

EDUCATING CONSULTING CHANGE AGENTS FOR ECONOMIES IN TRANSITION: A TASK FOR EDUCATORS OR CONSULTANTS?

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ABSTRACT

An educational program is described in this paper that was designed and delivered for consultants variously charged with rejuvenating clients' businesses in Poland. An original approach is reported that involved imaginative use of structural integration of content, teaching methods, and cognitive skills. The participants' high evaluation despite pursuing several consultant initiated training programs, posed the question why governmental funds and agencies within Poland were focusing on consulting firms for their educational needs and not academic institutions. Some explanation of this apparent inconsistency is provided together with some guidelines for redressing the apparent imbalance between programs run by academics versus consulting companies. The program was commissioned by ACDI/VOCA for the FIRMA2000 Project, funded by US-AID, and delivered by the International Office of Babson College.

A 2.5 weeks residential program was commissioned for 11 Polish consultants and entrepreneurs who had started their own consulting companies whose focus was on small and medium sized business consulting. Three main content foci were woven together: (1) marketing (market assessment, pricing, and general management for a consulting firm), (2) applied microeconomics, and (3) strategy. Specific skills were developed explicitly in consulting techniques, and communications effectiveness. The program included a performance assessment of each consultant's skills at the start and at the finish of the program. A mix of classroom instruction, case studies, and site visits comprised the program. Hands-on project work was required that utilized the program's knowledge and skills.

We worked as a faculty team under Lidija's Polutnik's direction to develop priorities and a rich set of integrated elements to maximize value added for the participants. An international faculty team was chosen to represent different teaching emphases as well as subject foci:

- Lidija Polutnik: Program Director: Slovenian economist and MBA teacher: Expert on economies in transition
- Abdul Ali: Marketing expert, from India, MBA teacher
- Jeff Ellis: Strategy and consulting techniques, from England, executive teacher
- C. J. McNair: Accounting, from USA, undergraduate, graduate and executive teacher
- Sydel Sokuvitz: Communications expert, from USA, undergraduate, graduate and executive teacher
- Kathleen Hagan, Director, and staff of Babson's Office for International Programs

The team was also mixed by teaching inclination (case versus experiential teaching method, mathematical versus hermeneutic content, and research versus teaching orientation), race, gender, and religion.

This paper reports on innovative uses of pedagogic theory in business education and the power of integrated program designs as used in this program. The value added to the participants was reported to be very large, despite concentrated periods of education by consulting companies. Why is the government funded educational task of developing consulting change agents for economies in transition falling almost exclusively to consulting companies? This paper attempts to explain this seemingly inappropriate use of funds and how academic institutions might gain a larger share of this business to the advantage of nearly all constituencies.

BACKGROUND

The Context in Poland

The education program was supported fundamentally by US-AID through the FIRMA2000 project within ACDI/VOCA of Poland. US-AID is the U.S. Agency for International Development that funds initiatives for economic development in nations in transition with the expectation that sound economic development reinforces democracy and a stable political economy. ACDI/VOCA is a consulting company in Poland with many governmental related contacts and FIRMA2000 was a project of ACDI/VOCA that is now completed. Additionally, the employers of the participants or the participants themselves, as entrepreneurs, contributed to the educational program.

US-AID funds were drying up because Poland had reached a GDP of \$1200 per capita: This was the last year of funding for training. Most of the participants had received extensive training under US-AID, mostly from the Polish offices of U.S. owned consulting organizations. Participants on the program both anticipated unusual and great things, but were nevertheless a little skeptical of anything new arising.

Designing and Delivering the Program

Babson College in Massachusetts, USA was the host for the residential executive program. The Office of International Programs at Babson College has worldwide connections, mostly arranging student internships overseas, elective courses overseas (China, Russia, Ireland, Switzerland, Argentina, and other countries), and helping students with immigration issues. Babson has a tradition of “teaching teachers” especially through the Price:Babson program for academics and entrepreneurs and our Blank Center for Entrepreneurship. Ranked in the top twenty across the world for Executive Education, it is known for custom designed education programs. Also, Babson is well known for integrated degree studies (graduate and undergraduate) and for adopting a worldwide focus in business education.

Participants

Participants in the program were all focused on building better business practice for their clients, but varied widely otherwise. Types of employing organizations included private consulting and research companies and entrepreneurs who had started their own

companies. Also employees were represented from Regional Development Agencies, a Trade Association, and a Government Agency in Poland. Personal background ranged widely in terms of age, educational level, and managerial status. All participants were capable of drawing benefit from classes. Without question, the group integrated and maximized value for each other.

THEORY AND PROPOSITIONS

Our objective was clear: To provide the greatest value added to the participants. This could be achieved by leveraging as directly as possible off the strong base we believed they brought with them. To add most value for the participants, it seemed natural to build from their solid factual and theoretical base into a program designed to develop additional cognitive skills. Additionally, it was judged valuable to use various teaching methods not prevalent in the participants' former educational experiences, especially in imaginative and effective combinations. Overall, it was apparent that we needed to weave subject matter together in new ways and towards an applied focus to add value to the extensive education that participants had received ahead of this program.

Two conceptual frameworks were selected as particularly appropriate to the setting and purposes of the planned educational program: (1) Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1954) and Kolb's learning cycles (Kolb, David A., I Rubin and J. McIntre, 1974; Kolb, David A. 1976; Kolb, David A., 1981). These classic theories linked most forcibly with the two main concerns of meeting the need we anticipated for the program participants to be: (1) exposed to and working with higher cognitive skills; and (2) engaged and interacting dynamically with subject content.

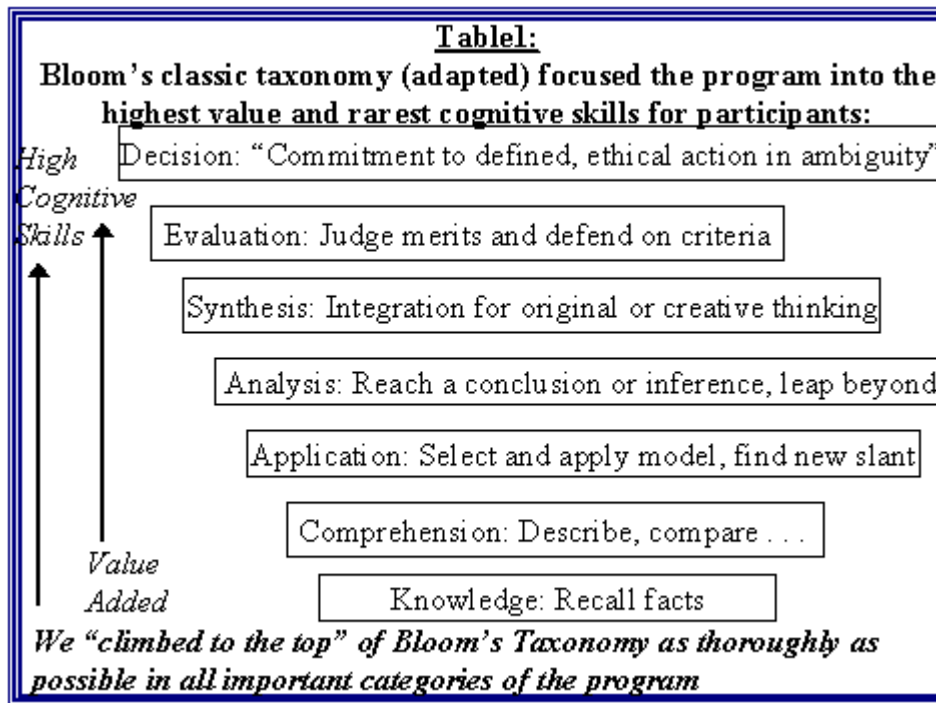
From our personal knowledge of business education in Poland, four parameters were judged to be of particular importance in building propositions to guide the development of the educational program:

- (1) Business education in Poland tended to be rigid and based on theoretical propositions that exclude experiential and hands-on teaching;
- (2) The training methods used by consultants, the main source of the participants' training under USAID, tended to be knowledge and anecdote driven using tightly structured delivery;
- (3) Knowledge and instincts were poorly developed in many important areas of the workings of free market economies such as the setting of prices, thinking strategically about competition, understanding customer attributes and so on. This aspect of knowledge was known to be the imperative for our participants; and
- (4) Respecting the excellence of the Polish education system and the thorough screening that our participants received, we could be confident that they would be well educated quantitatively and otherwise.

Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's taxonomy recognizes different types of cognition according to a hierarchy. As shown in **Table 1**, the lower cognitive skills include knowledge (recalling facts) and comprehension (describing, comparing and otherwise using facts.) Application (selecting and applying a model and finding a new slant in the use of set of the model) and analysis (reaching a conclusions or inference and perhaps leaping a little beyond data) represent more challenging cognitive skills. The greatest value added in many situations comes when learning at the lower levels is synthesized or integrated into original and creative thought. This aspect of learning is a major motivation for the design of integrated programs intended to harness learning into a synthesized focus. Higher in Bloom's taxonomy is evaluation where judgments are made on the merits of the conclusions of prior learning. Ultimately, in the world of management, comes decision – an adaptation or elaboration of the taxonomy. In management education, it is suggested that this ultimate step of coming to a defined and ethical decision is imperative. To have any meaning, ambiguity or uncertainty is an essential ingredient in a management education context. Inevitably, while all levels of learning are essential to managers, the greatest value added occurs at the higher levels of the hierarchy and the first proposition for defining the program was noted as:

Proposition 1: *Value is greatest for participants for learning that systematically and comprehensively accomplishes all the cognitive skills throughout Bloom's taxonomy (Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation, and Decision) to achieve full competence from knowledge through informed decision*



Kolb's Learning Styles

As shown in **Table 2**, Kolb identified four learning styles, as follows:

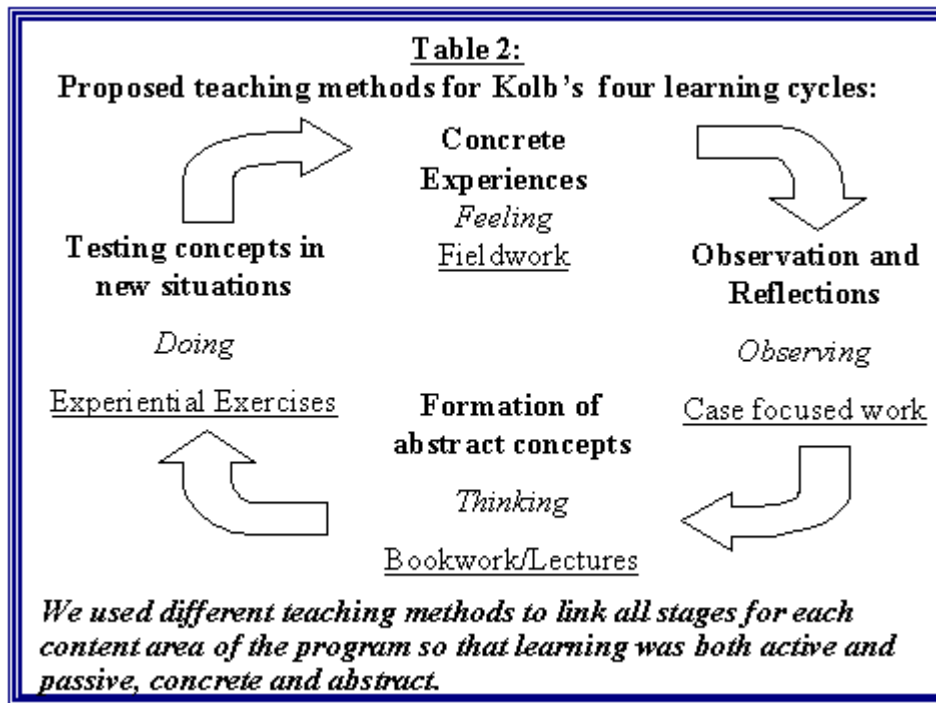
Concrete Experience: involved in experiences and dealing with immediate human situations in a personal way – feeling – a concern with the uniqueness and complexity of present reality

Reflective Observation: understands the meaning of ideas and situations by observing and impartially describing them – understanding over practical application – a concern with what is true or how things happen rather than what is practical, reflection over action

Abstract Conceptualization: uses logic, ideas, and concepts – thinking as opposed to feeling – a concern with building general theories rather than intuitively understanding unique, specific areas – good at systematic planning, manipulation of abstract symbols, and quantitative analysis

Active Experimentation: actively influencing people and changing situations – practical application over reflection – a concern with what works rather than absolute truth – doing over observing – enjoy accomplishment, taking risks, impacting environment, and seeing results

In using Kolb’s learning cycles it becomes apparent that opposing perspectives on learning must be accommodated to achieve integrated learning and attention to higher cognitive skills: action and reflection, concrete involvement and analytical detachment are all essential for optimal learning. Kolb’s learning cycles identified the need for different teaching approaches, not only to capture the interest of participants with preferences for certain types of learning, but to embrace, in combination, all the levels of Bloom’s taxonomy.



In the hands of skilled instructors nearly all teaching methods may at least touch upon each of Kolb’s four learning cycles and ascend Bloom’s taxonomy. However, more

interactive teaching methods are necessary to do justice to active and concrete learning and to the levels of Bloom's taxonomy addressing higher cognitive skills. In Table 2, fieldwork is indicated to be appropriate to achieve concrete experiences, case work can help with observation and reflection, and experiential exercises (role plays and games, for example) constitute suitable methods for active learning. Bookwork and instruction by lecturing are often presumed to be of most benefit in the formation of abstract concepts.

As Kolb and McBer observe: Managers are strong on active experimentation and weak on reflective observation skills. To bridge this gap in learning styles, the management educator must:

- Respond to pragmatic demands for relevance and the application of knowledge
- Encourage the reflective examination of experience necessary to refine old theories and build new ones
- Apply experiential learning directly in the classroom; games, role plays, and exercises
- Provide concrete and active learning experiences
- Integrate scholarly and practical learning styles and learning experiences

This implied a complex teaching design of interlinked content and diverse activities that were interrelated.

Proposition 2 for designing the program can be stated thus:

Proposition 2: *Learning effectiveness is highest when compensating for the passive and abstract learning that participants had received formerly to:*

- *Stress pragmatically relevant concepts and topics and taking them to full application of the knowledge*
- *Encourage reflective examination so that participants could refine and link theories known to them to new ones and assimilate prior experience into new applications*
- *Apply experiential learning directly in the classroom; games, role-plays, completing analytic templates and various exercises were part of nearly all classes*
- *Provide concrete and active learning experiences through field trips and extensive meetings with practitioners*
- *Integrate the scholarly with the practical at all opportunities*

Subject matter was naturally confined by the terms of reference of the program (marketing and strategy related content.) Within this limitation, value was expected to be highest for participants by focusing on the most advanced and progressive practice available. Particularly, situations richest in the characteristics of free markets contrasting the communist system formerly prevalent in Poland were expected to be associated most effectively with the value sought by participants. Indeed, examples were thought to be particularly valuable for learning if they were dramatic and provocative in constructive ways. This led to the third proposition for guiding the development of the program:

Proposition 3: *Within the scope determined by the terms of reference of the project, it was proposed to stress the most applied, free market instances of the capitalist system in sufficient detail to demonstrate all the skills and perspective necessary to functional proficiency. As constructive, it was proposed to stress fully developed examples of actual practice that were not only maximally advanced, but also dramatic and provocative in their effect.*

To embrace all levels of Bloom's taxonomy efficiently was judged almost certainly to require integrating multiple teaching methods, necessary also to incorporate all of Kolb's learning cycles to advantage. Similarly, while distinct categories of knowledge existed, to bring managers to full competence, applying multiple fields of knowledge to a practical problem without prejudice was deemed essential. These needs implied a program designed to integrate cognitive skills, learning cycles, subject content, and a structure to permit systematic development of these skills within finite time and resources, integration formed the basis of a fourth, and perhaps leading, proposition for the program, as follows:

Proposition 4: *Accomplishment of propositions 1, 2, and 3 requires simultaneous integration of: types of learning, approaches to teaching, and different subsets of subject matter according to an overall structure for the program that builds integrated learning in all these aspects as effectively as possible*

METHOD

Integration was identified as the guiding philosophy for design and delivery of the program. Specific aspects of integration were defined for the program to meet these needs around program structure and perspective, conceptual development of subject matter, and teaching methods.

Program Structure and Perspective

A three-phased structure was designed systematically to integrate learning, teaching methods, and subject content. The beginning phase of the program set out to frame subject matter using strategy as a commanding and integrated view of a business. Detailed subject matter, one technique or concept at a time filled the middle bulk of the program. Gradually, the program moved to topics and activities to do with closure and synthesis thus constituting the third phase. The start of the program elicited participants' needs and a critical ending session comprised participant presentations partly used to review and convey to us the learning that had been achieved by them. This phased structure enabled the program to both move faster and accomplish more while introducing some variety.

Attention was given to establishing a perspective for the program to aid participants in interpreting the relationships between diverse activities and subject content. Dominantly, the chosen perspective was proficient application of advanced techniques in progressively contemporary models of corporations within a future orientation. Specific content

designed to accomplish this perspective included scenarios to create a sense of the future, presentations and discussions on business architectures as flat, outsourced, and intellect based, and the use of quality service management to capture issues of operations with intensive information technology applications. As the program progressed, applied topics of increasingly complexity and challenge were addressed. Sessions pulled together patterns including context, content, perspective, techniques, application, and business judgment.

Later learning combined greater rigor with more integration so that the program moved climactically towards an increasingly comprehensive intellectual experience. The three-phase structure provided the context to shape a rich pattern of session by session cognitive skill development, incorporation of learning styles, and applied foci of subject matter. Integration of the program was not linear, but based mainly on streams of thinking that culminated in a number of very thoroughly defined examples of content applied in the real world. While patterns of integration were crisply defined and explicit through the program, the whole experience was designed, managed, and delivered somewhat intuitively to capture richer content and the idiosyncratic motivation of the participants.

Higher Cognitive Skills

Higher cognitive skills link with the more important functions of management, but qualify as the scarcest in traditional education. To capture Bloom's taxonomy from top to bottom for each of our five applied topics, the program was designed to mix activities for each topic. An introduction to knowledge and concepts formed the initial emphasis, mostly through the use of readings prepared before short lectures and classroom discussions. Case discussions and participants' experiences before and during the program formed the setting for comprehension of the knowledge and concepts. Discussions involved participants in describing and comparing their respective experiences as well as the specific example common to the class that had been prepared mutually beforehand. This multifaceted approach was adopted to create independent capability for the participants rather than a string of content and skill pitched at the same level of cognitive skill.

For all techniques, participants were required to utilize the tools in class to a complete end result. In some cases, templates were provided to structure the work and to ensure that the particular application and analysis of a theory or concept was performed at as an advanced level as appropriate. Mastery of a specific technique was the goal whether the learning was attribute analysis, segmentation, regression, pricing, value creation, value chain, or whatever. Case studies or site visits provided the basis for integration or synthesis of work. They were also used to evaluate the meaning of the work to arrive at a decision and how to implement the decision. Instructors gladly accepted the expectation to push thinking in class to a final decision. Thus, all topics were taken to full competence including sharp analysis and intensive consideration of actually deciding and implementing the topic in question.

Multiple Learning Styles

The goal was to integrate all the teaching methods so that the unique characteristics of each could be reinforced with each of the others. This approach added maximum value for the participants' learning because each teaching method tended to stress a particular learning style. Only in this way could all the dimensions of an applied ability be conveyed to the participants.

Similarly, to meet the requirement of Kolb's learning cycles, a mix of teaching methods was adopted to embrace participants' different learning style:

- Extensive field trips to make lessons concrete and to ensure observation and reflection.
- Speakers, company visits, and related activities brought theory to concrete experience. All involved documentation for preparation before the event and also for reflection later
- Analytic templates and software to connect theory to a concrete end point and to test concepts and extend them to new situations
- experiential exercises (games, role plays, presentations, and various exercises) were part of nearly all classes
- Lectures and readings to shape new abstract concepts and explain difficulties in application

Not only did each teaching method served to enhance the learning obtained by complementary methods, but the program content was delivered so that it could mesh with the participants' prior knowledge and practice. This carried the merit that the participant became better able to apply content to their specific field of practice. It also helped anchor content and deepen understanding by affording a comparison of subject theory with actual experience for each participant.

Applied Content Foci

As defined by the terms of reference of the program, three main areas of subject matter were woven together: (1) marketing, (2) applied microeconomics, and (3) strategy. Additionally, skills were developed explicitly in consulting techniques and managerial communication as requested by the client. Presentations, spontaneous discussions, and written work were integrated into the teaching. The program concluded with the use of consulting techniques in the design of a course project of the participant's choice. Subject areas, consulting skills, and presentation effectiveness were both independently identified and explicitly combined. These activities formed streams of thought and practice running through the program to an end result as a fully developed example in the real world and all the implications associated with that final manifestation of study.

A pivotal element of the program was a number of application foci (see **Table 3**) that were selected to demonstrate full concepts in the field rigorously. These foci found their fullest form in well-planned visits to corporations. Each selected application focus was framed by strategy context (Strategic Marketing, Industry Analysis, and Strategy Formation), various base analytic techniques (for example regression, cluster analysis,

industry analysis and so on) employed communications and consulting skills, and culminated in a thorough demonstration of advanced practice in the field.

These “slices of experiences” built through the program. One example culminated in a presentation of Sauza – a tequila brand that was the subject of major investment by Allied Domecq, a major spirits and wines group. The brand equity approach to this product, the associated advertising and sales promotion, product development, and brand strategy were very advanced and progressive. To provide background for this challenging application, a visit to an advertising and public relations firm (Hill Holiday) had been arranged before the brand presentation. There, participants were involved in discussing latest thinking in the fields of advertising and public relations. Various elements of class driven subject content were utilized in the site visit and the brand presentation including attribute analysis, brand strategy, statistical techniques, business strategy, and others.

In these “slices:”

- each topic could be worked to the top of Bloom’s taxonomy and incorporate all Kolb’s learning styles
- each applied problem would use many elements of the foundation disciplines (microeconomics, marketing, strategy, and entrepreneurship) to find the most powerful particular solution
- earlier elements in the program were used by more than one of the application foci so that constant application and reapplication of content in slightly different settings helped reinforce learning

As shown in **Table 3**, there were six main “slices” built into the program. Each “slice” was interconnected to some degree with other “slices” to create whole patterns of learning for the participants.

Table 3
Corporate Site Visits and its Main Content Thrust
•Cambridge Business Development Center (Entrepreneurship Process)
•PC Build (Entrepreneurial Start-Up Process)
•Pepsi Cola and Frito Lay (Competitive Scale and Rivalry)
•Bose Speakers (Total Quality Management and product development)
•Hill/Holliday (Advertising Agency)
•Sauza Brand Management (Brand Equity)
Site visits embraced a variety of interests and included speakers, formal presentations, factory tours, and hospitality (as appropriate)

RESULTS

It was apparent quickly that participants had never received education of this character and stated that it was both distinctive and valuable. The participants seemed dazzled by the level of technical and business expertise in the program and by the level of teaching effectiveness. Participants were desperate for the more technical expertise provided in the program, for what they considered to be a more advanced perspective, for the

particular view taken on consulting skills, and for the benefits of an integrated program design

The formal survey evaluation of the program echoed the encouraging anecdotal and conversational feedback that was received:

- On all measures participants scored the program greater than 4.5 out of a perfect 5.0
- Written comments from the participants included:
 - “Suddenly, I know how to place the plug into the socket”
 - “It was a great experience in my life and in my career development process”
 - “Showed me a point of view that is different to the European”
- Project FIRMA2000 were pleased and satisfied with the program
- Long personal thank you letters from eight of the eleven participants
- Continued contact through newsletters and emails since the program

The sentiment was highly positive, especially for the first time we had done a program for this type of audience and purpose,.

A summary of the consensus views of faculty and administrators regarding the program included:

- The basic premise of educating change agents (consultants for private firms and for regional development agencies, trade association executives) was sound.
- The participants do have the skills and drive to disseminate the learning from the program to their clients
- The money seemed to be spent wisely on priorities
- Communication with the sponsoring agency before the program should be strengthened, but this introduced many practical questions
- As a result of the program’s success, we would change little in terms of content and structure for a possible re-run

The program faculty felt the program very worthwhile professionally and believed that it constituted a positive contribution to improvement in the world. Additionally, many faculty felt they had rather exceptionally bonded to the participants.

All the respective parties associated with the program were motivated to design and deliver similar programs for any other economy in transition. Despite accolades for doing a superior job, we could only do this once and could not get efficiencies from repetition or gain the opportunity to do it better.

CONCLUSIONS

The results for the program were generally evaluated to be exceptionally good compared both to other programs subscribed to by ACDI/VOCA and to programs experienced by the program participants. Why could not more programs be commissioned in line with this highly regarded alternative approach? Despite the value added compared to consulting approaches to training, consulting companies rather than educational institutions seemingly enjoyed the lion’s share of this money and made the greatest

financial profit as well. From a customer's or an observer's point of view one would expect consulting companies to be less able to conduct educational assignments because of their people's training and motivation and their structure. From a governmental viewpoint, it would seem more relevant to build the educational strength of academic institutions rather than to fund consultants to become educators while distracting consultants from developing their core practice of consulting.

This program came at the end of a multiyear, multi-million dollar government driven investment in such programs in Poland. The suspicion was that an academic institution got this program because the major consulting firms were putting their effort into building the next market (Bulgaria, Romania) rather than cleaning up the final crumbs from funding for Poland. In other words, the consulting competition for these funds was diminished opening the possibility for teaching institutions to participate.

Why might consulting firms be beating out academic institutions, despite logical expectations and the experience of this program indicating that exceptional value could be added by academic institutions? Discussions mentioned the following possible reasons why academic institutions were not getting a noticeable share:

- The issue is interpreted to be one of training consultants by consultants rather than one of education
- Academic institutions cannot sell:
 - cannot afford to pay professional business development people
 - do not know how to motivate and reward sales people
- Academic institutions were less ready to change market places – to move from Poland to Bulgaria and Romania

Another reason for consulting firms gaining the business, despite no portfolio in education, is that the primary focus of consulting companies is to sell services for financial gain as well as for value added for the customer. It is a first instinct to pursue pools of money for consulting business when these are triggered by governmental expenditure. Additionally, it is possible that consulting firms carry more credibility in some market places for owning and disseminating highly contemporary, practical knowledge. Consulting firms take a business like attitude to the opportunity making them easier and less expensive to deal with administratively compared to academic institutions. It is reasonable to conclude that academic institutions cannot win without driven and skilful "for profit" behavior and large rewards for the sales development function.

Ostensibly, the mission of academic institutions is not to sell services for financial gain, but rather to provide opportunities for students and development for faculty. Rewards need not be measured in direct economic benefits but more in terms of institutional benefits. The challenge for an academic institution is balancing financial priorities for business development investment and faculty resources against core educational activities and priorities

It is hoped that this work might spark any of the following thoughts and behaviors:

- Triggers the thought in government agencies serving emerging countries that academic institutions can not only educate change agents in business, but accomplish this better and for less money than consulting firms.
- Prompts top management of academic institutions to seek profitable revenue by pursuing market opportunities for educational programs, although this requires skilful selling and relationship building.
- Stimulates the thought among academics that designing and delivering educational programs that serve market needs can enrich their work.

Building educational competence necessitates finding the most developmental projects and these may often be those competed for by consulting firms. Excelling in an educational mission depends on securing great opportunities and building financial strength for academic institutions. Fuller involvement of business schools in these well-funded programs for emerging nations may serve every constituency better.

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