

Trapping the wily professor A hunting guide for CLOs

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Recently, I attended a Concours Group meeting of senior HR executives from large European companies. The attendants were all engaged in designing and/or running various forms of management training and education in their companies, and a discussion about how to deal with outside suppliers – particularly business schools – came up. A key problem, it transpired, was getting the good professors to engage in company programs. While the schools were more than willing to sell their branded programs, most corporations wanted something tailor-made, designed to achieve a specific corporate learning goal. Furthermore, they wanted it tailor-made by the big names – that is, the professors the students were likely to know. This had proved very difficult. These were big, prestigious companies – why couldn't they get the big, prestigious professors?

Coming from the supply side of this relationship, I have little problem understanding the difficulties these managers have – so I herewith offer a little guide to hunting down and keeping that rarest of animals, the business-savvy and interesting professor. A warning, though: This is not a task to be approached lightly. Hunting requires knowledge of the prey itself, its living environment, and its reward structures. It requires patience and a keen sense of observation, as well as an ability to communicate with the natives – or at least not to offend them too much.

First: *Hunt professors on your turf, not theirs.* The best place to hunt for professors is not through the business school sales channels. Instead, invite the professor to come into your company to give a short talk on some very specific point of interest – half an hour is fine – at some small executive meeting, with lunch and informal discussions thereafter. Pay the professor for the presentation. If there is no chemistry, you have listened to a (hopefully) interesting presentation and the professor has made a little money and is likely to think of your company with benevolence. Incidentally, the best referrers of professors are other professors – so use the occasion to extend your network. Carefully cultivated, most professors will come when you call and leave you alone when you want them to.

Secondly: *Avoid the obvious blunders.* This should go without saying, so the experienced professor-hunter may want to disregard this paragraph. However, any high-powered and dynamic business executive can unknowingly scare away the wily professor without meaning to – the equivalent of putting on aftershave before the hunt and then wondering why you never see any prey. Professors are academics, and you hunt them because they are. Consequently, never use the word “academic” to mean “irrelevant”, “hypothetical” or “impractical”. Never refer to them as “educators” – in academic cynical parlance, an “educator” is someone forced to live by teaching because he can't do good research. And never – never ever – ask them to include that

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interesting best-seller (“Who drank my café latte?”) you saw in the airport bookshop in their program curricula. Professors are extremely jealous of outside intellectual competition, and anyone preferring the Heathrow School of Management to them is treated with extreme suspicion, if not outright hostility.

Third: *Don't deal with intermediaries.* Typically, the CLO seeking a management education program interacts with a relationship manager from the business school. This person is pleasant, nicely attired and means well, will sell you the standard programs and tell you what you want to hear, but is incapable of trapping the wily professor on your behalf. If you want a program out of the ordinary, talk to the person most critical for its success – and that better be the professor, because if program responsibility lies with the salesperson, you are in trouble. That being said, the school's relationship manager is very useful as a support person – so let your own support person deal with him or her, and make sure that the minute any content issues spring up, the problem is escalated to you – and the professor. (And, by corollary, don't fall into the trap of becoming an intermediary yourself, in the case when a business colleague needs a program and asks you to set it up.)

Fourth: *Ask not what the professor can do for you, but what you can do for the professor.* Professors are not motivated by money. Actually, that is a whopping big lie – they certainly are, but it needs to come in a form palatable to the world they inhabit. Doing executive education does not help a professor in his or her career – at best, it earns him or her non-tradable brownie points for helping the school. What counts in the academic hierarchy – at least officially – is publishing what to the layman appears as unreadable articles in obscure journals read by few and remembered by even fewer. These articles are created through back-breaking work and qualified through an evaluation process that makes Purgatory feel like a day at the beach. To do the work, the professor needs money, in the form of research grants. To get through the evaluation, he or she needs data, obtained by getting access to corporations. If you can give the professors research money and access to data (i.e., your company,) they will happily create executive education programs as part of the research process. They will even teach them. (It is possible to bag a few professors through money alone, primarily the younger ones, but on a repeated basis this will yield a lower quality of prey).

Fifth: *It is not what you say, it is what you do.* The above will attract and retain professors, but will not earn their undying love. To achieve that, you need to follow through and do what they say. Professors seeing their theories listened to and applied will do anything you ask of them – sit on your Board, talk to your executives, co-write career-enhancing articles with you in trade magazines and even listen to your suggestions for making their theories better. The danger herein lies in that you may go native yourself – and what a tragedy that would be.

So there you are – to bag a professor, start by wining and dining them, paying them for a small presentation, then lure them with money and access to provide you with tailor-made and interesting executive programs. It is easy. You can start now. My email is at the top of the page.