THE TOP BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Playing Well With Others Recruiters say the 'soft' skills -- such as leadership, communication and the ability to work in teams -- are just as important as the hard stuff. And a lot harder to teach

By RONALD ALSOP

For Craig Savage, one of the most terrifying -- but most rewarding -- parts of his M.B.A. program at Vanderbilt University was the stand-up comedy routine he performed in his communications class.

He related some humorous real-life anecdotes and, to his surprise, received one of the best reviews in the class. Now, as a vice president for private-wealth management at Goldman Sachs Group Inc., Mr. Savage doesn't want to leave his clients laughing. But he does believe the course prepared him well for the job. "In today's business world, the people on the other side of the table can be very intimidating," he says. "Being able to be relaxed and perform in an improvisational way is really valuable."

Interpersonal communication and other so-called soft skills are what corporate recruiters crave most but find most elusive in M.B.A. graduates. The major business schools produce graduates with analytical horsepower and solid command of the basics -- finance, marketing and strategy. But soft skills such as communication, leadership and a team mentality sometimes receive cursory treatment.

"As much as business schools talk about leadership, I don't think they do a very good job teaching it," says Marshall Dahneke, a recruiter and vice president of global marketing for the Hill-Rom unit of Hillenbrand Industries Inc., Batesville, Ind.

In The Wall Street Journal/Harris Interactive survey, recruiters rated schools on a variety of attributes, and then rated the attributes in terms of how important they are in a job candidate. Topping the list of 24 attributes are communication and interpersonal skills and the ability to work well in teams. Close behind: leadership potential, ranked No. 6.

The Right Stuff

Management consultants especially value interpersonal skills because of the need to form relationships with clients. Neal Walters, a consultant for A.T. Kearney Inc., a Plano, Texas, unit of Electronic Data Systems Corp., looks for M.B.A. students who seem capable of displaying grace under pressure. "We need a combination of strong analytical and interpersonal skills, plus an ability to cope with ambiguity and remain composed in uncomfortable, stressful situations," says Mr. Walters. "A key question for us is: Can the M.B.A. candidate be comfortable working and communicating with a range of people at the client company, from top executives down to assembly-line workers?"
Business schools have been most successful at instilling teamwork in students. Many schools organize students into teams and assign group projects such as consulting work for companies. In the Leadership Effectiveness and Development course at the University of Chicago, students trek to Lake Geneva, Wis., where they participate in such team-building exercises as navigating ropes and climbing walls. They also are videotaped while working on team projects, and then watch the tape to analyze the group dynamics.

The tougher challenge for most schools tends to be developing leadership and interpersonal communications. In fact, some educators believe it's a waste of time trying to teach these skills, and argue they can only be mastered through practice. The University of Southern California's Marshall School made business communications an academic department more than two decades ago to teach students the art of business speaking and writing and to develop their persuasion skills. But as a department, it still doesn't get much respect from some professors. "Communications isn't seen as important by some faculty members who believe it takes away time and money from more serious academic disciplines," says Shirley Maxey, chairman of the business communications department.

Even more skeptical are students. "Budding M.B.A.s tend to be overly confident," Ms. Maxey says. "Our biggest single problem is convincing them they don't have the skills needed to communicate well in a corporate environment." Soft skills are indeed hard to teach, but many schools are trying a variety of approaches these days. Stanford University offers the courses "Paths to Power" and "Genius and Folly," which Prof. Rod Kramer describes as "a look at leaders who do things very well but sometimes shoot themselves in the foot." Visiting executives at Yale University such as Roger Enrico, former chief executive of PepsiCo Inc., teach minicourses on what it takes to run a multinational corporation. And as part of its leadership focus, London Business School assigns students to a "shadowing project" that requires them to silently observe a manager on the job for five days and then submit a report on their experience.

Can They Write?

Even before students reach the classroom, more schools are screening for communication skills and leadership traits by requiring face-to-face interviews with applicants. Professors and administrators at Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Management have been so appalled with applicants' weak spelling and writing skills that they have created a professional writing course requirement for all new M.B.A. students. To be excused from the class, students must pass a rigorous writing test.

The course will include an array of writing assignments, from simulated "breaking news" stories to songs and business proposals. "We're really ramping up our communication and writing courses this fall," says Fred Talbott, professor of management communication and a former journalist and contributing writer to NBC's "Saturday Night Live" show. "For too long, communications skills have been the stepchild in M.B.A. programs," Mr. Talbott says.
Recruiters say they often see a lack of interpersonal and leadership skills in M.B.A. graduates from schools with a quantitative focus, such as Carnegie Mellon University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. While neither school can promise to turn every student into a polished leader, both are addressing recruiters' concerns.

Best and Brightest

"M.B.A. students may get by on their technical and quantitative skills the first couples of years out of school," says Rob Greenly, the new director of leadership at M.I.T.'s Sloan School of Management. "But soon, leadership and communication skills come to the fore in distinguishing the managers whose careers really take off."

Sloan is reviewing the entire curriculum, he says, to determine how it can build leadership lessons into more courses. Mr. Greenly, previously vice president of leadership and organization development at Boston Scientific Corp., teaches seminars on "emotional intelligence" and "leading large-scale change" and organizes a leadership film series featuring such popular movies as "Gladiator," "Elizabeth" and "Remember the Titans."

At Carnegie Mellon, many of the programs and courses on communication and interpersonal skills are the work of Douglas Dunn, who retired this year as dean of the Graduate School of Industrial Administration. He was motivated to focus on communication because as an executive at AT&T Corp., he was constantly frustrated by the unreadable memos he received from employees with M.B.A. degrees. "I felt I had to take out my green pen and edit it just so I could understand it," he recalls.

Mr. Dunn added two full-time communications faculty members and increased the number of communication electives to seven from two. He even brought in etiquette consultants to teach students how to hold a wine glass and plate and still shake hands at receptions, and how many drinks are acceptable at business events (answer: just one).

Flair for Drama

Geoffrey Hitch, who teaches an acting class for M.B.A. students at Carnegie Mellon, says, "Number-crunching dominates the personalities of many of the students here who come from engineering and mathematics backgrounds; it's my job to remind them they're human." Says Mr. Hitch, "It's the human impression and connections that really matter in business." Quoting from Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," he says, it's all about "a smile and a shoeshine." In Mr. Hitch's course, class activities include readings from that play and another Arthur Miller drama, "All My Sons"; students are asked to play the part least like themselves.

Drama plays a big part in leadership and communication instruction at Cranfield University in Cranfield, England. Instructors take the students to the reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe Theater in London, where the students, through readings of "Henry V," learn how to make inspired speeches and to analyze leadership skills. Cranfield also
tries to develop communication and presentation skills through a course that includes a 
crisis-management exercise in its television studio. Student teams play the role of a board 
of directors facing hostile news reporters after a corporate disaster.

It's sometimes overlooked that communication is a two-way endeavor, so some schools 
focus on another personal skill as well: listening. The University of Notre Dame has 
developed a course devoted entirely to listening and responding. Students learn about 
"listening barriers," such as finishing someone else's sentence or becoming defensive, and 
engage in a variety of classroom exercises. For instance, they listen to instructions for 
playing cribbage, and then the professor watches to see how long they can play before 
they get stuck and need help.

"Listening is a skill that doesn't get much attention because it seems that all of the power 
in an interaction is with the speaker," says Sandra Collins, an assistant professor who 
teaches the class. "But the power is really divided between the speaker and the listener." 
People don't realize, she adds, that managers spend about 40% of their time listening -- 
though not always effectively.

Emphasis on Ethics

Leadership courses with a focus on ethics will be especially in vogue this school year, 
playing off the meltdown of Enron Corp. and other corporate scandals in the headlines. 
The Business Leadership Center at Southern Methodist University will offer seminars 
dealing with "crisis leadership" and "when do you trust people in a business transaction."

A course entitled "The Moral Leader" is expected to be standing-room-only at Harvard 
Business School. Joseph Badaracco teaches about ethical issues facing managers through 
such classic works of fiction as "Macbeth," "The Secret Sharer" and "The Last Tycoon." 
"My course should be especially applicable to current events," Mr. Badaracco says, 
"because a lot of literature deals with people for whom things don't turn out well."

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