courses in a one-month format or three courses in a three-month format. This allows students to take a course and have the flexibility to pass for a couple months and then reenter to complete their MBA. This program is highly successful for military leaders who often must go on deployments during their MBA instruction. Business schools should consider a similar approach. It allows adult learners to balance work, family, military duties, and everything in between.

7. **Leader Development Programs.** While many MBA and EMBA programs will suggest one of their courses is leader development. Such is not the case. Their programs are leader orientation only. Furthermore, there are many short "leader development" programs offered by leading business schools as well as providers such as the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). Again, I argue that such short programs while useful and insightful, they rarely develop leaders.

Short courses are useful to gain insights to a variety of leadership and management concepts. But for many leaders, the primary benefits include taking a break from the daily grind with time to recharge their batteries, reflection, and networking with other leaders. Thus, providing such courses online reduces the value of these courses.

Regarding behavioral change, it easy to say you should be authentic, empathetic, humble, and sensitive to others. However, leaders sent to short courses must realize that to change their behavior they must be able to reinforce the desired behavior on the job. Without this effort their learning activity may be only a flash in the pan. Or, to put in another way, it may be like heating up a hot cinder, and then dumping it into cold water when they return to their work environment. This often occurs if participants fail to invite peers and subordinates to support them in achieving the desired change. For educational

and training institutions to provide meaningful leader development, they must build organizational reinforcement strategies and efforts into their programs to be successful.

Bottomline, paying six-figures to attend elite MBA or EMBA programs that are primarily online are not worth the money. Unfortunately, if the programs remain primarily online for another year or so, MBA and EMBA programs may never recover.