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THEORY & PRACTICE**M.B.A. Programs Hone 'Soft Skills'**By **PHRED DVORAK**
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During his first year as a student at Dartmouth University's Tuck School of Business, Nuno Carneiro got a crash course in people skills.

First, classmates rated him on qualities such as listening, teamwork and sensitivity to others. Then, he drew up a "leadership development plan" that listed his shortcomings, such as rushing through presentations. Finally, Mr. Carneiro met with the director of the M.B.A. program for a "coaching" session, where the two identified ways he could improve. One suggestion: hone presentation skills by joining a group of Tuck students that offer consulting services to local businesses.

"It's a very safe way to apply little changes of behavior," Mr. Carneiro says of the process.

Mr. Carneiro's experience reflects the greater attention some business schools are devoting to topics such as teamwork, leadership and communicating -- the "softer" side of management. Typically, those soft skills got shorter shrift in M.B.A. programs than "hard" skills such as strategy or financial analysis.

The schools are responding to employers' growing interest in soft skills. Executive suites are increasingly composed of managers running far-flung operations who must attract and retain knowledgeable workers. That puts a premium on skills such as communicating and brokering compromises, says Warren Bennis, a professor at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business and author of a best-selling book on leadership.


"It isn't just nice -- these interpersonal skills," Mr. Bennis says. "It's about stuff that's necessary to lead a complex organization."

In bolstering their soft-skills training, business schools are copying and adapting popular corporate techniques such as coaching, personality assessments and peer feedback.

Recruiters told professors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management that graduates needed better leadership skills. In response, the school added classes and workshops on topics including developing relationships and leading meetings. Last fall, it began requiring first-year students to work on leadership style and communication with second-year "coaches."

The Stanford Graduate School of Business this fall will revamp its leadership-training curriculum, requiring all first-year students to take personality tests, participate in teamwork and management-simulation exercises and critique their people skills. The school will bring in executive coaches to watch the simulations and offer advice. The training is aimed at getting students to look at

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how they behave and how effective they are, says Evelyn Williams, an expert in leadership simulations who is overseeing much of the new coursework.

Our M.B.A. students "can pontificate like the best of them. But can they do?" says Ms. Williams.

At Tuck, Dean Paul Danos and other professors began sensing a need for more leadership training a few years ago, recalls David Pyke, associate dean for the M.B.A. program. Employers were asking Tuck to develop leadership programs for their managers. Alumni on Tuck's advisory board commented that graduates weren't being assertive in job interviews.

Mr. Pyke and other faculty members designed a leadership-development program, modeled in part on techniques companies use for executives. The program, launched in the fall of 2004, puts first-year students in teams of five. They complete coursework together and help each other with assignments.

The students rate themselves and each other on how well they've operated in those teams, judging whether each person "solicits feedback and acts on it" or helps "manage conflict." The students get a report comparing their own ratings to those of their peers. They use the reports to design leadership-development plans and attend coaching sessions -- all common techniques in corporate leadership-development programs.

The coaches are faculty members who have had training in executive-coaching techniques. Elizabeth Winslow, a coach and the leadership program director, suggested one student who tended to interrupt others count to 15 before he offered his own opinion.

Christine Quirolo, a second-year M.B.A. student who now mentors first-years in leadership, says her teammates rated her relatively low on confidence and assertiveness. They pointed out that she often prefaced statements with disclaimers like "this is probably wrong, but..."

Ms. Quirolo, a liberal-arts major in college, decided that her lack of confidence stemmed from her uncertain command of "hard" management topics such as financial analysis and modeling. She took more classes in those areas and worked on presenting her opinions more assertively; she also chose an internship that called for analyzing financial data.

At the end of the internship, Ms. Quirolo says she confided to her supervisor that she had been working to improve her assertiveness and asked how she had done. The supervisor told her he would never have guessed she had a problem, she says.

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Corrections & Amplifications:

The Tuck School of Business is at Dartmouth College. This article incorrectly refers to the institution as Dartmouth University.

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