

# Education

## M.B.A. candidates learn leadership, in the mud

COËTQUIDAN, FRANCE

An executive program dares managers to try out a French boot camp

BY CHRISTOPHER F. SCHUETZ

On a particularly muddy June day in Brittany, a group of bankers, managers and consultants tried to solve an unusual problem. Using a wooden plank, several lengths of rope, a squished plastic oil drum and a metal grid, they were trying to cross two daunting pits to retrieve an injured colleague.

Though the immediate objective of the exercise was simple to grasp, the eventual key to the problem — the full cooperation of a team consisting of German, French, Belgian and Indian citizens — was tougher to realize.

“You can read thousand of theories on leadership, but this is far more effective,” said Harshavardhan Bhat, one of the participants in the exercise, which was part of an 18-month executive M.B.A. program held jointly by ESSEC Business School in France and the University of Mannheim in Germany.

Though the pits were imaginary and the injured colleague a stuffed doll, the lessons in leadership, problem solving and teamwork were real.

The two days of training were held on some of the French military’s most hallowed ground: the officer training school of Saint-Cyr.

The school holds regular leadership classes, mostly for French corporations and also for two M.B.A. programs: the ESSEC-Mannheim collaboration, and one at HEC Paris.

All students — who are generally between 30 and 40 years of age, though some are older — are expected to partake in the course’s physical challenges. Ravines are crossed, walls are scaled, rafts are constructed, bridges are built, and a hypothetical refugee camp is designed. Under the supervision of off-duty or retired military officers, future business leaders are trained in the basics of leadership and problem solving.

Saint-Cyr, which is as legendary in France as West Point is in the United States, has trained French officers since it was founded by Napoleon in 1802. From Gen. Charles de Gaulle to Marshal Jacques-Philippe Leclerc, virtually all French Army officers at one point in their lives marched on its parade grounds and crawled through the same muddied training grounds as the 90 executive M.B.A. students did last month.

“We believe that anybody can become a good leader, if that person is willing and if that person is properly trained,” said retired Capt. Alexandre de La Nézière.

Captain de La Nézière, who headed commando groups in the Middle East, the Ivory Coast and the Balkans, led some of the ESSEC-Mannheim students through the exercises.

Introducing himself by his first name, and insisting that rank — though prominently displayed on his fatigues — did not matter, he told the class that he was there to share his experiences as a leader, not to lead himself.

One point stressed here is that unless a single, supported leader coordinates



Students doing field maneuvers for a course organized by French and German business schools at France’s premier officer training school, located at Saint-Cyr in Brittany.

the group, various problems cannot be solved. As basic as the concept seemed, the cacophony of suggestions and arguments among the 10 participants — executives, managers and directors who were used to giving the orders — showed how hard it was both to lead and to be led.

“Keeping a group of 10 alpha people on target becomes pretty interesting,”

said Benjamin Walter, a banker and a participant in the class.

After several failures, during which both the tools and the injured colleague fell into the imaginary ravine, the team achieved its goal. As three of the participants hoisted the beam into the air, four others used ropes to guide it into place, while the rest worked out a strategy for crossing the second pit. The temporary



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leader, after initially becoming too involved in tying knots and micro-managing the teams, learned to step back and oversee the operation.

When military cadets do the same exercises, they usually come up with the same solutions, Captain de La Nézière explained; they just get there much more quickly.

“It’s all about the human aspect,”

said Captain de La Nézière, who said that successful leadership in the army was about managing and motivating people.

At the end of a 12-hour day of overcoming obstacles and solving problems, most students, wet and cold from the rain, were decidedly out of their comfort zones. The collegial bonhomie had worn off, and both hands and nerves were raw.

As if by design, communication between the group members became less polite and more direct. Though it is difficult to conceive of such physically draining situations in the boardroom, students were able to relate to the level of stress.

The leadership training in Saint-Cyr and the subsequent debriefing at ESSEC’s campus in Cergy, outside Paris, takes up a relatively short time in the curriculum. However, the experience looms large for many of the students, who say that they have been looking forward to it since they first heard about it.

The military leadership program has been a part of the executive M.B.A. program at ESSEC since 2010. According to Allan Jenkins, the program director, it is a key component in the program’s module on leadership.

“Leadership comes in many different elements, and we look for a way to instruct them all,” Mr. Jenkins said.

Lt. Col. Cyril Barth, who heads the Saint-Cyr foundation that trains the

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business students, feels that the army, with its tradition of leadership in crisis situations, has something it can teach civilian leaders. He thinks of the leadership training as an exchange between the military and the civilian worlds, two spheres that have become more distant since the end of mandatory military service in France nearly two decades ago.

A particular focus for the Mannheim contingent is intercultural leadership. The Mannheim students will visit New York and Shanghai in the course of their program and will collaborate with business students in both places.

Cultural differences are expected to crop up in those distant places, but they also show up when the two cohort classes — one from France and one from Germany — first work together, according to Daniel J. Veit, Mannheim’s program director.

“Don’t underestimate the difference between French and German business cultures,” he said.

According to Mr. Veit, the two cultures at the heart of many European business relationships are different enough that this leadership exercise can be useful for his mostly Germany-based executive M.B.A. students.

Mingfei Li, who runs his own manufacturing business in Germany and China, is also part of the executive M.B.A. program. As a young man he went through military training in China before studying at a university, but he found it did not do much to prepare him for his engineering degree.

Now, as a business leader, he concedes that he might be able to learn something at the famous military school.

“In normal life, people are doing business with ties and suits. While it seems different to military life, I feel both have a lot in common — teamwork, competition, discipline and ‘thinking before doing,’” Mr. Li said.