

Back to school

By Twan van de Kerkhof

Why do 500 managers spend six days away from their clients or desks to go back to school?

500 Managers chose to invest six days in Orchestrating Winning Performance (OWP), the annual flagship programme of Swiss business school IMD. They consider it worth their effort because of the content and the interactions with participants from 60 nations and a wide variety of industries and functions. They also consider it worth the CHF 14,000 that IMD charges for OWP.

OWP is like a pop festival for managers. All 55 professors of IMD present their most recent research and insights about the latest trends in management. Some of these will last, others will prove to be fads. China and India were high on the agenda, as was CSR (including climate change and biofuels). There were also some golden oldies, ranging from personal development to mergers and acquisitions.

Participants were asked to choose two out of sixteen possible 'streams' which they would focus on throughout the week. They could choose from eight streams in the morning. The most popular was 'Leading at the Edge: developing professional and organizational growth', led by professor George Kohlrieser. An astonishing 170 participants were in his stream, in which he addresses very personal questions, increasing the self-awareness of leaders (to be). 'His concepts were not new to me but I never before had them presented with such a clarity. He really helped me to think about myself', one participant said. Other streams were about building global organizations, fast-developing economies, services and operational effectiveness.

Lunch at IMD hardly is a moment to relax. It is a continuation of work, a Networking Lunch. Adrenaline keeps flowing on a high level. Not that it feels like a punishment to sit in the shade of an umbrella, munching some fine food, having conversations with interesting people and looking at the mountains on the other side of le Lac Lemman. OWP always takes place at the end of June, when the weather in Lausanne is generally wonderful.

Many participants came to Switzerland as part of a group, often from family-owned companies. Teams were there from Van Oord, TNO, Robeco, and others. Some of these used lunch and dinner to share their experiences from the various streams, thus extending personal lessons to their team companions.

The afternoon brought another choice of eight streams: brands, finance, values, growth and innovation amongst them. Also some interesting cases were presented: the difficult joint venture of Danone and Wahaha in China, ING Direct USA and the ABN AMRO takeover. This unique acquisition was put into a broader perspective, taking into account the credit crunch, the role of hedge funds and the role of investment banks.

All sessions were interactive. A presentation by a professor was usually followed by a discussion in groups of seven or eight participants. The quality of these discussions was dependent firstly on the clarity of the questions posed to the group and secondly on the composition of the working group. Sometimes board members were part of one and the same group with managers who had just

started their careers. It was hard for board members to get an equal value out of the discussion as juniors tend to learn more from seniors than vice versa.

OWP is in essence a programme that invites you to re-think your own business dilemmas. A huge variety of topics is presented and rarely, if ever, is one investigated exhaustively. Instead, different angles to the same topic are presented. Also, most professors underscore that there is not one right answer to any given problem. They challenge the participants to reflect on their own answers for their specific situations. Some participants found that frustrating, their attitude being: you are the expert, you should provide the right answer. 'The preparation and elaboration of the cases is not rigid enough', one participant said. She compared it to her experiences at Harvard Business School which she valued higher. But she also had been to another IMD-programme that she found dug deeper and was more detailed. 'OWP is broad not deep', said Phil Rosenzweig, one of IMD's professors. The programme gives a flavor of many different topics, but executives that really want to explore their personal dilemmas might be better off in one of the specialized programmes of IMD or another business school.

IMD is one of the most prestigious business schools in the world. It has a very small number of MBAs compared to Insead or the well-known American schools. It also has a small campus and a small faculty. Faculty has no tenure. Professors can only stay if they perform well. IMD's focus is on executive education, resulting in its motto 'Real world, Real learning'. Recently, the Financial Times ranked IMD nr. 1 in executive education. IMD was established in 1990, when IMI (founded by Alcan) and Imede (founded by Nestlé) joined forces.

Go to www.imd.ch for more information on IMD programmes and OWP.