

WHAT MAKES YOU SUCCESSFUL?

INTERVIEWS WITH 11 HIGHLY EFFECTIVE EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROFESSORS

A UNICON Research Report

Elizabeth Weldon, PhD

OVERVIEW

I interviewed 11 successful executive education teachers working in schools in South America, Mexico, Europe and North America. I asked each one to tell me what makes them successful; how they developed their executive education skills; and what can be done to help other faculty build their executive teaching skills.

These interviews provide valuable information about a) the characteristics of successful executive teachers; b) teaching tools and techniques used by successful teachers; and c) how these successful faculty developed their skills. This information can be used to design development programs to help other faculty build their own executive education skills.

WHAT MAKES YOU SUCCESSFUL? INTERVIEWS WITH 11 SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROFESSORS

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This research is part of a UNICON research project designed to help executive education faculty build their executive teaching skills.

To address this issue, I interviewed 11 successful executive education teachers working at schools in South America, Mexico, Europe and North America. All of the interviewees have PhDs. Six had experience working fulltime outside academia before becoming professors, and most of the others had some consulting experience as academics. The interviewees were identified as successful executive education teachers by the Directors of Executive Education at their schools.

I asked each interviewee these three questions:

- a. Looking back over your career, can you identify events that had a significant impact on the way you design and deliver executive education? What were those events, and what did you learn?
- b. In your own view, what makes you successful as an executive education professor?
- c. In your own view, what can be done to help other professors develop the skills they need to be successful in executive education? What advice would you give them?

I used their responses to answer this research question:

- Research Question: What can we do to help our faculty develop their executive education skills?

In Part 1 of this report, I summarize the answers to each of the three interview questions.

In Part 2, I summarize what we have learned from these interviews and how it can be used to help other faculty develop their executive education skills.

PART 1. SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW RESPONSES.

Interview Question #1. Looking back over your career, can you identify events that had a significant impact on the way you design and deliver executive education? What were those events, and what did you learn?

I identified six key themes in the responses to this question: 1) work experience outside academia; 2) learning from others; 3) starting small; 4) participating in program design; 5) working with a coach; and 6) working in an environment where executive education is an important part of the school's mission.

Work experience in the business world. Five of the six professors who had worked fulltime in the corporate world, or as a consultant, said that this experience had a big impact on their ability to teach executives. Having worked in the business world, they know how managers think, they know how to communicate with managers, and they know what managers want from an executive education program. In addition, business experience provides anecdotes, a rich experiential database and an appreciation of the practical challenges of getting things done in companies.

Learning from others. Eight of the eleven interviewees indicated that learning from others had a big impact on their development. These respondents learned by watching other faculty teach, co-teaching, and/or finding a mentor.

For example, one interviewee watched expert teachers when he enrolled in an executive education program as a participant. He treated the experience as a teaching buffet where each professor was an item he could sample. He found this experience more helpful than a formal training program for professors at Harvard.

Another interviewee told me that he learned by watching a role model. He watched his role model listen to managers talk about their work and the challenges they face. At the end, his role model would link the presentations to research-based frameworks. This experience taught him to identify central issues and use research-based frameworks to structure and address those issues.

Another interviewee learned from an assigned mentor. Before teaching a case himself, he would review his mentor's teaching plan and then watch his mentor teach it. Using this method, he learned how to develop learning objectives, choose a case, develop a teaching plan and manage the classroom.

Two respondents said that they had learned by co-teaching with an accomplished teacher.

Starting small and starting early. Two respondents felt that teaching executive education early in their careers and starting with small teaching assignments were important developmental experiences for them. Starting small made the learning process manageable, and starting early helped them build confidence in their ability to succeed.

Getting involved in program design. Three respondents said that getting involved in custom program design helped them become better executive education teachers. This experience helped in three ways: 1) they understood the importance of knowing the client company; 2) they understand the importance of linking classroom sessions to program objectives and to earlier sessions; and 3) they understand that classroom sessions must work with other activities, such as action learning projects, to create a valuable learning experience.

Working with a coach. One respondent said that working with a coach helped him learn how to design successful executive education sessions. His coach asked him questions to help him address key issues of session design. For example “What do you want participants to say about your session? How do you want them to feel?” The coach also taught him how to use the half-hour before class to prepare mentally for the classroom. His coach was a successful executive education teacher, in addition to being a professional coach.

Working in an environment that values executive education. Finally, two interviewees said that working at a school that values executive education was important to their success. At these schools, executive education was an important part of the school’s mission and being involved in executive education was a valuable and important part of building a career at that school.

Interview Question #2. In your own view, what makes you successful as an executive education professor?

Three themes emerged: 1) focusing on the participants; 2) respect for executives’ knowledge and experience; and 3) specific tips and guidelines for effective teaching.

Focusing on the participants. Focusing on the participants took several forms.

- Several respondents said that participants should own the experience, because it is their program. Faculty must understand what the participants want and how they think. They must offer what they need by tailoring the material and activities to suit the audience.
- Another made it clear that the focus is on the participants' needs rather than any content she might want to cover. As she said, "I teach people, I don't teach stuff." She likes to help people move from where they are to where they want to be. She likes to see the light bulbs go on.
- Another focused on the participants' desire to learn how to do things better. For this reason, he encourages participants to go back and challenge the system. He encourages them to figure out how they can change things rather than explain to him why things will never change. Sometimes he asks participants to sign a contract describing what they will do when they get back to work, with a signing ceremony in front of the class.
- Another respondent said that he took time to work with an industry expert to rethink his topic and how to teach it. This helped him understand his topic from the participant's point of view.

Respect for executives knowledge and experience. Three of the respondents indicated that respect for executives and interest in what they have to say are important elements of their success. As one respondent said: "I look around the room and realize that together these people have 1000 years of executive experience". He is interested in the ideas they have to share. When his opinions differ from the theirs, he respects that: "Their ideas might be different from mine, but theirs are guaranteed to be more relevant." When an executive's opinion is inconsistent with research results, he says "Let's talk about that". In his opinion, the faculty member is not the purveyor of truth. The faculty member is a smart person facilitating smarter people.

Session design. All the respondents mentioned specific details about their approach to teaching that help them succeed. I list them here.

- Several respondents mentioned the importance of giving real and practical examples during class and linking ideas, principles, concepts and theories to practical problems.

- One said that he takes 5 minutes to present a model and then uses the rest of the hour to discuss examples of how the model can be applied.
- Another suggested that co-teaching can be used to pair faculty fluent with theoretical models with faculty focused on more practical aspects.
- Several mentioned the importance of grounding the session in research. They use research based frameworks to structure the issues and the discussion.
- Several said that a genuine interest in their areas of expertise is a key element of their success. They are enthusiastic about the topics they teach, and they enjoy talking about them.
- Several mentioned the importance of facilitation skills -- knowing how to facilitate a group discussion, how to draw people out and how to balance their input with the participants'.
- One respondent told me that he designs differently for different audiences. In his view, success in open enrollment programs depends more on formal presentation skills, but for custom programs he lets people speak more. In addition, the more senior the people are, the more he lets them talk. He also believes that senior people are keen to hear what the faculty think, and they will test faculty and use that to provoke a discussion. He also uses different approaches for different kinds of programs. For example, a workshop is halfway between teaching and consulting. The purpose is to help people reflect on their strategy. To be successful you must know the company, which requires a lot of preparation. In addition you must be flexible to rethink and redesign based on what has happened. When designing and delivering study tour programs, he is a facilitator rather than a teacher.

Other sources of success:

- Focusing on a few main points, at most 4 or 5, and showing only a few slides.
- Using a variety of different learning methods, including short lectures (30 to 40 minutes) to clarify and formalize the learning and simulations.
- Providing evidence from your own country if possible.
- Designing sessions that are problem-driven.

- Adding a bit of salt; being provocative and encouraging people to discuss conflicting views.
- Using humor and making the classroom fun.
- Preparing by researching the company and the industry.
- Being flexible, embracing uncertainty, adjusting to fit the situation as it unfolds.
- Telling interesting stories and telling them well.
- Co-teaching in custom programs and workshops so that your partner can provide feedback and help you adjust your plan and react to the group. As an observer, your co-teacher can also provide another perspective on the classroom dynamics.
- Teaching cases, because even the most experienced people can learn from cases.
- Having a clear sense of his professional mission (or as he said, “knowing your gig”).
- Focusing on process. For this faculty member, executive education is more about process than about content. His guidelines are: co-creation of learning, more ideas rather than fewer, more conversations rather than fewer, more participants talking rather than me, prototyping, experimenting, pulling out ideas rather than trying to push them across.
- Willingness to deal with ambiguity, experiment, and cede control, but staying on the edge, so it doesn't go wrong.
- Listening, listening.

Interview Question #3. In your own view, what can be done to help other professors develop the skills they need to be successful in executive education? What advice would you give them?

The respondents' advice was based on their own developmental experiences and their beliefs about how successful executive education is delivered. This is the advice they gave.

- Get some experience with executives. Learn what executives care about and how they talk about it. Go to conferences or do other things to find out what managers care about.
- Respect the participants' experience. Be sure to create the opportunity to learn from the participants in your class.
- Focus on the participants and their learning needs. Know your audience, put your teaching in their context. Focus on the participants' issues and problems.
- Understand that being a good MBA teacher doesn't make you a good executive education teacher. As one respondent said, MBAs are happy to talk about abstract concepts. But executives want concrete ideas. They want to know how they will use this when they get back to work. They want to know how to apply theories and models and frameworks.
- Learn from others. Watch good professors. Find a mentor and shadow him or her. Sit in and help with exercises.
- Find a mentor, watch others. But, be yourself, use your own style.
- Teach practical topics, but ground your sessions in research.
- Start small (e.g. a one-hour session on your research).
- Prepare: know your client, industry and competitors.
- Don't spout theory, but help participants use theory and frameworks to analyze a problem.
- Don't assume you're right, only that you have another point of view. You can say, "How about a different perspective"?
- Use simulations to reduce resistance to change. Telling people that things need to change doesn't work. A simulation will help participants realize what needs to be done.
- Don't let people say "I can't", or "They won't let me". Instead ask them to focus on "How could I?". Ask them to think about why someone would say "No"? Help them focus on the organizational challenges of getting things done.

- Some percentage of the people don't want to be there and there is nothing you can do to make them happy. Don't compromise the experience for others to make those people happy.
- Be willing to adjust and adapt.
- Practice.
- Recognize that academic expertise is not enough. Recognize that pedagogy is as important or even more important than concepts and content. Recognize that knowledge delivery is as important as knowledge creation.
- Be willing to be something of a performer.
- Use practical examples.
- Avoid falling into a routine.
- Keep your knowledge fresh and up-to-date.
- Know your gig: figure out what you want to accomplish with your own professional expertise.
- Look at evaluations from previous modules and/or previous years.
- Recognize that different types of programs require different skills. Open enrollment requires presentation skills, custom is more about facilitation, provoking a discussion.
- Let more of the learning come from the participants.
- Be provocative to energize discussions.
- Invite people to watch you teach, ask for feedback.
- For open-enrollment, polish your presentation skills. Get very good at teaching a specific content. Learn how to make effective presentations and communicate assertively.
- Learn the program director role – how to open with a bang, close the program, etc. Learn to manage a program, not just deliver silver bullets.

PART 2. WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

These interviews provide valuable information about what makes an executive education professor successful and what we might do to help other faculty develop their executive education skills.

First, we identified characteristics of faculty who are most likely to succeed in executive teaching. These faculty members are:

- genuinely interested in their areas of expertise,
- enthusiastic about the topics they teach,
- interested in the practical challenges that managers face,
- interested in the practical challenges of getting things done in companies,
- comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty,
- flexible, with the ability to adjust and adapt
- good listeners, and
- early in their academic careers.

In addition, they respect executives, and they often have experience outside of academia, although this experience is not necessary for success. When developing faculty for executive teaching, we might focus first on people with these attributes.

Second, we identified many specific tips and techniques for designing and delivering successful classroom sessions. We can share these tips and techniques with other faculty.

Third, we gained useful information about how successful executive education faculty can develop their skills. They can watch expert teachers, find mentors and role models, co-teach, work with a coach, get involved in program design, gain experience with executives by reading, consulting or going to conferences, shadow a mentor, look at evaluations, get feedback from their peers, start small and practice. We can encourage new faculty to use these developmental processes to develop their own skills.

CONCLUSION

We can use these findings to design development programs that help executive education faculty build their executive education skills. For an overview of what these programs might look like, see *Helping Faculty Develop Their Executive Education Skills*, a UNICON research report, 2012.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Weldon is an expert in leadership and management development with 20 years of experience teaching in MBA, EMBA, Executive Education and custom leadership development programs in North America, Europe and Asia. Most recently, Professor Weldon has served as Professor of Management Practice at the China Europe International Business School (CEIBS) in Shanghai, the H. Smith Richardson, Jr. Visiting Fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), and Professor of Leadership and Management at IMD International in Lausanne, Switzerland.