

ENHANCING THE LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF MBA STUDENTS: THE DEVELOPMENT AND EFFECTIVENESS OF A LEADERSHIP FELLOWS PROGRAM

Phillip Hunsaker, School of Business Administration, University of San Diego, 5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110, 619-260-4870, philmail@sandiego.edu
Johanna Hunsaker, School of Business Administration, University of San Diego, 5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110, 619-260-4858, hunsaker@sandiego.edu
Alexander Wilhelm, School of Business Administration, University of San Diego, 5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110, 858-413-6784, awilhelm@sandiego.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the impact of the Leadership Fellows Program in the Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of San Diego. Based on an analysis of data collected over the life of the program, the effectiveness of this innovative education program in meeting its leadership and team development objectives is described. After reviewing similar programs at other universities, as well as suggestions from participants and faculty members, strategic options for continuing and expanding the program are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The University of San Diego (USD) Graduate School of Business Administration (GSBA) initiated the MBA Leadership Fellows program during the 2011-2012 academic year. One purpose of the program is to provide second year MBA students the opportunity to develop their leadership skills in process observation and follower coaching and development. A second objective is to improve the satisfaction and effectiveness of first year MBA teams. The third objective is to develop first-year students as productive team members and leaders.

The program centers on the engagement between Leadership Fellows (LF) and first year MBA student learning teams working on core curriculum class projects. These interactions are referred to as “leadership labs.” The labs offer experiential development for the learning teams as well as the leadership fellows. The lab provides the opportunity for behavioral feedback, role experimentation as well as informal mentoring. The labs may be formal and scheduled as an integral part of a graduate class, or on an ad hoc basis to address a specific challenge unique to a learning team.

Labs provide second year MBA’s the opportunities to engage in the leadership activities of process consultation, behavior feedback, role analysis, and informal mentoring. All USD/MBA students participate in a minimum of three “Formal” Leadership Labs as part of their first semester, and many students take part in additional labs that support student leadership and team development before and after International Practicums, post-internship. “On-Call” Leadership Labs are available to assist Learning Teams that are facing challenges related to team dynamics.

LEADERSHIP FELLOWS PROGRAM

Knowing how to develop others is a crucial leadership competency. The Leadership Fellows Program plays an integral role in the leadership curriculum by bringing together a group of talented second year

MBA students to support the leadership and team development of the first-year cohort. This is an honorary elective program is open only to those students who have applied and been accepted into the Fellows Program. Leadership Fellows selection criteria are listed in Appendix 1.

Fellows develop the advanced leadership skills of leading teams and developing others through coaching and mentoring. Among the specific competencies developed are: 1) team process consultation (e.g. diagnosing group dynamics, teamwork facilitation, debriefing and coaching without undermining the leader); 2) individual coaching skills (e.g. effective inquiry, asking powerful questions, balancing support and challenge, providing effective feedback, holding others accountable, utilizing, valuing and connecting across personality differences and power differentials, and using oneself in service of another's development); 3) personal development skills (e.g. self-reflection and self-awareness, leveraging strengths, stretching outside one's comfort zone, and learning from experiences.)

Fellows are assigned to teams of first-year MBAs in Leadership Labs where they coach teams regarding their charters, structure, process, and individual effectiveness. There are two types of labs to develop student teamwork and leadership skills.

- In **formal labs**, all members are required to meet at one time to complete team development assignments, discuss the personal effectiveness of members, and develop plans to improve team dynamics. Formal labs typically take place during GSBA 501, 515, 516, and consulting practicums for MBA, EMBA, and IMBA students. Fellows observe and provide feedback to teams as they work to complete team projects. Formal labs are either “in class” or “take home” where Fellows and team members agree on mutually satisfactory times and locations to meet.
- **On Call Labs** are optional labs initiated by team members or instructors, where teams meet with Leadership Fellows for coaching regarding team and interpersonal problems, or how to deal with special challenges that have developed.
- In addition, Fellows provide **individual coaching** to first year students who request it.

At the beginning of the program, Fellows receive training in team building and leadership development from USD faculty members. During the school year, Fellows meet several times with USD faculty for additional skills training, planning and debriefing labs, and peer clinics to discuss specific strategies for working with first year students and explore areas for their own skill development. Readings on topics such as process consultation, team development, feedback, coaching, and counseling provide the conceptual base for fellows to apply when they coach and mentor first-year MBAs.

Evolution of the Leadership Fellows Program

The USD MBA Leadership Fellows Program has grown in scope and scale over the subsequent five semesters since its founding. Initially the leadership labs were conducted by a team of 4-5 Leadership Fellows with 2 to 3 labs offered on a voluntary basis, outside of scheduled class time. Beginning with the fall semester of 2013, two Leadership Labs were formally integrated within a required introductory course: GSBA 501, Ethical Leadership and Organizational Behavior, and a required International MBA course, GSBA 515, Leading Multicultural Teams and Organizations. In 2014, required labs in these courses expanded to three. Additional labs were conducted for second year MBA students. One was for students returning from summer internship experiences to examine and share leadership development lessons. Another was held in support of the GSBA 594, Advanced International Consulting Practicums held during the January Intersession. There are both pre and post practicum labs. The first was held before departure to address team formation, planning, and leadership challenges associated with these short duration, high intensity business projects. The second was held upon the teams' return, to debrief

the experience and summarize and share the lessons learned. By 2014 the labs involved 12 Leadership Fellows supporting 14 student learning teams per semester. Data regarding the conduct of leadership labs to date is presented in Figure 1.

Initiation

The development of a Leadership Fellows Program originated from the desire to enhance MBA students' leadership skills in coaching others, and facilitating effective team work. The program was launched with a meeting of second year MBA students invited by organizational behavior course instructors who assessed them as having an exceptional aptitude for team leadership and interest in developing coaching skills as peer mentors. In the first few meetings concerns were expressed about the direction and intent of the initiative. Proposals for Leadership Fellow roles varied. Ideas ranged from suggestions that the Leadership Fellows should coach MBA learning teams that "needed" them, to suggestions that the Leadership Fellows should evaluate all of the MBA learning team projects, to Leadership Fellows should conduct "real-world" consulting projects themselves in order to showcase the leadership effectiveness of USD MBA students. The initial cadre of Leadership Fellows did not embrace roles that appeared evaluation or demonstration focused.

The idea of being positioned as "expert" leaders among the peers nearly caused a collapse of the group. The Leadership Fellows revealed themselves to be responding to intrinsic motivators commonly associated with servant leadership and less from extrinsic motivators typically associated with MBA students (such as opportunities to differentiate themselves from their peers, enhance resumes, prove a greater individual worth when compared to peers etc.) USD MBA Leadership Fellows wanted to serve as mentors and coaches for their peers, but they wanted to do so to enhance the team and leadership development of their peers and themselves, not for status or recognition.

Transformation

The catalyst for redefinition of purpose came from an emerging student leader of the fellows group, and a newly appointed faculty Director of the Leadership Fellows Program. Based on their experiences in the GSBA 535 course, Interpersonal and Group Dynamics, the student and professor proposed that the Fellows conduct Leadership Labs for first year MBA teams focused on enhancing interpersonal, team, and leadership skills through the facilitation of constructive performance feedback. The Leadership Fellows unanimously expressed support of the plan, and the Leadership Labs were initiated.

Moving forward into semester two, the Leadership Fellows Program had a Director, a program model, and a cohort of motivated second year MBA student leaders. Three Leadership Labs were conducted with learning teams in the first year MBA course: GSBA 501 Ethical Leadership and Organizational Behavior. Labs focused on forming productive student teams through the development of team charters, analyzing team process and member roles midway through the semester, and assessing strengths and improvements in team and member process at the end of the semester. "On-call" labs were available at teams' requests if issues developed with team process of interpersonal relations. After gathering data on the effectiveness of this approach this has become the basic model for the on-going leadership labs at the university.

FORMAT OF LEADERSHIP LABS

All MBA students participate in at least three Leadership Labs during their first semester. The labs consist of three phases.

1. Process Observation. The initial phase of the Leadership Labs is relationship building. The “consultant” (Leadership Fellow) is introduced as an observer for the team’s initial project assignment, typically the development of a Team Charter. The Leadership Fellow observes the team and its dynamics during a project that the fellow has experienced him or herself as a first year student. This generates an initial measure of confidence for the fellow when providing feedback, and it establishes fellow’s credibility with the learning team as members realize that that the fellow understands their tasks, the process, and their challenges.

2. Team Performance/Role Analysis. The second phase of the Leadership Lab is a Role Analysis exercise. This phase is designed to turn the team’s focus away from the Leadership Fellow as a guide, and focus the participants on their learning team structure. The Leadership Fellow provides the team with a list of common roles found in task teams and asks participants to fill in the names of team members that most closely serve in the roles.

There are two parallel learning points during this exercise. The first is the identification of the teams’ existing roles. Team members usually question the Leadership Fellow about whether the team should exhibit all of the roles listed. This leads to the exploration of whether all necessary roles are being fulfilled, and which team members are contributing the most to the team process. The second point of learning is the indirect positive and negative feedback associated with members who were identified as being prominent in certain roles, or those not recognized as serving in roles.

3. Individual Performance Feedback. The final phase of the labs is designed to offer MBA students an opportunity to obtain individual performance feedback. The Leadership Fellow introduces the team to an exercise referred to as “The Note Card Drill.” This consists of each member writing one or more positive points of feedback, and one or more constructive points of feedback, for each teammate. The participants are cautioned to make points validated by observation of specific events. During these feedback sessions the Leadership Fellows provide examples of effective feedback and facilitate the sharing of specific events by participants. An honest self-narrative is the goal in this final phase. Fellows help participants avoid the trap of self-deception that comes from group pressure to represent each other in only positive ways. When this occurs, members avoid confronting each other about negative interpersonal behaviors, leaving participants with blind spots and missing opportunities for improving interpersonal competence [2].

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Participant feedback was collected after the completion of labs over the course of the second, third, and fourth semester. Two forms of data were collected: survey responses about the overall experience and written reactions about the value added in specific labs.

Survey Data

Over 400 participants completed open-ended surveys that asked them to share their assessments of positive and negative lab experiences, the Leadership Fellows impact on the quality of their projects and team process, the helpfulness of the Leadership Fellows' facilitation, and to recommendations for improvement of the Leadership Labs or Leadership Fellows Program. The responses were collected anonymously on note cards filled out after the completion of each of the 37 Leadership Labs. Figure 2 summarizes the survey data and indicates that the participants valued the Leadership Lab experience (68% positive feedback overall).

Participant Feedback Testimonials

A summary of participant feedback regarding the Leadership Fellows and the various types of Leadership Labs can be found in Appendix 2: As stated by the Leadership Fellow Coordinator, “These are just a few feedback samples. I have had numerous opportunities to catch up with our Fellows individually and their insight and commitment to the Learning Teams’ success is simply inspiring. They continue to do great work and I am very proud to be counted among them!”

Assessment Discussion

While the participant approval ratings for the Leadership Fellows and Leadership labs are very high, interpreting them as a measure of success should be done in context. It is possible that these ratings are more a confidence measure of participant buy-in, than a measure of effectiveness. Measuring the long-run effectiveness of this program should consider the impact of its graduates, both student learning team participants and Leadership Fellows, as leaders in organizations. Both the high level of participant buy-in and the high level of the all-volunteer Leadership Fellows commitment clearly validate the value of this type of experience at the university. What is still needed is a mechanism to measure the impact of the program on participants after graduation. There needs to be time to absorb the feedback of program participants as they move through career positions where these skills are relevant.

One approach to an objective measurement of long-term leadership development can be found in the work of Alice Black and Garee Earnest [1]. They suggest that leadership development program outcomes occur in three different ways: episodic, developmental, or transformational. Episodic is related to the actions of the participants, developmental refers to observable, across-time behaviors that are represented in steps taken by individuals, and transformative outcomes are fundamental long-term shifts in behavior or performance. This model has the potential for providing more meaningful long-term assessment of the Leadership Fellows program impact on leadership development. As the participants increase generationally, there may be opportunities to observe and measure impact, as well as to adjust program execution year-to-year to increase its effectiveness.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Going forward, with the limited data gathered to date, there appear to be essentially three options to consider. After describing these options, they will be assessed in light of the leadership mission at the University of San Diego, and similar programs at other universities.

Maintain and Refine

This option offers the least risk. The program is clearly earning high participant satisfaction ratings. Resource expenditure could be limited to simply addressing the expressed concerns of the participants that fall within a minor adjustment of schedules, content, or organization. This option would most likely lead to minor increases to an already high level of participant satisfaction.

Update and Adjust

This option would involve a substantial change to the program content and structure. There are a wide variety of content changes that could be considered. The engagement model, second year MBA students mentoring first year MBA students, should be considered as the right base from which to update. This relationship is fundamentally driving the value statements found in participant feedback. The content

and lab structure are mentioned frequently enough in the constructive comments to merit consideration should this option be selected.

Radical Re-Organization

This relies on applying the developmental capital earned by existing MBA students whom have participated in the leadership lab experience create a new leadership development model. With 90% of existing students expressing value in the Leadership Lab experience, there could be sufficient interest in providing an expanded developmental experience, designed for their benefit.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Successful so Far

The Leadership Fellows Program clearly facilitates the leadership developmental interests of the USD MBA students. It constantly earns high participant satisfaction ratings (over 67% positive). Consequently, we conclude that the program is successful and should be continued. Following are ideas about where we should go from here.

Building Student Accountability in Lab Participation

Next semester the Leadership Fellows supporting the first year MBA Organizational Behavior classes will participate in a performance feedback loop that increases the accountability measures for participants and fellows. These were developed based on the feedback of two generations of previous Leadership Fellows. One purpose is to build some “soft accountability” into the fellows program by having fellows provide feedback about the contributions of members of the teams they are coaching, and this feedback can influence course grades.

Leadership Fellow Assessment and Feedback

A Leadership Fellow rating form (Appendix 2) has been developed to give team members a structured way of providing feedback, and rating the effectiveness of their fellows at the end of the semester. The results give the program coordinators feedback for each specific fellow and allow them to determine what additional skill training and lab formats are necessary to improve the program.

Expansion

In order to increase the opportunity for this area of learning, the Leadership Lab concept will be expanding into the undergraduate business student realm with the addition of Leadership Labs for project teams in marketing research and organizational behavior classes. This move is based on the demand from undergraduate professors for help with facilitating undergraduate task teams working on class projects.

REFERENCES, FIGURES, AND APPENDICES

(Available upon request)