

# **TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY AND FOR-PROFIT CONSULTING COMPANY PARTNER TO CREATE LEADERSHIP MASTERS DEGREE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Ken Blanchard Companies (KBC) and the University of San Diego (USD) jointly created a Master of Science in Executive Leadership (MSEL) by combining the special talents and resources of both entities. USD provided academic structure, classroom facilities, and curriculum expertise, while KBC provided unique insight and experience in effective executive teaching methods in a cohort environment. The article details the process of how faculty and administration designed and implemented the organization and operation of the successful masters program.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A casual golf foursome in 1998 led to a meeting between Ken Blanchard – author of *The One Minute Manager* and founder of the Ken Blanchard Companies (KBC) – and Curtis Cook, the new dean at University of San Diego (USD) School of Business Administration. The encounter ultimately led to the formation of the Masters of Science in Executive Leadership (MSEL) degree program as a partnership between KBC and USD.

Ken Blanchard had long been involved in his alma mater, Cornell University, as a member emeritus of the board of trustees and visiting lecturer. He desired to leave an imprint on higher education. Prior to coming to USD, Curtis Cook had been the Associate Dean at CSU San Jose for 17 years. During that time, he was instrumental in starting new master's degree programs in Silicon Valley to meet the needs of Apple Computers and other high tech companies. With a common vision, Blanchard and Cook teamed to create the novel leadership program as a combination of academic rigor and executive education teaching style.

## **ISSUES**

Blanchard and Cook made a commitment to bring together both organizations to explore a partnership to create a leadership degree program. They believed that KBC staff, most of whom were doctorally qualified, could bring a wealth of consulting and practical experience to the program and USD faculty could bring value and rigor in functional business areas (accounting, finance, marketing, etc). Further, USD is AACSB-accredited. This added credibility to the program.

An early meeting between USD faculty and KBC staff identified the following issues:

What should be included in the curriculum?

How much emphasis should be on traditional business functions?

How should the program be differentiated from MBA programs?

- What is the target audience—especially in the first cohort?
- How can two faculties create a coherent experience of the students?
- How should ownership and control of the program be structured?
- What is the financial plan?
- How should financing be integrated into the budgets of a non-profit university and a for-profit consulting company?
- How should marketing reach a nontraditional audience for a new program?
- How can a non-traditional degree program be integrated with a traditional university administration?
- Will the program grow, prosper, and add prestige to both organizations?

## **CURRICULUM**

A committee of three KBC members and three USD members was charged with developing a curriculum. This group met monthly sketching out a curriculum while an overlapping executive committee simultaneously met to solve financial, marketing, and accreditation issues.

Early conclusions of the curriculum committee were:

- The curriculum should be cohort-based. All students would enter and graduate together. There would be no course waivers. Students could only begin with their cohort in July.
- Courses should maintain the traditional three-unit values.
- Each course should meet Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for two weekends except for the first and sixth courses that were to meet for a full week in the summer.
- There should be two faculty members jointly teaching each course. Both should be in the classroom to keep the pace, variety, and energy high.

The MSEL should require 11 courses (33 units) with approximately 15 units devoted to various aspects of leadership and 15 devoted to core business functions and one three-unit integrative course at the end.

## **TARGET STUDENT MARKET**

A student profile was developed to make sure the program targeted a different audience than the traditional MBA. The intended profile is:

- Upward mobile executives in midcareer with
  - o Direct responsibility for leading subordinates (consultants need not apply).
  - o Eight or more years of professional experience.
  - o Degree from accredited school—any major.
  - o A record of leadership.

Based on an alumni survey, the actual profile after four cohorts (n=57) was:

- Upward mobile executives in midcareer with
  - o Seventy-nine percent had direct responsibility for subordinates. Twenty one percent were in staff positions, between jobs, etc.
  - o An average of 12 years in management positions before enrolling.
  - o Thirty-five percent reported they were sponsored by their employer, 35% self-financed, and 26% a combination of the two.
  - o All had a record of leadership and a desire to improve it.

## **FACULTY INTEGRATION**

The KBC culture of consulting is driven by a concern for billable engagements and frequent travel. The University, however, is driven by teaching schedules, research demands, and less travel. Links were necessary to overcome these barriers so that the separation would not destroy efforts to form a coherent educational program. The MSEL program solved this issue in several ways.

Student evaluations are reviewed by the executive board immediately after each class.

Before recruiting the first cohort, a full-time Program Director was hired as the primary recruiter and focal point for communications between the Executive Board, faculty, and students. The Program Director communicates with these groups on a daily basis. The Director schedules classes, organizes meetings, and facilitates communications between USD and KBC. The Director is responsible for ensuring that issues are not overlooked and that miscommunications are resolved as soon as possible. The Director is the first point of contact for faculty, administration, and students.

Currently, the Executive Board has governance responsibility for the program. The Program Director organizes the meetings and presents all important issues to the Executive Board for discussion and action including curriculum issues, instructor problems, student problems, financial reports, policy changes, and marketing efforts. The executive board reviews and has final approval on admissions. A student representative from each of the two in-progress cohorts regularly attends these meetings to provide student input into Executive Board decisions.

The MSEL faculty meets twice a year for six hours to discuss educational issues. These meetings are facilitated to align goals, identify objectives, specify common threads, and foster communication between USD instructors and KBC instructors.

KBC sponsors seminars for USD professors to learn about KBC approaches to learning and leadership.

## **PROGRAM OWNERSHIP**

Single ownership of the program by USD, the non-profit entity, eliminated unnecessary complexity and preserved the rights and responsibilities of both parties. KBC faculty are treated as adjunct faculty and a sliding scale for royalties was devised. No disputes have arisen.

## **PROGRAM SUCCESS**

The MSEL program has generated a cash-flow surplus every year. There have been three directors since inception. Director turnover slowed the growth of the program somewhat but the current director has regained the momentum. At the request of MSEL alumni, a continuing leadership education called the Executive Leadership Forum (ELF) was developed. These half-day topical sessions attracts 30 to 70 participants – some alum and some potential new applicants – and extend the influence of the MSEL program.