

Harvard biz school's extreme makeover

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(

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) — A couple of years ago, Nitin Nohria co-authored a Harvard Business Review article entitled “The Seven Things That Surprise New CEOs.” The Harvard Business School academic wrote the essay after several years of teaching and observing newly appointed chief executives who came to Harvard for a two-and-one-half-day workshop.

When Nohria penned the article with HBS star professors Michael Porter and Jay Lorsch, he had no idea that he would soon assume a CEO-type role himself — the deanship of the most powerful and influential business school in the world. Now a year into his job, Nohria concedes that he has indeed been surprised by the unrelenting demands of the position.

“I used to be horrified at the lives of these CEOs who lived every day in 30-minute increments meeting with different constituents,” he says with a laugh. “It’s not a job that you are ever ready for. Some would say it’s ironic that I should be surprised and yet in many ways I had that same surprise.”

Surprised? Maybe. Unprepared? Hardly.

Within 12 short months since becoming dean of the Harvard Business School, Nohria has racked up accomplishments that would have taken most B-school deans a decade or more.

Nohria’s achievements include putting the leadership of the world’s most prestigious MBA program in the hands of an iconoclastic master teacher; pushing through significant

changes to the MBA program; bringing in a record number of women in his first entering class; and raising millions of dollars in donations, including a \$50 million gift from India's Tata Group and its philanthropic interests.

To some, the pace seems dizzying. "If you are a scholar of change management, you might shake your head and wonder whether it's feasible to change so many things in an already well-run institution," says Tom Eisenmann, who teaches entrepreneurship and heads up the elective curriculum at the school. "But we've made significant progress against all of them."

At an institution known to gain comfort in conformity, Nohria has shown an eagerness to assume unusual risks, on both people and the flagship program for which the school is known.

Fresh faces and swift changes shake up the old guard

Some HBS old-timers were puzzled, for example, when Nohria named popular marketing professor Youngme Moon as the chair of the school's MBA program, the first woman to hold that prestigious post.

Though Moon has long been an exceptional teacher, she doesn't have an MBA. She earned her PhD in communications and, perhaps more crucially, hasn't hesitated to speak her mind.

On her personal website, Moon notes that Harvard "is an institution that was built on the backs of alpha males and even today the place seems to chew up junior faculty just for the fun of seeing how far it can spit them back out."

Such directness might have banished her to the doghouse in earlier years. Nohria, on the other hand, found her candor refreshing. He views Moon, a three-time winner of the Teaching Award from students, as one of Harvard's most accomplished professors. Yet even Nohria concedes that when he announced the appointment, "A lot of people looked at me and said 'really?'"

And when it came to pushing through changes in the MBA curriculum, some faculty believed the school needed 18 months to implement the revisions. Nohria disagreed, thinking the same work could be accomplished in a third of the time.

"My view of life was that all of the work is going to be done in six months in any event so let's just pick the six months now," he says. "We would have just wrung our hands and gotten ourselves anxious for the first 12 months."

It would have been of little consequence if those changes amounted to a mere tweaking of the program. Instead, the revisions decrease the role of the school's previously sacrosanct case method of teaching, which has been the dominant pedagogy at HBS since the mid-1920s.

As a lifelong student of leadership and management who has taught at Harvard Business School since 1988, Nohria seems to know when to push and when to let up.

"The classic problem of leadership is how do you keep a healthy organization experimental, nimble and willing to change," says Eisenmann. "Nitin's got a masterful command of the institution. He knows how the place works and who's good at what."

Pushing students out of the lecture hall

The most significant change is a new first-year course called FIELD (Field Immersion Experiences for Leadership Development). It will be based on small-group learning experiences that focus on leadership, global business and entrepreneurship.

To accommodate the new yearlong course, Harvard is cutting roughly 10% of the class time from its 10 core courses in the required first-year curriculum.

Among other things, FIELD includes a required eight-day global immersion experience during the January term. Lining up some 150 organizations willing to give meaningful project work to 900-plus MBA students in countries as varied as Vietnam, India and China is, in Nohria's words, "a mammoth administrative and intellectual undertaking."

The final portion of the course requires students to create and launch a business enterprise in a new Innovation Lab that will open in November.

The top two floors of the laboratory will include 10 circular classrooms with movable furniture, called "hives" by HBS faculty, who will stand in the middle and direct small teams of students. It's a major departure from the classic tiered classrooms where HBS has taught business basics to generations of would-be managers.

Defining success and limitations

While these changes are dramatic for Harvard Business School, many of them have been implemented elsewhere. As Moon explains, "We're never going to differentiate ourselves by how we do things. It's always how well we do things. If we end up doing something today that 10 or 20 years later everybody else is doing, we will have succeeded."

Not content to move these changes out to only the first-year class, Nohria is also reshuffling the elective curriculum for second-year students as well. The school's two-semester format will morph into four quarters, giving faculty the ability to create shorter courses, more simulations, and projects.

Moon says the number of field courses Harvard offers in the new elective curriculum will double to 20 from 10. Case method courses, meantime, will decline by half a dozen to just over 70.

Nohria says that he hopes the changes make a Harvard MBA more relevant and valuable. "We're adding to the intensity of our academic curriculum," he says.

The dean says he is troubled by the overemphasis some MBA students put on starting salaries instead of the value of the education itself.

"If there is one thing that I am most distressed about, it is this ratio between an MBA's salary at graduation and the salary when a student enters the program," he says. "If that becomes the metric people use to value business education, then we will be guilty of the same short-sightedness that we don't want business leaders to have."

In the past year, he says, his conversations with other deans have led him to believe that the relentless pursuit of higher paying jobs and social events among MBAs also has led to diminished student engagement in the academics.

"I am horrified at times to hear of absenteeism in the second year and even the first year classes at some schools," he says. "For some students, Friday classes might as well be optional. We are very fortunate at HBS. We have close to 100% attendance in our first year, and we have attendance of 95% to 96% in the second year. But the general drift in the world is not in that direction."

Nohria is determined for that not to happen at Harvard Business School. "In the end, it's the quality of the educational experience that brings people together. All that other stuff is the icing on the cake, but it's the cake that people come to eat."