

First-Person Account



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Business Education à la Carte

Professors joined with executives to create a timely graduate-level business course specifically for their organization

By **Beverly L. Propst**

WEB EXTRAS

▣ **Reading list: A Sampling from Rutgers University's Reading List for Supply Chain Management**

▣ **Web site: Rutgers Institute for Management & Executive Development**

In 2001, my employer—Graybar Electric Co., a \$5.2 billion distributor of electrical, telecommunications and networking products and services—teamed with Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., to launch a management training program to give current and future leaders a broad base of business knowledge and experience.

Because Graybar has a long track record of promoting employees throughout the organization, this program has become an important element of Graybar's succession planning. Although I was appointed vice president of human resources in April, I enrolled in the program in October 2007 when I was senior attorney on Graybar's legal team specializing in employment, labor and litigation. To serve in both roles, I wanted to learn as much as possible about the business and build relationships with other leaders in the organization.

I also was interested in professional development. After practicing law for 11 years, I was ready for a new challenge. I wanted to get more business education, possibly in an MBA-type program. Not only would I learn more about Graybar, its business leaders and culture, I would expand my knowledge and skills.

After expressing interest in the program, I was invited to apply. Candidates seek nomination by a vice president and submit an application, resume and essay. My application included references from a

customer, a supplier and my supervisor. A committee of Graybar senior executives and Rutgers faculty that review submissions selected, for my cohort, 20 diverse individuals from different disciplines and geographic regions.

The program includes face-to-face meetings and regular online communication. Our cohort, the third such group, will meet together three times—at the beginning, at midterm and at the end for the final exam presentation. With e-mail and instant messaging, webinars, podcasts, conference calls, and Internet-based learning techniques, technology allows us to collaborate, complete group projects and prepare presentations throughout the 14-month program.

While there are no regular classes, we are responsible for finishing assignments and readings at our own pace and on our schedules. This allows us the flexibility to fit our studies around our jobs and personal obligations. For example, one recent assignment was to listen to a podcast of a lecture by Kevin Roberts, chief executive officer of Saatchi & Saatchi, an international advertising agency, on creating customer loyalty. Each team then drafted an article for our employee newsletter on what the Graybar brand stands for and how each employee strengthens the value of the brand in the eyes of customers.

Throughout the program, we will cover subjects ranging from accounting, finance, human resources, operations, sales and marketing to specific distribution and supply-chain theories. Our “textbooks” include well-known business books, and we also keep abreast of current events through publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *BusinessWeek* and *Forbes*.

Graybar Electric Co.

2007 revenue: \$5.2 billion.

Products and services: A diversified wholesaler of products from thousands of manufacturers.

Ownership: Employee-owned.

Top manager: Robert A. Reynolds Jr., chairman, president and chief executive officer.

Locations: 250 North American distribution facilities.

Headquarters: St. Louis.

Full-time employees: 8,600.

Connections: www.graybar.com, media@graybar.com, 1-800-GRAYBAR.

We do the majority of our work in cross-functional teams. There are five teams within our cohort. My teammates include a vice president from our Canadian subsidiary, an operations manager from Pittsburgh and a branch manager from Birmingham, Ala. A graduate of the previous cohort, Paul Hansen, serves as a team advisor, along with a senior officer who heads sales and marketing for our electrical business. We learn as much from one another as we do from the formal instruction.>

We examine industry-specific case studies and real-world challenges that affect Graybar's strategy. Each team tackles one challenge as a "capstone" assignment, and students present their findings and recommendations to senior managers at the final exam. This is more than just an exercise—the work done by the students is actually used within the company to guide future strategy.

Because the program emphasizes hands-on learning, the teams participate in action-learning projects. Each team recently completed an assignment on ethics, creating an employee training module in response to an ethical issue. My team's 10-minute training program introduced basic ethics principles such as integrity and the duty of loyalty and applied them to a realistic situation that could happen at our company. To complete this assignment, we had to learn the ethical concepts and translate them into an engaging and informative program for employees.

Clearly, this business studies program is custom-tailored and developed in collaboration with Graybar. When you take a class at a local college, I suspect that you can apply only about 10 percent to 20 percent of it to your daily job. With this program, I'd say the hit rate on relevance goes up to 80 percent or 90 percent.

It is less expensive than a full MBA because the distance-learning format costs less than putting people together in a classroom and the compressed program takes less time. Through the Rutgers-Graybar collaboration, we plan to continue developing leaders and preparing them to take on roles of increasing responsibility. The program's dynamic environment allows for expansion to meet the company's changing needs. It is an integral part of Graybar's succession planning and helps us sustain our promote-from-within culture.

The author is vice president of human resources at Graybar Electric Co.

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