



How to Save Your Job (and Corporate Universities)

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The rationale for corporate universities in general, and executive/leadership development tracks in particular, is enticing. What can be better than investing in a company's "most important asset," its employees and future leaders? Yet in practice it's more hope than change.

Executive and leadership programs prosper in companies with a lot of reserves. The reserves come from past years of success in competing. The *only* skill that will maintain those reserves is maintaining success in the competitive race — i.e., superior competitive strategy — and yet executive-development (ED) programs do little to address that. Instead they typically aim to raise productivity and innovation. Laudable goals, but they won't make a bad competitive strategy good. Witness Motorola, Nokia, HP, Yahoo, American Airlines, Blockbuster, General Motors, Blackberry, and... well, the list goes on and on.

This short piece may make someone (perhaps you, the reader) uncomfortable and even angry. But it may save your job, and we'd rather save your job than soothe someone's ego.

We are not from the Learning and Development, Human Resources, or Organizational Development communities. We work with people who are the "product" of those functions. And we are dismayed at how ED programs, despite their good intentions, leave smart executives unskilled on one crucial, probably *the* crucial, aspect of executive development: the ability to look out the window. If ED programs do not improve in this respect, some readers (or the executives who trusted them) may find themselves with no job as global competitive pressures keep growing.

We run business war games and teach strategy for a living. War games simulate competitive reality and pressure-test strategy in future scenarios. They use human role-playing, computer simulations, or both. With over 60 years' combined experience working with thousands of strategists we have "played" in every imaginable industry on every continent except Antarctica. Whatever the technology our war games all shared one thing: they forced executives to pay attention to market dynamics. That is, to what *others* may or will do to one's invincible-on-paper growth strategy.

You might think executives already do that, but you'd be wrong. That skill is what's missing from almost all the ED programs we've encountered, where the focus is intensely internal. Note the spreadsheet-strategy syndrome (side effect, overconfidence): this is what we will do, and our competitors will do whatever we need them to do. Business war-gamers learn to demand, and produce, better analysis.

We suggest that your corporate university must adopt a pedagogical principle, and adopt it fast. It is this: *No strategy operates in a vacuum*. If leadership programs do not make this an integral part of their curriculum they will fail their companies, and their companies eventually will fail too.