
UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE
SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

THE LIFE AFTER AN MBA

LECTURE BY JOHANN COETZEE

Every year, during the orientation week of the first year medical students at the University of Pretoria, I have the privilege of meeting and addressing these debutants.

On this occasion, I encounter an assembly of probably the highest *IQ per square meter* anywhere in the world. These are highly gifted, talented and aspirational individuals. They have been scrutinised, assessed and selected to study Medicine and Supplementary Health Services, so that they may one day render such professional services to the peoples of South Africa.

Their education, at this level, will include very specific philosophical, scientific and dexterity components within the various disciplines, so as to qualify them to practice independently.

The one fundamental dimension they will not learn, and which is the essence of their profession and their craft, is that of **life sustaining engagement**. Of this, they will learn nothing specifically, but hopefully acquire much fundamentally. If they do not discover their altruism and even their philanthropic inclination, then they can at best be mechanistic practitioners processing patients. This analogy has relevance to this gathering today.

Assembled in this auditorium today, is the prevailing ethic of the **master of business administration: M.B.A.** It still remains that preferred management and leadership qualification which announces a unique achievement motive within such students and which still stimulates organisations to invest in this special way in their executive debutants. Their protracted education and training will focus on the business imperatives and all the concomitant mentalities and competencies, influencing efficiency and efficacy in such a manner that it would meet the return on expectations. This is a business school's charge and the requisite mentality of its students.

We are all deployed into organisational cultures, prescriptive budgets and clearly defined key performance areas. We tease out human talent, diffuse it into the corporate objective and then unify collaborative endeavour so that symbiosis and synergy will optimise all capacities. We are good at this!

Because of our acquired professional attractiveness, the organisational ethic embraces us with fervour and promise. When we are young and impressionable, we tend to (slavishly) step into this embrace and render our capacity and potential unconditionally available as we answer that corporate call. The shareholder salutes such corporate citizenship, notably when the declared dividend is pleasing and the investment risk reduced, as a consequence of our responsible operational management thereof. For this we are materially handsomely rewarded and promoted.

MBA studies are as scintillating as they are daunting. They introduce new perspectives on conventional thoughts, challenge stoic ideas and even pre-dispositions, and confront conventions, all within the academic *laboratory* of dynamic debate and discovery. This is where we have our enquiring minds charged by alternative thinking, and vigorous interactive discourse on perspectives, viabilities and even experimentation as we seek to make a difference at enterprise level. It is here where we meet the sages of industry, the scientists with their original thinking and the peers with their peculiar experiences as an admixture of stimulation for personal discovery.

The common aspiration is one of doing conventional things unconventionally better with the benefit of MBA exposure and to be recognised and rewarded with growth and promotion.

The one dimension in this aftermath, which is not adequately recognised nor influenced, is that of **quality of life** in the universal sense. Whilst we learn everything about the business, management and leadership processes, we are not adequately equipped for self-management, personal wellness and a balanced integrated lifestyle. Sadly, this we learn by loss and default and sadly more, by injury.

Given the nature of my work, as an Organisation Psychologist, I am not only engaged in human optimisation, but indeed also the counter-productive organisational culture which impedes such performance. I am fascinated by organisational unwellness, which tarnishes the potential to perform and succeed and

even the invisible prevailing organisational toxicity, which pervades processes as it does minds and behaviours. It is that prevailing invisible killer, which does not evolve from within the organisation as an entity necessarily, since it is the consequence of human attitudes and conduct. After all, organisations **cannot** behave: individuals behave and this converts into culture and climate.

It is this *death*, which cannot be ignored in this tantalising equation of life after the MBA. So often graduates internalise and optimise this remarkable qualification and the opportunity to implement such knowledge and skill only to neglect self-preservation in general and the maintenance of a preferred quality of life specifically. It is as if the MBA tends to become a *phantom instruction* to sanction neglect, and pandering to that corporate call as if it existed at all. Strangely enough, I have never encountered any employer who insists that an executive should deliberately collapse his relationships, sanction a lifestyle conducive for heart attacks or even not take leave or time-out. Again, it is this phantom within, that regulates the tolerance of the unacceptable and the mandating of the agreeable, which ultimately, and compoundedly, detracts from the preferred lifestyle.

In order to understand this addiction to self-mutilation, I have studied this strange phenomenon for decades. It all culminated in a thesis **at this school** four years ago. My fundamental philosophical and normative hypothesis was, and remains, "*why would astute masters of business, management and leadership deny themselves the life they actually want!*" The only way in which one gets authentic evidence is to ask those who have *messed up* and who have consciously and even deliberately trashed, not only their own lives, but indeed that of others. In all fairness and honesty, I also had to engage some auto-ethnographic introspection and integrity, and therefore admit here and now, that I feature as much in this evidence as any other victim who volunteered such information.

The causal factors are listed here. It patently does not make for good reading; but it does make for sad surveillance. This is the vulnerable MBA at work who, in this condition, does not necessarily only impress with sustainable contribution, but indeed remarkable survival resolution. It is amazing how individuals, crippled by a corrupt corporate culture, survive and even prosper only to *hit-the-wall* at some

stage where the resilience and fortitude have been exhausted and the consequential collapse spectacular.

This sombre picture is sadly pertinent and even increasing. By denying the intrinsic mortality seemingly lingering within all talented people, is a further lie. By acknowledging it, and in particular the causal criteria, one is recognising its existence, but also signal a warning to leaders and *leading* alike.

You are challenged to work through this list with unprecedented candour and introspective self-assessment and then argue the case for Work Life Integration.

WORK LIFE INTEGRATION UNWELLNESS INVENTORY

CONDITION	CAUSE	CONSEQUENCE
EXCESSIVE AMBITION AND ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVE		
ACCUMULATION OF MATERIALISM		
CAREER ACCELERATION TOO MUCH, TOO FAST, TOO SOON		
EXHAUSTING COMPETITIVENESS		
NORMATIVE COLLAPSE. DISREGARDING THE CORNERSTONE FOR STABILITY		
INSTITUTIONAL DISINTEGRATION PARTNERSHIP, FAMILY PARENTAL ROLE		
ADDICTIONS SUCCESS, APPLAUSE, WEALTH, STATUS		

CONDITION	CAUSE	CONSEQUENCE
RELATIONAL FATIGUE ROUTINE, RITUAL, BOREDOM		
GREED / WEALTH INSATIABLE APPETITE FOR <i>MORE</i>		
EGO – IMAGE, STATUS, STATURE, POWER, POSITION, <i>LOOK</i>		
NEGLECT SINGULARITIES		
RSA DISENCHANTMENT WORRY ABOUT <i>CONDITIONS</i> AND FUTURE. FEARS		
TOLERANCE OF UNACCEPTABLE NUMB		
FUN DEPRIVATION PREDICTABLE AND PRESCRIPTIVE LIFESTYLE		
SENSORIAL POVERTY SECTIONAL LIVING		
SUCCESS /FAILURE – PARADOX LACK OF REAL DEFINITIONS		
MECHANISTIC LIVING RITUALISTIC, REPETITIVE, ROUTINE		
MAKE BELIEF: " <i>IT WILL GET BETTER</i> ". FALSE HOPE WITHOUT SERIOUS INTERVENTIONS		
COMMITMENT (CORPORATE CALL) SUBSERVIENCE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SLAVISHNESS • CONFORMISM • CITIZENSHIP (LOYALTY) 		

CONDITION	CAUSE	CONSEQUENCE
FAKED GRATIFICATION FALSE FULFILMENT		
COMPROMISED, LIVING, STYLE. DEPRIVATION		
GROWTH (<i>SHRINKAGE</i>). NOT HOLISTIC. PRE-DOMINANCE OF CAREER / JOB		
RATIONALISATION ("THAT'S THE WAY IT IS!")		
HOPEFUL / HOPELESS: MEANINGFULL / MEANINGLESS. DEFEAT! IMMUNITY AGAINST ALTERNATIVES / INDOCTRINATION		
ADDICTION / DEPENDENCE ON SUPPLEMENTARY <i>STUFF!</i>		
PAIN / PLEASURE (DICHOTOMY). <i>"IT PAYS"</i> SYNDROME		
REWARD / NEGLECT. POLARITY		
ALLIANCE /ALLEGIANCE / ALIGNMENT: FRATERNAL FOLLY		
THE WAITING GAME. ONLY A FEW YEARS MORE		
POSTMONEMENT(S) PENSION / RETIREMENT, JOY		
CAREER COWARDICE : CAN'T SAY NO. CAN'T SAY YES		

But, the percentage of converts is progressively increasing. This is the population of executives who seriously, and uncompromisingly, acknowledge the imperative of self-maintenance and who have particularly discovered the full meaning of life and the sectional portion and status of work therein. As this list will reveal, these are converts who recognise the power of corporate conscription and the inherent dangers of ignoring them. They are actually the corporate heroes who disallow the encroachment of untoward culture and call, and who refuse to jeopardise their personal preferences. Significantly, these are people who become philosophical about life universal and not only professional. They respect the virtue that personal philosophy is one's one science of wisdom, and then they sanction such wisdom to regulate choice.

Even more significantly, this 17 % of converts do not become less successful or attract ridicule like *corporate nerds*. They are actually the pioneers of a new and authentic corporate ethic which states the true case for life after the MBA and even the resurrection of personal and professional gratification previously reduced and even lost.

Every MBA Programme should contain a full module on this subject. Any graduate ill equipped in this realm is not fully rounded to engage in all the vicissitudes of executive life. More over, any business school who excludes this imperative must assume moral culpability where the fullness of life is tarnished.

WORK LIFE INTEGRATION SUCCESS PROFILE

- Experienced (serious) Disappointment(s).
- Encountered Loss.
- Suffered Adversity.
- Arrived at (counter-productive) **Enough**. Defining Abundance.
- Discovered attractiveness of alternatives.
- Philosophical about LIFE and Living.
- Challenged Work Life Integration successfully.
- Rationalised ambition. (Achievement Motive).
- Finalised the difference between meaningful and meaningless.
- Sanctioned critical compromises. (Honesty!)
- Realistic lifestyle adjustments.
- Confronted routine, ritual and replicative living.
- No further postponement of joy.
- No irrational impulsive decisions, eg. Resign, sell house, re-locate.
- Normalisation of relationships. Sense of Family.
- Realistic calculation of material needs. (Wealthy)
- Interventions NOW. Action!
- **Shocks** experienced : Political, financial, Eco.
 - Adjusted future perspectives. (Concerns).
- Personal Comprehensive Health and Fitness management.
- Values Clarification. Normative Clarity.
- Legislation against negativity. Significance of Positive People.
- Respect for relapse. (Occupational Addiction).
- Comprehensive Mandatory Periodic Inspection(MPI).
- Wondering and wishing converted into Energy.
- Serious Self Management.
 - Engagement of Partner. (Joint integrative Venture).
- Celebrating victory, success and positive effect.