

## Can Nice Guys Finish First?

By Cintra Pollack (MBA 2005)

When I first came to the UW Business School to earn an MBA, I was full of trepidation about who I'd be spending two years—as well as building my network—with. What types of people make up the UW MBA program? I'd known MBAs from fancy schools in my previous workplaces and I didn't think very highly of the subspecies in general. A number of the people I'd met from top tier B-schools acted notoriously arrogant and brazen and wore a ten-pound chip of entitlement on their shoulder. If I was going to spend two years in close quarters with a few hundred of these individuals, it could get ugly, I thought.

From the first day of orientation, however, UW seemed different than the world I'd braced myself for. My classmates were unassuming, and though many of them had impressive credentials under their belts, most were conspicuously modest. The first few weeks of class were unabashedly polite: no one wanted to speak too long, speak too often or speak out in a tone too contrary to their peers' opinions. They were all so darn nice. Quite honestly, I spent fall quarter waiting for the shoe to drop. Where were the *real* MBAs, those cocksure business-leaders-in-training? I saw no teeth other than those of appropriate smiles.

From our early meetings with MBA program staff and second-year students we learned the importance of our teams, of being active participants not only in the classroom but also in clubs and networking activities. To be a UW MBA is not only to attend classes, team meetings and lectures. It is also to volunteer at the Boys & Girls club on Friday afternoons, to hang out drinking an IPA at a pub on a Thursday with first- and second years, or to come in to the MBA lounge on a Sunday morning to scrub out the nastiest microwaves imaginable for the benefit of the rest of the program. There's a lot more involved than the studying/networking/career-seeking trinity described to us our first days in Boeing Auditorium.

Perhaps it is the Northwest environment or the UW's admissions criteria or the Class of 2005's attitude in particular, but an overwhelming number of members of my class are exceptionally balanced individuals: they run marathons, raise children (extra points for those who have them while in the program), write columns for newspapers, lay sheetrock, play soccer, do yoga, cook amazing food, construct decks,



knit ponchos—all of this while still accomplishing all the things required of anyone in the MBA program. Indeed, we are the poster children for the notion of work/life balance. Even the *Utne Reader* would be impressed by how many of us think seriously about not only balancing the demands of business school with our personal lives, but also balancing the activities of the businesses we work for with paying attention to environmental sustainability, corporate governance, and social responsibility. UW MBAs on the whole evaluate our actions with tools such as the balanced scorecard, the triple bottom line, stakeholder theory, etc. We display a holistic attitude not yet adopted by the business world at large.

These are the types of people I want to work with. I found my classmates to be hardworking, compassionate, and humane. But all this decency comes at some price. Lest I relentlessly spout sunshine about my classmates, I do wonder if we are tough enough to make it in a world filled with people who are not. The “aw shucks” appeal of a UW MBA, our ability to play well with others and our tendency toward self-deprecation (not quite to the point of self-effacement) is laudable in some settings. Will these traits forever limit many of us to be meek middle managers? Will other MBA-types who feel destined for greatness at any price—be it sacrifice of personal lives or even ethical standards—walk all over us?

I hope not. I know not all of us will face the opportunity to be bold, to speak out and to make waves. Not all career paths cross such points. But for those of us who do run up against the grain in our organizations, for those who find ourselves mired in ethical quandaries we didn't create, for those who find ourselves from time to time in positions that call for us to be anything but polite, I hope we can all find our contrary voice. I hope we take risks. May the only entitlement we claim be to well-deliberated opinions and the sense that we can make a difference in business on a global scale.

*For the past two years, Cintra Pollack has written an MBA Journal for BusinessWeek online. This fall, incoming MBA student Anne Turchi begins her own. To read their journal entries, visit [www.businessweek.com/bschools/mbajournal/](http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/mbajournal/)*