Taste real world of competition
Kaplan’s business simulation program is going places

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BEN TILLEY
BANK OF QUEENSLAND MANAGER

FOR training consultant Phil Todd, one of the great problems afflicting human resource departments globally is that they waste so much talent. He suggests many HR practitioners aren’t quite sure how to recognise and develop talent and the upshot of this is talented people are often the first people to move when HR fails.

Based in Britain, Todd is a training consultant with corporate education specialists Kaplan. He spent a week last month in Australia acting as a facilitator in the Kaplan Business Challenge, a two-day management program held in Sydney and Melbourne.

Todd says the program is an experiential learning process.

“I know that sounds like US marketing speak, but I truly believe people need to use all their senses to learn.

“A long time ago I read a Confucius phrase that stuck with me: ‘I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.’

“The purpose of the challenge is to show participants a holistic view of a business and to allow people to embrace finance as part of the toolkit management needs to run a successful company.

“Todds says it’s important to get managers to understand that finance is just part of this overall toolkit. Moreover, he says it allows managers who aren’t working in finance to gain an understanding of the financial circumstances of the decisions they make.

Ben Tilley, organisational development manager for the Bank of Queensland, agrees. He says for him was gaining a better understanding of the impact individual decisions make on the whole business and bottom line.

“The real value of the Kaplan Business Challenge is grasping impact. People in banks understand banks. They understand finance. But seeing linkage isn’t an opportunity most people get. It is very rare for people to see across an entire business and understand the impact of their decisions,” Tilley says.

Another key part of the program is helping people understand what makes a great leader.

“IT’s about getting people to understand what leadership is about and that leadership can be learned.

“At the leadership level, what we like to do is work with people very intensely over four to five days and really strip them back. We need to get people to open their eyes to new ideas. We then give them the tools to move forward, and they have nowhere to hide.”

Obviously, the program is not a cure-all churning out new leaders in a few days. Todd says it’s a process that can take up to 18 months and, ultimately, “individuals have to be prepared to make the effort”.

Importantly, the program is
starting to see tangible results. Feedback from individual participants has been that they have greater self-awareness and more motivated staff.

According to Todd, the great test of leadership for most people is trying to get a team motivated without resorting to bullying.

Managers need to understand people better and the cultural nuances within a group.

For Todd, it begins, and almost ends, with self-awareness.

“Once you understand you — what you are and who you are — and once you understand the impact you have on other people, then you have the ammunition to be able to do something about being a great leader,” he says.

He says you can see the differing levels of seniority within a company from the program itself: while more junior managers will compete vigorously with each other in the two-day course, the longer leadership course over five days doesn’t see participants focus on competition; rather, they look to innovation and how best to move the company forward.

For the Bank of Queensland’s Tilley, the program was something the bank decided to implement with potential leaders in the company.

“We have a group of middle managers and this is the right time in their careers to learn the critical nature of decisions,” he says.

“It will give them good grounding in the financial impacts of decision-making.”

Kaplan Professional vice-president Marilyn Hill says a key part of the program is tailoring it to suit a company’s objectives such as those of Bank of Queensland.

“It’s an innovative approach to learning and development with a strong focus on career outcomes for individuals and groups of individuals,” she concludes.