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Symposium Session

Learning from Leadership at all Levels: Life Events and Immersive Experiences

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Abstract

We face a competitive global environment characterized by turbulence, complexity, interconnectedness and change across all sectors. Developing leaders who can perform effectively under these conditions is an enormous challenge, as people are constantly pushed beyond their capabilities. This dynamic and interactive Symposium explores the core capabilities that leaders need and shares some of the best practices and relevant lessons for leadership development across multiple career levels. Specific focus is placed on our research and teaching innovations in leveraging life events and immersive experiences for accelerated development. Faculty at all levels are encouraged to participate in this critical conversation.

Learning from Leadership at all Levels: Life Events and Immersive Experiences

Introduction

The competitive global environment today is characterized by turbulence, complexity and change. Global leaders must learn to lead across cultural and organizational boundaries in this chaotic context while at the same time driving strategic and operational effectiveness (Yammarino, 2014). Developing leaders who can perform effectively under these conditions is an enormous challenge. It is clear that leadership development initiatives that are successful in some contexts with learners at one career stage are often ineffective in other organizational settings with participants at different career levels and backgrounds. Teaching and learning programs and curricula must therefore be adaptive, participant-focused, creative and carefully designed to evoke capability development in rich, rigorous and memorable ways. This, too, is an enormous challenge.

Toward this challenge, this session provides real-world examples of best practices in designing and implementing successful leadership development teaching initiatives in multiple domains. Experienced faculty members from two leading universities, one in Ireland and the other from the US, will share their lessons garnered from their use of innovative pedagogy that leverages life events and immersive experiences to actively engage learning and accelerate leadership development. Effective teaching and learning examples are provided here to address learners across multiple career stages, including undergraduate students, graduate and MBA students, professional management development programs and executive education. Individual lessons and curriculum are developed for each domain, along with distillation of common themes and successful approaches that transcend or link learners across these different levels. Our goal is to share a dynamic, interactive and spirited review of multiple innovations in teaching leadership – and in learning from real leaders – to spark valuable conversations with MOBTS participants on how we can accelerate our own development as teachers in helping current and future leaders perform more effectively to be able to lead positive change in our rapidly evolving global landscape.

Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications

Leaders today operate in what has become known as a “VUCA” world: Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (Johansen, 2009). To address and combat this punishing environment, we seek pedagogy, initiatives and programs that will enable leaders to thrive under uncertainty while forming leadership teams that are diverse and creative (Hill et al., 2014). It has long been understood that developing leaders who can perform under pressure requires both structured and unstructured learning through experiences where the leaders are frequently in “stretch” developmental assignments and uncomfortable situations to develop greater self-awareness and improved decision-making under uncertainty (McCall, 2002; Goldsmith, 2003). In this sense, the critical leadership meta-competencies are personal identity awareness and adaptability, where leaders are *both* highly self-aware and adaptable, being reflexive and open to learn about themselves and actively willing to adapt and place themselves in uncomfortable learning situations (McCarthy, O’Connell and Hall, 2005). Reflecting on one’s life story and crucible events is just one example of this.

Further, as the competitive landscape has become increasingly interconnected and truly global, we must also develop leaders who are culturally competent, sensitive and aware, with cosmopolitan and open views of the changing world and the complex interplay of diverse cultural values (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Dalton et al, 2003; George, 2012; Conger, 2014). Leaders must be able to practice respectful inquiry, performing and learning through openly asking followers questions and actively listening and attending to responses (Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). Leadership development initiatives that do not take into account cultural and organizational context, leverage diverse values and mindsets across varying career stages and hierarchical levels, and provide clear opportunities for reflective personal learning are destined to fail (Gurdjian et al., 2014).

At the same time, students, managers and leaders in all domains report intense competition for their time, energy and focus. Traditional classroom-based teaching, lectures, case studies,

development programs or expatriate rotational assignments are often too time consuming, too distant from the experience of managerial work, too expensive, or some combination of all of these factors. So, the key question is how do we create leadership developmental initiatives that are rich enough in intercultural context, drive meaningful reflexive learning, convey strategic and operational lessons, and yet are cost effective and minimally (or optimally) invasive on the learner's time and availability?

One response to this dilemma is the rise of immersive learning experiences, where learners, typically corporate managers, are placed in interim and short-term assignments such as working in developing nations within nonprofit organizations and NGOs and in disadvantaged urban areas as an integral element of each manager's personal leadership development plan at their home corporation. These assignments are built around specific learning goals tailored to each participant and include coaching and mentoring during and after the experience to maximize the reflection, adaptability and self-awareness of the learners. As described by Mirvis et al. (2014: 240), "Global service learning assignments typically put participants into a multicultural milieu where they are dealing with people who may have very different outlooks, motivations, and goals. Executives, lacking formal power in this context, have to learn to listen openly to different points of view, explore what is behind them, and exercise a deft diplomatic touch in the face of potential conflicts. In this context, a strong case can also be made for 'team based' service as it can help multicultural groups to simultaneously improve their own teamwork and serve diverse communities more effectively." Ranging from as little as two or three weeks to as long as two or three months, these global immersive learning experiences require reflexive learning and build substantial intercultural competence for developing responsible global leaders, while providing the local organization and community with managerial and business expertise that otherwise would have been impossible (Mirvis et al. 2012; 2014; Pless et al., 2011). These immersive learning experiences provide the space and time for reflexive learning that is necessary to develop responsible global leaders (Gersten et al., 2012; Rosenblatt et al., 2013).

In this way, we extend this research and practice to explore multiple views of creative pedagogy and innovative teaching approaches that use life events and immersive experiences to accelerate leadership development for diverse learners at varying life and career stages, as described below. In the life story work, life events can include career transition points, the maturation cycle from childhood to adulthood to parenthood and transitions from manager to leader. The identification of a life theme can aid managers in identifying how their work and role in society matters – giving them an anchor to grasp when their values are threatened by the experience and challenges of work.

Discussion and Overview

This Symposium actively explores the challenge of creating effective and engaging learning initiatives for teaching leadership to multiple levels of students and learners. A diverse group of experienced faculty members from Boston University and Dublin City University provide salient and relevant examples of curriculum, materials and teaching approaches that have proven to be successful in varying settings. The conversation is further advanced via interaction with a practitioner who runs an adventure experience company and who recently completed the Inca trail in the capacity of a porter to highlight the work that the porters do and the leadership challenges they face.

A key element to our successful pedagogy here is that we have discovered that we all consistently employ life events and immersive experiences to engage learners in reflection, analysis and discovery in examining their own leadership. Through these approaches, we have found that our students are able to exhibit increased self-awareness, enhanced empathy, and greater creativity to perform more effectively as leaders. This Symposium session serves as a forum for us to share our lessons and experiences from our innovative teaching approaches and as a platform to engage the MOBTS audience in conversation and critique to understand, apply and extend to learning to help shape further improvement to our collective pedagogy and teaching practice as faculty members in the field of leadership.

Session Description

We provide a 90-minute Symposium session. During this time, the authors, comprised of five senior faculty members with wide teaching and research expertise in leadership at two leading universities, share specific examples of their successful pedagogy in the leadership domain. This conversation is complemented by insights from work with an adventure experience practitioner who has served in a unique leadership role.

Each faculty presenter provides a dynamic 8-10 minute overview of their respective curriculum and context, as described below, along with the challenges, pitfalls and successes from their teaching experience. Live examples of interactive exercises are employed to demonstrate the teaching principles and engage the audience during the session. Our teaching initiatives involve engaging undergraduate students, graduate MS and MBA students, management development programs and executive education. Break-out sessions (15 minutes) are employed during the session for MOBTS participants to discuss individual questions with faculty members from each domain according to their respective interests. Finally, a concluding integrated discussion is moderated (20 minutes) to distill common themes, raise additional questions, critique and concerns, and to discuss ideas for future enhancements and improvements.

A summary of each faculty member's teaching innovations discussed at the Symposium is provided below:

- The transformation of a large multi-section undergraduate Organization Behavior course (1,000 students per year, in 30 discussion sections) at the Questrom School of Business at Boston University through the implementation of creative arts-based experiential exercises and a studio classroom model. We also employ innovative technology-enhanced lecture delivery models that have improved the student learning experience, use of digital content of conceptual and theoretical material to allow more classroom time for application and experiential learning, diverse team experiences, and direct engagement with managers and leaders at external organizations in industry to learn firsthand from studying and discussing real leadership in action.

- The large 500-student lectures in this Business School course (OB221, The Dynamics of Leading Organizations & People) are infused with surprise visits by musicians and performers, who creatively demonstrate the course's concepts in team dynamics, collaboration, leadership and dealing with complexity. In addition, a live stage play performed by School of Theatre students and faculty is employed as a real-time "case study" in conflict and power for students to analyze at multiple levels of learning in subsequent small group discussion sections. Designers from the university's College of Fine Arts also come to class discussions to serve as expert consultants in a "Project Runway-style" design exercise in creativity and decision-making in groups and teams.
- At the same time, student teams in the course are tasked with gaining access to an actual management team in a business or nonprofit organization to conduct onsite interviews and observation of management and teamwork in action. In this way, our students see and hear the course's concepts and lessons in the voices and behavior of practicing managers, which reinforces the very same principles that the actors, designers and musicians value in their collective work as creative ensemble. Similarly, reflective exercises and peer coaching and feedback processes are instituted throughout the semester to increase students' self-awareness and to leverage the students' own teamwork as a dynamic learning environment to practice and study teamwork.
- Discussion class sessions were redesigned to be experiential studio model, where students work in groups to practice and apply course concepts in a more immersive, hands-on manner, with emphasis on self discovery, engagement and practical application of course concepts.
- We also designed and implemented a digital media production process within OB221 to create custom course content, distill lessons and enhance students' learning experience. We produce our own creative digital content each year that engages our OB221 students in their exploration and discovery of course content through the use of short films, interviews and digital media for core topics that

are curated and deployed as creative content, online resources and teaching materials. This content illustrates and helps teach course lessons in a real-time way, using the voices and examples of our own current and former OB221 students to actively describe concepts and lessons as they occur in their actual work. Interestingly, students have followed our lead here and are also developing more of their own digital content and short videos that capture lessons and experiences to not only expand and reinforce their learning but also to enhance the quality of their deliverables, build valuable integrative skills, and provide a knowledge base and content that can be used in future classes. See some examples of our custom OB221 digital content through the links below:

[Capstone OB221 video](#)

[OB221 Tips for Team Meetings](#)

[What is Leadership?](#)

- Lecture content is systematically distributed and facilitated through traditional face-to-face lectures as well as other synchronous alternatives where students experience the lecture as digital media in their smaller group discussion class sections of 30-36 students that is moderated in a classroom by their discussion instructor as well as online through a virtual chat feature. Lecture content is also available in digital format asynchronously for subsequent viewing or review. The use of varied formats of content distribution engages multiple modes of learning in our students and further enhances self-awareness and strengthens adaptability and learning agility.
 - A feature article profiling the successful transformation of this course as a “success story” for innovative pedagogy and the creative use of digital learning initiatives is provided as Exhibit 1.
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- The development of an undergraduate Leadership seminar at Boston University that employs service learning in the nonprofit sector for students to explore and build their leadership capability by working with a small team to design, develop and execute an impactful service learning project (see Exhibit 2). This course also engages students with

dynamic learning opportunities through interactions with organizations such as a renowned university-wide institution dedicated to social justice and civil rights ([The Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground](#) at Boston University), and with global leaders from developing nations serving as Fulbright Fellows in the [Humphrey Fellowship Program](#) at Boston University, as well as other guest speakers and experiential initiatives designed to provide undergraduate students with a variety of leadership learning and development opportunities. All of these experiences build upon in-class leadership development opportunities in which the students lead small group discussions of important leadership concepts and practices and then design, engage in, and reflect upon personal “leader experiments” throughout the semester;

- Focusing on women’s leadership journeys, leadership development initiatives aimed at women often fail to take into consideration potential disengagement from leadership tracks due to temporal invisibility from the workplace (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; McDonald, Bradley & Brown, 2008). Career transitions are often characterized by a myriad of challenges. Such challenges can disrupt a sense of self or identity (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015) but while they can be difficult, they almost always present a valuable learning opportunity that can teach one so much about leading effectively. Individuals on leadership journeys must come to appreciate the evolving nature of their professional identities and through careful reflection on lived transitional experiences, they can learn much about themselves and, more importantly, on how they manage their relationships with others (Freeney, van der Werff & Collings, 2018). Ultimately, transitions have to potential to derail progression towards senior leadership roles, where the individual does not leverage both the challenges and the enrichment and where critical relationships at work fail to support learning.

While the focus here is on common transitional experiences for women and how that shapes their leadership journeys, extracting maximum learning value from career transitions is applicable to everyone on leadership journeys. The session focuses on leadership learning on the job and examines the roles of coaches, HR business partners

and line managers in leveraging transitions for high potential women. It examines the use of critical incident techniques and in-depth reflection to maximize lived learning experiences of key career transitions, which also supports effective reintegration and enriches personal development as leaders in the workplace. It draws on practices across 30 organisations in Ireland (See Exhibit 3). Consideration will also be given to the implementation of a class-based exercise based on critical reflection on lived key career transitions.

- The development of self-awareness and reflective capabilities in Executive MBA students using the life story methodology of Dan McAdams, Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University (see Exhibit 4). Coupled with 360-degree leadership evaluation, this allows participants to reflect on the influence of the past on their leadership style, consider their present abilities and develop a future-oriented leadership development plan. The use of the dramatic arts as part of this journey is illustrated in a short video clip filmed in theatre.
- In keeping with the theme of learning and leveraging non-traditional circumstances, we draw on a practitioner's reflection of serving as a porter on the famous Inca trail in Peru. Jarlath McHale took on the 43km iconic trail weighed down by a 25kg bag. Jarlath's work as a porter saw him complete all key tasks including transporting pots, pans and food and setting up camp each evening.

"You could be carrying everything from your own gear, the clients' gear, cooking utensils, food, a cooker, pots and pans, tents for yourself, tents for the clients, cooking tents, eating tents, sleeping mats, bags. The way it works is for two people to do the trail, you need six porters, for three people it's eight, and so on. So there were 20 of us, and 12 of them so we had food and equipment for 32 of us being carried by the porters"

In completing this task, Jarlath became the first non-Peruvian porter to complete the Inca Trail. This immersive experience highlights the dynamics of leadership, perseverance and

the critical and often neglected role of these key agents in enabling and sustaining tourism.

“They make your life so much easier. But what I really admired is that not only do they carry all your stuff, which is just fantastic, but they cheer you on when you come into camps. They really welcome you in, there’ll be two or three guys making sure that when you arrive at your camp spot or your lunch spot to meet you or direct you”

Jarlath’s interaction with the porters also highlights the role of humor and empathy. This experience forms a catalyst for conversations around success, perseverance and recognizing the voices and contributions from those who have been hitherto ignored. See the short film chronicling this leadership journey through the link below and as highlighted on Exhibit 5.

Carried Away: A Porter’s Story: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNkLDDWDUes>

This Symposium entails a lively and interactive session of shared inquiry with MOBTS participants. Our session develops and distills shared lessons across our diverse experiences and engages participants in an active conversation around how we can best employ these practices, approaches and ideas in our creative pedagogy going forward. Given the broad reach and wide impact of the topic of leadership and the breadth of the teaching innovations discussed in this Symposium, faculty from all levels and all domains are encouraged and very welcome to attend and participate.

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Exhibit 1

Boston University Digital Learning & Innovation Success Story Feature Article (OB221, 2017)



FACULTY VOICES

Successful Uses of Learning Technologies

Transforming the Large-Lecture Course

Using Innovative Concepts and Technology to Animate Organizational Behavior Come Alive

It takes vision, hard work, and leadership to make big changes in a mandatory large-lecture undergraduate course. Those same principles are taught in the Boston University Questrom School of Business sophomore course QSB OB 221, "The Dynamics of Leading Organizations." And they are the hallmarks of what associate professor Jack McCarthy and master lecturer Sandra Deacon Carr brought to the task of making the course truly dynamic for Questrom students.

They recognized that the traditional large lecture format was just not engaging the students. Said McCarthy, "It was a traditional lecture format, where we would herd 400 students into a large lecture hall once a week. Although we were teaching them psychological development, teamwork, and classical theories that were quite meaningful, the format was ineffective as a way to deliver the content."

BRINGING IN THE JIVE

As McCarthy and Deacon Carr and the Organizational Behavior department leadership began considering the structure of the course and how to more effectively reach their goals, they decided to cut back on the number of large lectures, replacing them with longer immersive learning discussion sessions—weekly three-hour studio classroom sessions in which students could actively learn through individual and team activities.

"In a lecture, you can give students content in context," explained Deacon Carr, "but you really can't get them engaged in their own learning and reflecting back on what it is that they've learned."

—Sandra Deacon Carr



engaged in their own learning and reflecting back on what it is that they've learned."

BUILDING AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE

Working cooperatively with the entire OB department to consider the changes they were making, McCarthy and Deacon Carr decided to shake up the remaining large lectures by surprising the students with live performances from jazz musicians, actors, an a cappella troupe, and dancers from BU's College of Fine Arts that were integrated into the theme and flow of the lecture. After each performance, the students would all on the stage and talk about how they shared leadership, how they collaborated, and how they solve problems to enable them to complete an effective performance.

Explained McCarthy, "We thought about how really understanding teamwork, who really understands diversity and collaboration. And that led us to artists and musicians, dancers, people in the theater group, who were doing this all the time as part of being an ensemble."

For example, McCarthy noted that for many years he had concluded his lecture on team dynamics by describing how a jazz troupe improvises. Since renovating OB221, he has actually hidden a BU jazz ensemble behind Questrom's lecture hall screen. The musicians actually emerge during the lecture to play jazz for the class, and then discuss their own team dynamics with the class.

"The ensemble can demonstrate the concepts much better than I could explain it in the hour lecture I've delivered. Just before," said McCarthy, "Using musicians to demonstrate the concepts in a real-time, interactive way

is often the highlight of the semester."

"The dance troupe demonstrates and then discusses shared leadership," said McCarthy. "We actually hid the dancers in the audience, and at the right moment they popped up, came forward, and created an ensemble on stage."



The same was done with an a cappella ensemble group. "They showed, literally and figuratively, how leadership is shared during the course of the performance," McCarthy explained.



Every performance was followed by a discussion, where the performers could talk about how they formed their group, established mutual trust, created diverse groups, and continued to work collaboratively.



McCarthy concluded, "It allowed us to create a lecture series that supported the studio model of the discussion section rather than the reverse, that forced us to think about creating dynamic lectures that were more community-building as well as content-delivering."

"Our focus is to get the students engaged ... learning on their own and experiencing it so that they'll remember it for years to come."

—Sandra Deacon Carr

ACTIVE LEARNING EXPERIMENTS

McCarthy, Deacon Carr, and their section instructors work together as a faculty team to use various active learning strategies to help the students learn more deeply during the weekly classes. For example, the students are divided into small groups and sent

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into the city with GPS devices, which are programmed with the locations of historic sites. For this assignment, the students are also provided with team-building exercises and puzzles to solve at each site. This strategy for hands-on learning gives students a much deeper understanding of organizational behavior than just reading or listening to lectures.

"My focus is to get the students engaged in really learning on their own and experiencing it so that they'll remember it for years to come," said Deacon Carr.

Another innovation is the Virtual Lecture. For this, the faculty manages smaller groups who watch and discuss McCarthy's lectures, which are simulcast into their classrooms. This enables faculty to work with students interactively around the lecture material. It has also enabled Questrom to accommodate the growing class size in its popular undergraduate program.

Another innovation is the use of video to get more teaching time and to help students reflect on what they've learned. Every semester, the students work in teams for a capstone project where they interview real managers about the real-world challenges of teamwork and management in their companies and organizations today. Students find it remarkable and reassuring that the managers they interview in industry frequently



cite the very same lessons about teamwork and leadership that the actors, dancers and musicians raised in their talk-back sessions at lectures—and these are the very same concepts and lessons that have been covered in the course's readings and lectures. McCarthy has used a grant from DLI to hire videographers to create a Capstone video that captures the highlights of what students have learned and chronicles how they felt about the process.

MANY BENEFITS TO COURSE TRANSFORMATION

The transformation of the large-lecture course has required the addition of some new faculty and the willingness among established faculty to change the way they think about teaching. But success breeds excitement, and the changes have yielded many benefits. For one thing, Questrom School of Business has been able to improve the quality of student learning even as it has had to accommodate rising enrollment. The innovative use of virtual lectures and studio classrooms enables Questrom to accommodate over 500 students per semester.

At the same time, student responses to the course have changed dramatically. While some students find the three-hour classes long, they are learning more and are more engaged.

McCarthy said, "The three-hour lecture isn't often practiced at the undergraduate level, but we know that having a

"We created a lecture series that supported the studio model of the discussion section rather than the reverse, that forced us to think about creating dynamic lectures that were more community-building as well as content-delivering."

—Jack McCarthy

larger block of time can be effective to teach concepts that are more lasting and that students can apply." After the course restructuring, he noted, "Students could explore in-depth experiential exercises. They could do much more discovery-based learning, and really hands-on learning, than ever before."

Deacon Carr acknowledged that it was initially challenging for faculty who are used to more of a traditional model to adapt to this approach. "They have to get used to the idea that their role now is as more of a facilitator of the content," she said. "A critical success factor in making a major change like this really supporting faculty through the transition and modeling it as well.

"We are making some strides that are important and that can be a model for other courses at the university potentially as well," said Deacon Carr.

Thanks to the Questrom School of Business



Chapters

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VIDEOS WORTH WATCHING

BU Arts Initiative Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12a25n16uM>



OB Concentration Video: <https://vimeo.com/252978311>



Spring 2017 OB221 Capstone Video: <https://vimeo.com/271464285>



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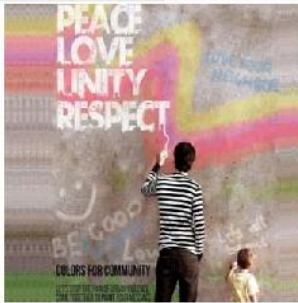
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Source: <https://digital.bu.edu/success-stories/transforming-the-large-lecture-course/>

Exhibit 2

Examples of Recent Service Learning Projects

LEADERSHIP IS ACTION



Learning to be a better leader requires you to do something different, take risks, act

Exhibit 3

Study of Leadership Practices in Women across 30 Organisations

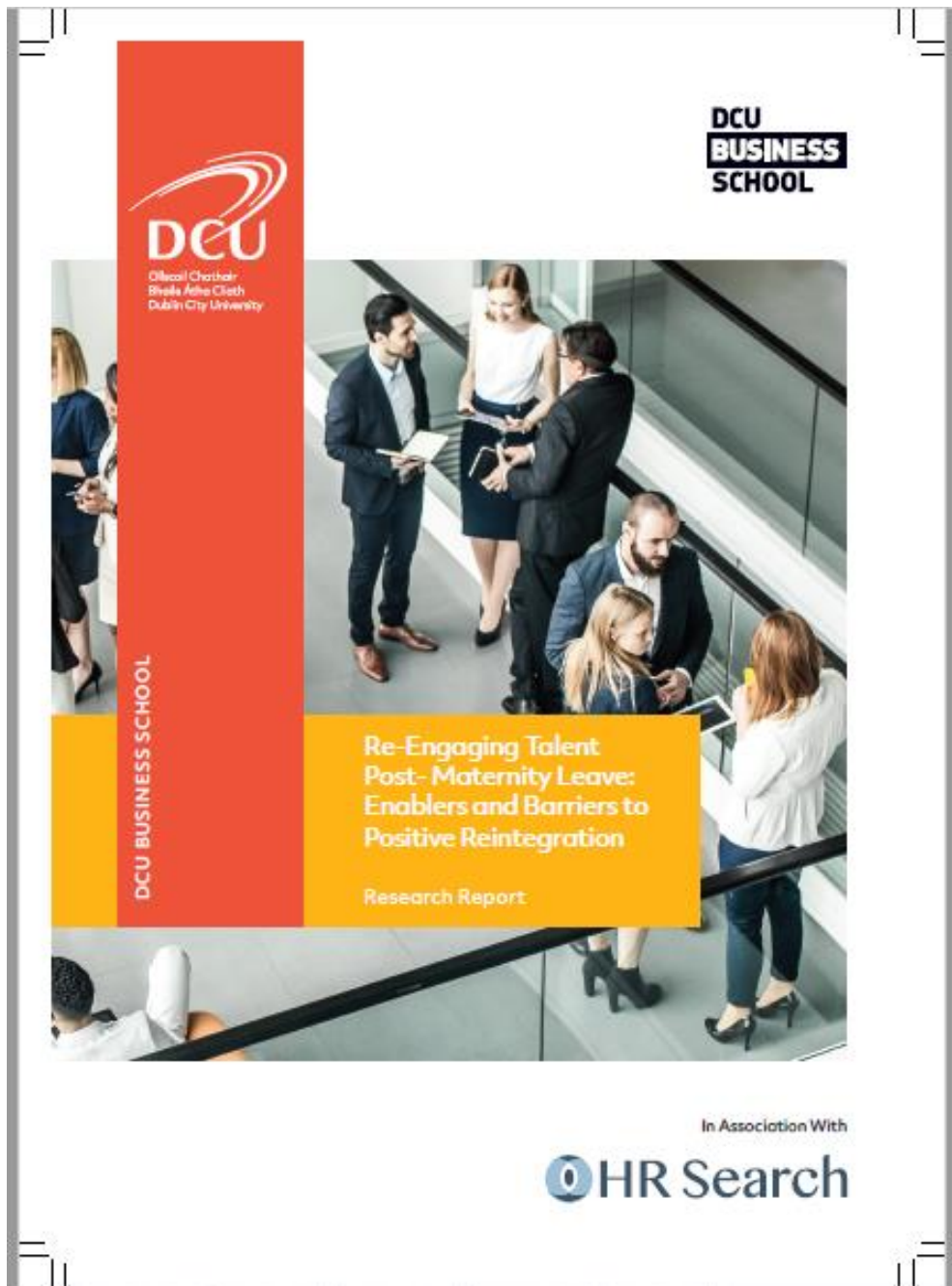
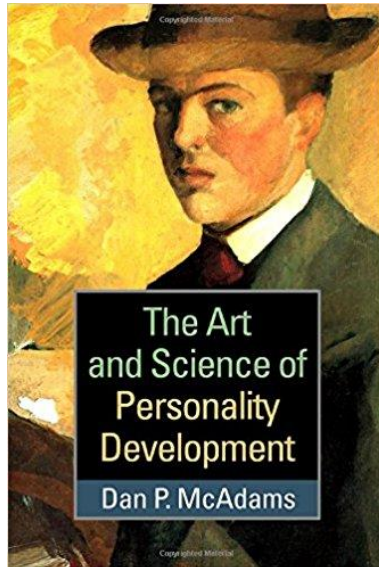


Exhibit 4

Life Story Methodology



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySDUoyL3KHg>

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PERSUASIVE LEADERSHIP: CONQUERING CORPORATE POLITICS

THREE-DAY PROGRAMME

Learn how to master your internal power and political networks with this highly experiential programme. Through theatre-based methods you will learn fundamental knowledge of the structural, tactical and psychological dimensions of persuasion. Using established leadership theories of persuasion, influencing and corporate politics, you will be able to provide and build your influence throughout your organisation.

Do you find company politics and power structures challenging? In your company experiencing increasing levels of volatility, complexity, and ambiguity?

Leaders in organisational environments like this need to be more aware of subtle stimuli and changes so that they can exercise influence rather than control. Being able to influence and persuade those around you is important for advancing careers, influencing policy and practice, managing change, and building relationships with existing – and potential – business partners.

This intensive three-day programme is designed to teach you the structural, tactical and psychological dimensions of persuasion. You will gain valuable experience using a broad range of unusual but effective approaches and interactions, to act with greater confidence and tactical mastery within your organisation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After this programme, you will be able to:

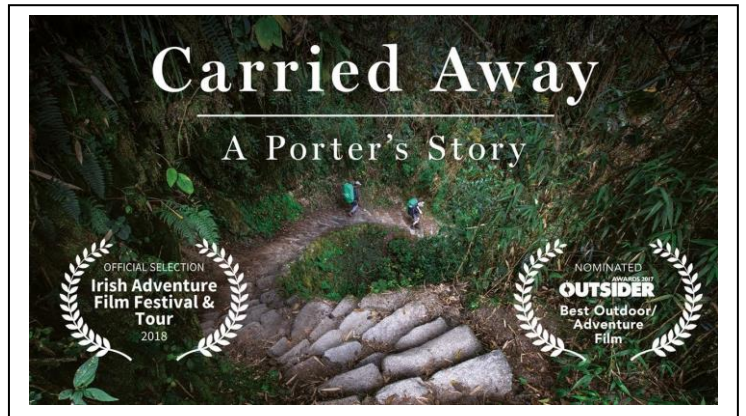
- use persuasive tools effectively
- avoid behaviour that is counterproductive
- meet and influence highly experienced people
- deal with corporate politics
- develop your style of influence and reward it
- determine benefits and costs of various influence techniques
- diagnose the political influence network within and outside of your organisation
- develop and implement strategies to effectively influence stakeholders, including customers, colleagues and board members.

"To lead, you must capture the heart and the head."
Prof. Patrick Plead

RSM - a force for positive change

Exhibit 5

Jarlath McHale on the Inca Trail



Media Coverage: [Outsider Magazine](#)

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