

UCT business school offers leaders lessons in complexity

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The UCT Graduate School of Business has designed an executive course that prepares senior executives and leaders to handle the chaos and complexity of their work by using a bit of chaos to open their minds to new insights.



The Leading Executive Programme (LEP), says programme director Chris Breen, is designed specifically to mirror the complex and sometimes chaotic world of business today. Previous delegates have cited an increase in awareness, calmness under pressure, and critically, an enhanced ability to see the world from new perspectives and spot opportunities, as key kickbacks of the programme.

"We live in an information-rich world that is fraught with complexity, a place where it is impossible to be right all the time, yet companies expect that from their leaders and leaders expect it from themselves. The danger with this is that leaders begin to believe that they do 'know it all' and in the process prevent new ideas and perspectives from taking root," explained Breen of the perils of traditional command-and-control styles of leadership.

"When that happens, the possibility for innovation is severely stifled and the same mistakes are made over and over again."

While most senior leaders would readily admit that the business world they operate in today is vastly different from that of just two decades ago, not many have translated this into an actual change in the way they operate.

That's according to Dr Peter Senge of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who writes in the book *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future*, that "even as conditions in the world change dramatically, most businesses, governments and other large organisations continue to take the same kinds of institutional actions that they always have."

This reactive behaviour, he claims, is governed by "downloading habitual ways of thinking, of continuing to see the world within the familiar categories we're comfortable with". In this scenario, the ability to do things differently and to see new opportunities and possibilities is severely reduced, says Breen.

The two-week LEP is thus designed to expose leaders to their own shortcomings and prejudices by "throwing them into complexity and exposing their unconscious resistances and prejudices".

With no set timetable, no lecture notes or any idea of what will happen from one day to the next - indeed from each moment to the next - the programme mimics the chaotic and unpredictable world that leaders operate within on a daily basis in a way that conventional development programmes cannot do.

Rudi Janse van Rensburg, General Manager at Protea Hotel Asokoro in Abuja, Nigeria, attended the programme in Cape Town last year and describes it as unlike any he's ever attended, despite having completed courses at Ivy League schools like Harvard and Cambridge.

"The experience was nothing I expected," he shares. "I learnt more about myself and people in that two week period than I did in 13 years of working."

"There were no set schedules. Venues constantly changed. We had no notes prior to each session. We did not know which speakers were coming to lecture or present. We did not know what each session was going to teach us - it was truly

chaotic."

And that, says Breen, is the real purpose of the programme - to challenge leaders on their set views of the world and to show them the multiple perspectives and possibilities that exist when their eyes and minds are opened to them.

Phillip Ntsimane, Chief Audit Executive at the Ithala Development Finance Corporation in KwaZulu-Natal, says his time on the programme was a "journey of self-discovery and transformation".

"Leadership is not about formulas and structures - I now understand the world as full of opportunities and I've exercised a previously untapped ability to see the invisible and spot possibilities where others cannot," says Ntsimane.

"After all, we cannot change the problems in this world with the same old ways of thinking that created those problems in the first place."

The LEP, offered by the GSB Executive Education unit, runs this year from 24 October to 6 November and is targeted at anyone in a senior leadership position who knows they have almost gone as far as they can using traditional command and control methods and are willing to accept the challenge of stepping into a complex space where they will be challenged to examine and explore their basic beliefs and assumptions, said Breen.

For more information contact Junita Abrahams at the UCT GSB on 021 406 1323 or SMS 'LEP' and an email contact to 31497.

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