

Testing MBAs

Mary Teresa Bitti, *Financial Post* Published: Tuesday, January 12, 2010

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Getty Images Files "The

importance of teamwork, the importance of trust and the need to keep focused on the big picture" are just three of the business lessons DeGroot team leader Shivalika Handa learned from the FEI ...

The case, Part I: Identify the key issues that Tim Hortons Inc. faces today and the strategies and action plans that you would recommend to the Board of Directors to address them.

Part II: Hypothetical crisis scenario. What actions would you recommend Tim Hortons take if: Contaminated coffee beans from a major supplier are discovered in the supply chain, and the discovery has garnered considerable negative publicity from local and national media, with consequent concerns from public health officials.

Ready. Set. Go.

This was the brief that 10 MBA teams representing business schools across the country were given when they came to Toronto in November to put their

academic training to the test in the Financial Executives International (FEI) Canada's fourth annual invitation-only MBA real-time case study competition.

"The only information we were given beforehand were the rules," says Shivalika Handa, team leader for first-time participant DeGroot School of Business and, as it turns out, this year's winners.

"Previous winning presentations are posted on the Web site so we had a chance to look at what a winning case study looked like, but that was it. Otherwise it was a live case."

Ms. Handa is not new to academic case competitions. In fact, she had a few under her belt before the FEI competition. Each event, she says, provided valuable experience.

"It gives us an opportunity to put our degree to work and to showcase our skills."

Business school competitions have become de rigueur, and, an important aspect of the MBA experience. Each year students have their pick of competitions and are encouraged to take part.

Simon Fraser University's Student Affairs office lists several reasons students should go for it: "Receive in-depth coaching on Business Plans/ Case Analysis and Presentation Skills; gain the confidence and skills to analyze and solve real life business problems and plans under pressure; have direct experiences that will be a major strength on your resume; travel within Canada, the USA, or overseas with all expenses covered; learn to be a team player and make life long friends; network with university students across Canada and around the world; and most importantly ... have the time of your life!"

For students and business schools, case study competitions offer the opportunity to test the relevancy of the skills and theories learned in class via a quasi real life scenario--and to see how they stack up against others. Ms. Handa says she took away three key learnings from the Best in Class competition: "The importance of teamwork, the importance of trust, and the need to keep focused on the big picture and not let little things get in the way."

For the organizers and businesses that take part, the rewards vary. According to Michael Conway, chief executive and national president of FEI Canada, its MBA Case Competition dovetails perfectly with FEI's mandate. "We represent the senior financial executives of the country with 2000 members. The competition gives us a couple of opportunities to connect academia with corporate Canada and to support future business leaders and hopefully future members."

And better ties means better business leaders, says Judy Munro, the chairwoman of the Best in Class organizing committee, FEI Canada Toronto chapter. "You don't want them completely trained on technical skills, you want them to be trained on real-life skills, and I think the competition helps them do that. In the days of cutbacks in MBA schools and not having the faculty in which to execute an event like this, who better to do it? We are an organization of senior financial executives. I looked around and said how do we lever all of our corporate relationships and do something that is meaningful and community minded and contribute and at the same time build our relationships with the academic world?"

For her part, Ms. Munro-- who as moderator watches all the presentations -- says certain schools more than others are starting to realize these real-life business simulations are an important part of business education.

"They are spending more time trying to prepare students for real-life situations. They know how important thinking on your feet is. Deans often call and ask how to prepare. I always say, 'Just make sure they have a good night's sleep.' You either have been teaching it all along and your students will be good competitors or not."

Don Schroeder, president and CEO of Tim Hortons, believes such competitions are good for business. "Whether they came to the right conclusion or not in my mind was not key. It was about good business thinking, using logic, dealing with time pressure, dealing with needing to work together as a team, strong presentation skills. It was a great package of skills that they were able to demonstrate and will be very useful to them when they enter the business world,"

Mr. Schroeder says. "In real life, you don't get to pick the problem, the problem picks you. They have to come up with a solution and work together as a team, think quickly and critically. If we can be part of the system to help these students prepare for when they do get out into the real business world, we are happy to be part of it."

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