2002 Why every executive should go to prison

It was a baking hot day and the team from Danone was 80 miles from Hyderabad. They’d visited a school, a water purification plant and met some entrepreneurs and there was still three hours to go until the bus would come to take them back to base. A very senior female executive turned to the programme leader Dr Jules Goddard and said: “Jules, what on earth are we doing here? This is a complete waste of our time. We’re trying to run a business and you bring us to this place, talking to people who have nothing to teach us.”

For Goddard it was the kind of mini revolt that’s always possible in his experiential ‘Discovery Method’. But it also led to the best moment of real learning he’s ever known. “I knew that others had found all sorts of interesting people to talk to on the trip,” he says, “so I took a risk and decided that we should all meet for a chat when we got back to our hotel.”

Finding common ground

Sitting on the hotel lawn in the beautiful Indian evening, the contrasting experiences came flooding out. One person said that talking to some of the Indian children had transported them back to their childhood and reminded them of their memories and dreams. And Goddard remembers the wonderful feeling as the group connected with each other and formed a bond. It was a revelatory experience that demonstrated why Danone had backed this kind of high-level management development programme, designed to go beyond the latest management techniques. The hot and cross senior female executive became a convert and Goddard subsequently brought her back onto other courses to talk about her own learning experience.

Danone started the award-winning management programme after an internal survey showed the company’s top executives were feeling a lack of personal development. CEO Franck Riboud wanted a groundbreaking initiative that encouraged really bold thinking. His view was that because Danone was smaller than competitors like Nestlé, Unilever and Coca-Cola, its only option was to be more creative and courageous in everything it did.

Danone asked six leading business schools to pitch and it chose London Business School because it had top academic expertise but was also able to do things outside the traditional academic way of learning. Nearly 200 of Danone’s top executives have taken part since the first Leading Edge programme in 2005, which was run especially for the company’s executive board, including Riboud … who was impressed.

Inspiring great ideas

“It’s true purpose is not to arrange extraordinary encounters,” says Riboud, “but to provide an opportunity for people to open their minds, listen without judging, share experiences, experience amazement and be filled with a burning desire to learn and innovate.”

On his programme, Riboud remembers visiting a school in London for autistic children which triggered a realisation about goal setting: “Management manuals tell you to set objectives that are challenging yet attainable, to keep people from losing hope and giving up,” he says. “What a mistake! I watched a teacher become ecstatic when one of his pupils managed to move a pen a few inches for the first time. The teacher was nowhere near curing this child, as reaching this ultimate objective on his own would have been inconceivable, but he still had all the motivation in the world to do his part.”

Riboud was inspired and he went on to launch Danone’s Dream project, which aims to give as many people as possible access to healthy food. In 2007 Danone sold its biscuit division and acquired Numico, a Dutch company specialising in baby and medical nutrition.

A prison, a monastery and a favela

Other participants in Danone’s Leading Edge programme have been similarly inspired. In a 2013 Danone-LBS survey of Leading Edge alumni, 100 per cent said it caused them to make lasting changes to their leadership style and enabled them to be more effective at work. Some 64 alumni have been promoted, four of them to the executive board. And the programme won the 2013 EFMD Excellence in Practice award for executive development.

No two programmes are ever the same. They’ve been run in nine cities in five continents. More than 100 visits have been set up including a high-security prison near Boston, a monastery in Amsterdam, an experimental school in a favela in Rio de Janeiro and a political think-tank in Istanbul

“With learning you never really know which ideas change minds in particular ways,” says Goddard. “But we’ve found that senior managers are unlikely to be short of ideas or lacking in knowledge and skills. They’re more likely to need a new source of inspiration, a new angle on business, a re-discovery of a purpose worth serving – as well as peers with whom to share the ideas.”

Managers ask to be educated

The Discovery Method is a long way from the early days of executive education. Goddard remembers companies like BP, GSK, BAe and HSBC coming to the School
in the early 1980s because their middle managers wanted to acquire the language of business schools. The managers would spend five days with five different teachers on topics like marketing, finance, interpersonal skills and future trends and challenges. And they’d look at case studies.

“There must have been an upward pressure from the young MBAs arriving in these companies,” says Goddard. “It was a time when writers like Tom Peters, Michael Porter and Peter Drucker were in the air. And there was a growing belief that management required formal education.”

But by the late 1990s executive education needs had changed. Case studies were less popular and Goddard felt dissatisfied with the didactic way of teaching executives. Time to leave the classroom

A big project with the global financial services company Prudential threw up an opportunity to do something new. The School had been designing a programme in London for Prudential’s top executives. But Mark Tucker, who was the company’s head in Asia at the time, said he didn’t want to send his people to London and chose San Francisco instead.

So rather than recreate a classroom in San Francisco, London Business School decided to set up visits for the executives to different places in groups of four or five. They would visit and ask questions and see what came out of it in the following debrief. The executives went to Cisco, Hewlett Packard, the physics department of Stanford University which inspired Silicon Valley, and the Sierra Club environmental protection enterprise. They also visited pioneering schools in disadvantaged areas, the Museum of Modern Art and Habitat for Humanity, which builds houses for the poor.

New ways of discovering

While the executives loved their interactions with the more socially-minded enterprises, they said they learned little from visiting businesses. So Goddard dumped the corporate visits, and in 2002 he branded the approach the Discovery Method. The School worked with around 200 Prudential executives over eight years and the programme helped bring people together and build networks within the company.

The Discovery Method has played a part in training programmes for other organisations including BG, the Environment Agency, JTI and Rio Tinto. It’s also an element of the School’s work with Roche, which revolves around ‘experiments’ in different, self-contained parts of the company to challenge people to think in different ways.

Proteus Programme

In 2002, Professor of Organisational Behaviour Nigel Nicholson harnessed experiential learning techniques to pioneer a radically different kind of open enrolment programme for executive education. The result was the unique Proteus Programme, whose guiding vision was that today’s leaders thirst for insights and experiences from worlds beyond the business school domain, integrated into a business-relevant personal development framework.

With a cap of 25, mid to late career business leaders and top professionals are taken on a seven-day ‘journey’ through landscapes showing states of the world and how they are transformed by discovery, innovation and leadership. Nicholson says the programme “mixes biography with traversing intellectual boundaries in order to challenge the outer and inner lives of leaders, around a series of creative encounters”.

Guided by topic experts, these encounters include a visit to London Zoo to consider our place as primates in the natural order; experiences around the past, present and future transformation of the social economy of the metropolis; dialogue with business-oriented bioscientists in Cambridge; experiential workshops in visual and theatrical arts; and meetings with young students in a deprived area of London to exchange perspectives on the meaning and experience of leadership.

Participants have included business leaders, a Middle-Eastern crown prince, the CEOs of major public bodies, and top professionals from many walks of life, for whom the week is a unique chance to refresh and renew personal and professional goals. Participants are handpicked for what they might contribute as much as how they might benefit, says Nicholson, “so that everyone can arrive with a sense of purpose and leave with a belief in possibilities. Nowhere else takes people on a journey like this.”

Dr Jules Goddard is a Fellow of London Business School. From 1978 to 1983 he was an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the School before joining City University as Gresham Professor of Commerce. Since the early 1990s he’s designed, directed and delivered executive education programmes for a wide variety of corporate clients for the Centre for Management Development at London Business School.

Nigel Nicholson is Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School and joined in 1990.

© 2014 London Business School