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Exec M.B.A. students stretch talents with Decision Base

BY ERIN MORAIN

In two days, they complete financial statements, interpret data, set goals, work through acquisitions, present business plans and calculate returns on investments, among dozens of other tasks, encouraging them to step outside of their comfort zones into an entirely new learning experience.

This fast-paced trip into the business world stretches the talents of some of Iowa's young corporate executives who are becoming immersed in the Executive M.B.A. program at the University of Iowa's Tippie College of Business. Their two-day adventure comes through Decision Base, a business simulation product created by Celemi, a business learning company based in Sweden.

"Rather than being told in a lecture format, they experience it firsthand," said Dan Topf, vice president of performance consulting at Management Development International Inc. in Ames. "Our opinion is, it's much more powerful learning and it sticks with people."

Topf, who facilitates the program to Tippie's Executive M.B.A. students, compared the experience to that portrayed in "Apollo 13," in which astronauts use simulator experiences to prepare for their journey into outer space.

Students begin Decision Base during the second day of a five-day residency at the start of their Executive M.B.A. studies, the only time during the 21-month program when students are in residence on Tippie's Iowa City campus. Their involvement with the simulation encourages students to begin thinking cross-functionally, a theme that carries throughout "residency week" and throughout the Executive M.B.A. program.

"It throws them into this culture that we try to maintain throughout the program of thinking broadly," said John Fraser, director of Tippie's Executive M.B.A. program. "We ask them to play roles in the simulation that they aren't comfortable with."

Topf begins the process by breaking students up into teams of four or five. Those teams become "companies" during the simulation and remain together as study groups during the duration of their studies, which Fraser said is fairly typical of Executive M.B.A. programs across the country. But few other schools use Decision Base in the learning process.

Over two days, the teams compete to become the most profitable manufacturing business. They make decisions regarding inventory, production, sales, marketing and other aspects of manufacturing. Topf said professors are able to develop a sense of an individual's capabilities and students are able to



Photo submitted

Students at the University of Iowa's Tippie College of Business work on their plans.

engage in self-assessment as they work through the program.

Both Topf and Fraser emphasized the importance of placing students outside their comfort zones, as someone with a background in accounting may become a marketing manager during the simulation.

"The whole goal is to take people who are very narrow but very successful in that narrow field," Fraser said. "After they leave the program two years later, they have a much broader perspective."

He said the 40-45 students who enroll in each Executive M.B.A. class are typically 37-38 years old and are mid- to upper-level managers at Iowa companies such as Maytag Corp., Rockwell Collins Inc., Wells Fargo & Co., Bandag Inc. and Deere & Co. As students in Tippie College, they commute to classes in Iowa City on alternating Fridays and Saturdays, as well as attend weekly meetings with their study groups.

Fraser brought Decision Base to the University of Iowa about 4 1/2 years ago, having worked with the business simulation product several years earlier as an executive at Amana Refrigeration. He said it worked extremely well at Amana, as people who served in a variety of functions developed respect for and knowledge of the responsibilities of other employees, allowing them to better communicate and better understand challenges.

"I didn't even think about it until I'd been

here for a year or two, and then it dawned on me that it would be a great way to kick off the Executive M.B.A. experience for class members," Fraser said.

Topf was hired as the facilitator, having used the program while in corporate learning at Principal Financial Group Inc. before setting off on his own at Management Development International. Along with the University of Iowa, he facilitates the program approximately 10-12 times each year at a number of companies, including Pioneer Hi-Bred International Inc., GuideOne Insurance and Pella Corp. He said Decision Base's high level of realism allows it to work well for his clients.

"They're walking away with 'I had no idea. I'm a human resources person and I had no idea it was so hard to be a marketing person,'" Topf said.

He noted three levels of learning that are observed through the program. At one level — a personal level — participants realize they have learned from the program, but choose not to tell anyone. On a second level, they decide to share their acquired knowledge with others. And on a third level, they gain insight into their own companies' circumstances and challenges.

"Celemi is very proactive," Fraser said of the parent company. "Some get stale after a few years. They've been very good about maintaining the technology by staying in touch with the world as it changes. So it's remained applicable for training." □