

From The Times

February 1, 2010

## Why Father knows best

### **Business schools are hiring monks to teach morality to students**



Steve Coomber

Today's MBA students are tomorrow's global business leaders, and many people believe that business schools must shoulder some responsibility for the behaviour of these students in wider society. MBA students learn about strategy, finance and marketing, but what do they learn about values, morals and ethics?

Some schools leave this up to philosophers, or even monks. At HEC Paris, MBA students take an ethics and performance option run by Father Hugues Minguet, a Benedictine monk.

"The three-day seminar takes place in a monastery," says Valérie Gauthier, associate dean of HEC Paris. "The objective is for attendees to become more conscious of the ethics of their own business practices and learn to assess their responsibilities as managers."

HEC Paris is not the only school drawing on the clergy's experience.

"It's critical to expose MBA students to questions of ethics because one day they will exercise real power within companies," says Pascal Krupka, head of the international MBA programme at Rouen Business School. "We invite Father Legal, a Benedictine monk, to discuss the management of monasteries, including fundraising, which can be viewed as unethical for a monk. He also discusses how personal concerns must be balanced with professional and financial accomplishments."

It remains to be seen whether the increased efforts of business schools to address ethics in the programme will pay off in terms of a more acute awareness of ethical dilemmas. But there is no doubt that many students appreciate the opportunity to explore these issues.

"The session with Father Legal was a worthwhile exercise," says H  l  ne Perchepped, a graduate of Rouen Business School. "As an MBA student, I felt it was quite important to learn more about ethics. Now, after several years of business practice, I see how the perspective I got from classes on ethics allows me to ask myself the right questions in the business world."

H  l  ne Cristini, a professor at the Monaco Business School at the International University of Monaco, says: "At first glance, business ethics might seem an oxymoron. The two terms don't sit easily with one another, which is

why people are sceptical about whether it is possible or desirable to teach ethics on an MBA. Unfortunately, the financial crisis has shown that there's an urgent need to reintroduce ethics and morality in business."

Peter Bryant, assistant professor of entrepreneurship at IE Business School in Madrid, agrees. "Ethical awareness, ethical behaviour and decision making are important characteristics of leaders in organisations," he says. "There is a moral obligation on those who teach the future leaders of business to do what they can to transmit good ethical practice."

Methods for exposing MBA students to ethical issues differ. At Judge Business School, Cambridge University, members of the university's philosophy faculty are brought in to stimulate thought-provoking debate.

However, it is not about making students ethical, says Alex Oliver, a reader in philosophy at Cambridge University. "It's not to change people's character, but to take them through a series of conceptual hurdles and show how things are actually more complicated, sophisticated, and ambiguous than they might imagine," he says. Oliver uses a topic-based approach, starting with abstract concepts, then moving on to practical applications and particular scenarios.

"One issue is the role of telling the truth, lying and exaggeration in business," he says. "You might think that straight-out lies — intending to deceive someone — were always prohibited, but in many business contexts there is great benefit to lying."

Negotiation is a good example. Telling someone that this is your final offer, when you know it is not, for example. In these circumstances you might consider that not telling the truth is legitimate behaviour, says Oliver. But that leads to the question: "When are things that are not wholly true acceptable?"