

When the Going Gets Tough: Mentoring for Career Enhancement of Senior MBA Awarded Managers



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Sylvia graduated the international MBA programme with The Open University Business School in 2013. For the last year of her studies, Sylvia was acknowledged by her peers as one of the five most influential MBA students in the B830 cohort. She has acted as a mentor for senior MBA managers at the OUBS, Henley Business School, University of Leicester and SDA Bocconi School of Management. Since 2017, she has been recognized as an international Certified Management Consultant in Strategy and Business Development. She has been a Managing Partner of Strategy+ Business Lab (www.spbusinesslab.com) since 2016 and a start-up mentor of newly-established international enterprises.

Taking the clock back 6 years ago. It transpired during one of the coffee breaks between lectures when I was conversing with people, some of whom I met for the first and last time. We were alternating between subjects which included the effects that the MBA programme had produced. The lady I was talking with (an OUBS official), referenced data collected in research conducted by MBA students; one of whom was myself. The subject aroused extremely high interest as we concluded the OUBS students, 95% of whom are senior managers, experience a change in both their career path and personal life, in the midst of their studies!

That was the bottom line of the research, a fact that has always been present all these years!

Given that the MBA education is one of those particular steps in life which is undertaken only to bring about a REAL change in one's life. The specific shape and color that the change is going to assume is a personal matter which triggers a very personal response. Notably, the MBA facilitates a change in one's credo. Regardless of whether one has set their sight on personal enhancement and accomplishment – which is the most frequent reason for pursuing MBA studies by female, or one has set their sights on climbing the hierarchy – which happens to be the most frequently admitted reason underpinning the MBA enrollment by male – the MBA education must be employed to enable a concrete change in life! There are cases where the change comes about by means of a fresh job opportunity with another employer or the change takes the form of a promotion which enables one to climb up the hierarchy, particularly in circumstances where the individuals has pursued the MBA Programme as a premise to develop their career.

However, there are cases where no change arises, or at least it does not click into place so easily.

There are circumstances where MBA graduates part from their employer, geared towards sourcing out more flattering career opportunities. There are even some MBA graduates who are prepared to run a greater risk; embracing the decision to shift from the corporate area to entrepreneurship. We are going to examine the unwilling variance and most common hypothesis and scenarios experiencing the MBA professional holding a high corporate office by exploring the tangible circumstances of his or her life. Whether no change has been triggered following the MBA, or the change which has occurred is negative, we are going to have a closer look at several ways to overcome these 'dead-end street' situations.

The 3 Dimensions of Career Change

Throughout my experience as a mentor, I have assisted the career change of senior managers holding MBA degrees. Despite the fact that each case has its particulars, the solutions gravitates around the following three dimensions:

1. Change of one's functional area
2. Change of one's industry
3. Change by way of climbing up one's hierarchy

Or a change by way of coupling any two or three of the said dimensions.

The more dimensions you are set to change, the more complex the change to be effectuated. This is not to say it is 'impossible', but rather 'complex'. You will require a career development strategy, and you need to adopt a step-by-step approach.

There is more to the story – a fourth dimension

All three dimensions listed above, have to do with a career change within the corporate framework. The fourth dimension is more radical, but admittedly, the majority of managers vested with an MBA degree go for this route. The dimension encompasses a shift from the corporate framework towards entrepreneurship. Drawing upon all four dimensions, we are subsequently able to articulate a fifth hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Following a comfortably long experience within a particular functional area, such as accountancy or human resources for example, you end up feeling like that is not exactly your area. As such, you desire to shift into an entirely new field.

Hypothesis 2: The MBA education has supplied you with a valuable outlook, thus you feel prepared and ready to climb up to the next level. Despite this, you have no specific arrangements with your employer.

Hypothesis 3: You come to the decision that a change of organisation may also command a change in industry as well.

Hypothesis 4: You feel the corporate life lays constraints upon you, therefore it is high time you set up a business of your own.

Hypothesis 5: Once you have tried out or effected one or more of the hypotheses (one, two or three) you are geared towards Hypothesis four. Or conversely, once you have tried hypothesis four, you go back to any of the options one, two or three.

In the next section we will focus on the means of introducing a change in any of the hypotheses. I'm sure you are curious as to how the change occurred in my case. It first arose as a welcomed surprise. In the last year of my MBA studies, I received a job proposal in the business department of a world media organisation in an English-speaking country. All I needed to do was pack my papers and take a flight. However, the circumstances in my life at that time constrained me, and I had to remain in Bulgaria for a couple of years. Then I received an unwelcomed surprise. On my first business day following my graduation ceremony in London, I found out that I was undergoing discharge procedures for a single reason; my 'rather' high skills for my current job position. At the time I had held the post for over four

years and there were others who were ambitious to assume my role. Although the discharge procedures failed, it was clear that I had to part ways with my employer. Today— five years later, I have realised that change comes in numerous and various unexpected ways. In particular, one which would not have occurred if I had not held the MBA degree, was the opportunity to join mentoring schemes and provide mentorship to OUBS MBA students and CMI Managers (The Chartered Management Institute) who were striving to make a change in their career. In a way, I supported mentees to enjoy a return on their investment in the MBA within a short term, thus putting their MBA to good use.

In the former section we focused on the four essential dimensions which senior managers could encounter in their life following their obtainment of an MBA degree. Given those four dimensions, we articulated a fifth hypotheses and the most popular change. However, we will have a closer look at each hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Following a comfortably long experience within a particular functional area such as, accountancy, human resources, etc. you end up feeling like that is not exactly your area. As such, you desire to shift into an entirely new area.

If you should happen to find yourself in this situation, you will inevitably run into one of the most widely spread employers' presumptions, which never changes.

Every position calls for people with previous experience in that same functional area.

However impressive the graduation certificate you may produce in proof of your excellent fit in that functional area, there is a fat chance that you may not progress to a higher position as you would in your current field. In such cases, I would recommend you seek projects in the new functional area with no remuneration. It could well be a not-for-profit organisation, a friend's company, or a club you hold membership with. The key is for you to gain critical experience in that new functional area that will allow you to stand a good chance when applying for a position. I would typically advise my mentees to stay within that practice for at least a year before they opt to apply anywhere for a position in that functional area.

Certain circumstances may assist you in your career change. They come into the equation if you are employed within a company, which may facilitate a vertical or horizontal career development. In such companies, lateral promotion is indispensable to the vertical one. Therefore, it should not be an issue for instance, to shift into the sector of business development when you come from a quality management or research and development

background, as you are able to lean on your diploma to attest your fitness into that new area, despite your lack of previous experience.

Hypothesis 2: The MBA education has supplied you with a valuable outlook, thus you feel prepared and ready to climb up to the next level. Despite this, you have no specific arrangements with your employer.

Typically, MBA vested managers who encounter this hypothesis tend to seek employment with another employer. For the most part, the existing employer may give the highly qualified employee the cold shoulder precluding his or her chances of promotion in the hierarchy. In the best case scenario, the employee successfully gets his or her current employer to terms which bring forth a promise of a promotion.

Hypothesis 3: You come to the decision that a change of organisation may also command a change in industry as well.

If you happen to identify yourself under this hypothesis, you will be one of the individuals who encounter the assumption espoused by employers that the 'excellent applicant' should be the individual who has relevant experience. Irrespective of whether you target industries who traditionally engage MBA graduates such as consultancy companies or companies within the investment banking area, or you will just opt to target an industry of your desire; you should always factor in patience on your part. The strategy that I encourage managers under this hypothesis to employ is to first figure out the companies that interest them in the new industry.

Furthermore, MBA managers should search their contacts list for networking opportunities. Examine your friends, friends of friends, your former colleagues and your alumni network from the University you obtained your MBA. Out of these, identify individuals who are employed or affiliated with those companies, and get in touch with them. Now, you want to introduce them to your idea, as such, organising a lunch or a cup of coffee may be ideal. This will allow you to find out about available opportunities, communicate your desire to get involved in their company, learn about their procedure for submitting CVs and receive advice about their key recruiters. It is important that you remain persistent as most of these interactions will not be fruitful, a lot of time and effort will be needed to make headway.

In all aforementioned hypotheses, one factor may assist you greatly in achieving change with minimum effort and within the shortest time. This is the provision of a positive attestation by

a person in a key or trusted position within the company you have targeted. Once you are able to produce a reference, chances are that you will be hired to prove yourself.

This is exactly what you want! The chance to prove your skills!

An additional approach which can help is to look for companies with strong entrepreneurship cultures. In such companies, the multi-functionality of employees is principle to boosting the company. Therefore, you will have easier access to employment opportunities within your targeted functional area. Should you make it, you may be promoted, and you will be in for the next challenging project which will enhance you as a professional also.

Hypothesis 4: You feel the corporate life lays constraints upon you, therefore it is high time you set up a business of your own.

Another 'bitter pill' you may have to swallow is the fear nested within others that your qualifications surpasses theirs, and as such you will naturally stand out whereas they will need to maintain a high profile to be seen. Consequently, you may find yourself hard 'pressed down', ending up as an 'outcast', comfortably omitted to be invited to meetings or being kept at a 'safe' distance from key projects, etc. Alternatively, following your MBA you may have already been promoted, and your company is running out of the capacity to further advance you, therefore, you begin to feel there is no more room for progression. Perhaps you find yourself at the right place at the right time with an excellent business partner who is equally interested in taking the risk of starting a long-cherished business. If such is the case, I would strongly recommend that you take that leap of faith. Whether you minimize your risk by remaining in employment before your start-up finds its feet and becomes well established on the ground, or you opt to be entirely dedicated to it; it is critical that you envision a clear way to sustain your start-up for the first year whilst your new business life positions.

Hypothesis 5: Once you have tried out or effected one or more of the hypotheses (one, two or three) you are geared towards Hypothesis four. Or conversely, once you have tried hypothesis four, you go back to any of the options one, two or three.

In both cases, I would advise a careful self-analysis before taking the steps. The analysis should focus on the strengths of the mentee, his or her preferred predominant functional areas, his or her fitness to perform in that particular industries and his or her tolerance of the entrepreneur's risk for example. Considering all personal factors such as your personal circumstances and emerging opportunities can result in structuring two or three alternative scenario.

Whatever hypothesis you identify yourself with, my first and foremost advice is that you have recourse to an executive career mentor to support you on your path. If you are geared towards switching between functional areas or industries, source a mentor in that new area or industry. If your target is to advance in your company's hierarchy, find a mentor from your company who is in a senior management role. Should you be willing to be supported by a mentor, ideally, seek a mentor with an MBA and who is also vested with the relevant experience.

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