

Wits Business School: 'Pracademia' and learning for real-world impact

'We get people from business to teach business'

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Complacency is the biggest threat to professionals and their careers. This according to Leoni Grobler, Director of Executive Education at Wits Business School. For this reason, she says lifelong learning is necessary for those wanting to succeed in life, if they wish to remain relevant.

Executive education caters to working people at various levels of an organisation, focusing on the key skills and competencies needed to manage yourself, others and a successful business. "Things are constantly changing, so whether you've just stepped into your first job, you're a seasoned manager or a celebrated executive, you need to constantly re-skill and upskill yourself," she explains. "We walk that learning journey with our delegates at any stage of their career, whether they're just starting off or already established in their field."

Being a leader requires a different skill set from the technical competencies required to perform operational tasks. "Once you start managing people you need to develop and recall different skills: you need to inspire and motivate people, but still hold people accountable, because at the end of the day you're working towards a goal." Grobler says calling these management skills "soft" is misleading, because these foundation skills are among the most important traits for success.

Skills for success

Business leaders must be adaptable to internal and external disruptions and implement change management within their own organisation; therefore flexibility, agility and resilience are important skills and mindsets to foster. "The world is forcing us to be far more fluid in the way we think and the things we do, and nobody can afford to be resistant to change," says Grobler.

Creative thinking is important across all levels of business and not just in the marketing or innovation departments, because this skill goes hand in hand with problem-solving and a growth mindset. While creativity is important, it needs to be coupled with critical and analytical thinking – and sound decision making.

Executive education can help foster a growth mindset: "This means you learn to see the opportunity in every challenge, and it also helps foster entrepreneurial skills, because people learn to see gaps in the market and solutions to fill

those gaps. So as business schools we have the responsibility to cultivate that mindset and help people find the positives instead of focusing on the negatives."

Mentorship and coaching training are also in high demand for executives, because leaders are expected to guide, empower, motivate and inspire the people they work with. This entails cultural sensitivity, an appreciation for diversity and inclusivity, and a collaborative approach.

Authentic leaders are steadfast and purpose driven, guided by a personal and organisational North Star that guides them and helps them navigate decisions and interactions. "As a business school, if we can not only plant but also water those seeds, then half the battle is won," she says. "If we can just get that to 'click', then the magic starts to happen."

Social responsibility, ethical business practices and sustainability are also important to incorporate into operations: "Investors are looking at investing their hard-earned savings in organisations that do good, so it's a balance between wanting a good return on investment but also playing a part or making a contribution to society and the environment."

Making learning a lifestyle

Learning is not something that is done, it is something that is lived. A learning mindset is one that will permeate into every aspect of life and ensure continuous growth and betterment. "There is no right time to start, because learning should be seen as an ongoing process that continues as long as we're alive," she says, adding that this does not mean it has to be a formal and structured process. "It's about reading, watching Ted Talks, listening to podcasts, watching videos about a variety of topics ... we have so many resources and platforms available and more access to information than ever before, so learning is easier than ever and there is no excuse to stagnate."

This does not mean that lifelong learning is without challenges, says Grobler. This is even more true when it comes to structured, formal executive education programmes. "It's never easy to find a balance between professional and personal requirements and responsibilities; therefore one of the most important things we offer our delegates is flexibility." This extends to when courses are attended, the duration of the course sessions and time in class.

There are also tutors, business coaches and



Leoni Grobler, Director of Executive Education at Wits Business School

learning coordinators available to offer continuous aid and ensure that delegates stay motivated and receive the necessary academic and emotional support they need to excel.

Graduate and postgraduate degrees are theoretical and academic in nature, while executive education programmes are more experiential. "Executive education is all about applied learning, so it is really practising, understanding, testing and piloting what is being learnt in the classroom, and then doing so in the workplace," Grobler says.

Learning from the best

This practical approach is why Wits Business School programmes are presented by what Grobler calls "pracademics" and not academics: "A lot of organisations and leaders are concerned that business schools may not be in touch with the realities of the world of work. Our team members have a good theoretical and technical base, but more than that they also have the practical experience and have walked the journey themselves. So if they talk about change management, they can give real-world examples of the problems they faced and the solutions that worked. We ensure that when we have a

programme running, the delegates gain knowledge from someone who is speaking from workplace experience. We get people from business to teach business."

Grobler says the pandemic and its impact has transformed the course of business and of life, and there is no turning back to the way things were. "We've seen how fast things can change, and business leaders cannot afford to not stay ahead of the trends – Covid-19 showed us this very clearly." The current debate is whether, given recent developments and rapid changes, a five-year plan is still feasible for organisations. "It's very exciting, and there is a lot of work that needs to be done in this regard, but the ability to learn and grow from these experiences and changes is incredible."

She believes the biggest threat to professionals and their careers is complacency: "It's no longer the case that even big businesses are safe and secure, and in order to be truly successful companies and their executives must stay relevant in order to be sustainable. Complacency will see doors close, and this is why we cultivate a learning and growth mindset in our delegates, to not only sustain operations, but look for new opportunities that will impact the world around them."