



The Mentor Mentality

The MBA Mentor Program affords students the invaluable experience and insight of senior executives

By Ed Kromer

Richard Tait, who knows a thing or two about inspiration, likes to say he went from paperboy to Microsoft, before co-founding Cranium, the revolutionary board game company he still serves as Grand Poo-Bah (his actual title), a whimsical maestro directing a freewheeling philharmonic of eccentric players who deliver masterpieces-in-a-box.

But Tait is the first to admit that he didn't get there by himself.

Among the most influential mentors to have shaped and inspired his life and work, he counts Drugstore.com founder Peter Neupert, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer and Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz. Oh, and his three kids. And a guy named David who shines shoes at a downtown Tully's with such integrity and passion as to elevate the exercise to an art form.

So when Tait was asked to join the Business School's MBA Mentor Program a few years ago, he knew he would pry free some space from his mobbed schedule to accommodate. "I'm incredibly busy trying to be the best director of the company as well as the best dad I can be," he says, "But mentorship has been such an important part of my own professional development that I thought, if there's a chance for me to give back, I couldn't pass it up."



Cranium

When Aaron Owen Katzman got a peek at Cranium, it twisted his melon.

An on-site visit to the imaginative board game company and its riveting “Grand Poo-Bah,” Richard Tait, was all it took for Katzman, now a second-year MBA student, to know where he wanted to spend his summer, if not the rest of his life.

“Once you tour the office, feel the pulse of the employees and hear about the growth trajectory of the company,” Katzman waxes, “it’s difficult to imagine working anywhere else.”

Tait does aim to inspire. “During our visits,” he says, “we first tell the Cranium story, and show the

students around our office so they can see how it celebrates the culture and the mission that we’re on: to give everyone the chance to shine. I hope they see that work can feel as playful and as fun and engaging as it does here, but still be highly productive.”

Katzman got the message. He and fellow mentee Brian Lane concocted a “playful” internship proposal, complete with mug shots of each straining his cranium to best serve the company.

Katzman won the internship and worked on co-branded promotions with partners, like cereal companies, who share Cranium’s target demographic “and lots of excitable eyeballs,” he says.

And he soaked up the extended contact with his one-time mentor. “Watching Richard guide this incredible group of intelligent minds and eccentric personalities taught me a thing or three about effective leadership and humility,” Katzman admits. “Being a recovering micro-manager myself, I appreciated that self-awareness.”

It’s also left an indelible mark on his cranium, and his myocardium. “Whatever I end up doing, I want to continue to give consumers the ‘shine’ experience!” he says.

“In a way that is profitable, of course...” □

In so doing, Tait joined a cohort of senior executives from the area’s top companies who offer their invaluable experience and connections to UW MBAs each year. The list includes Bill Ayer (MBA 1978), chairman, president and CEO of Alaska Airlines; Ed Fritzky, former chairman and CEO, Immunex; Tamra Chandler (MBA 1990), managing vice president at Hitachi Consulting; Erik Nordstrom (BA 1985), vice president of full line stores at Nordstrom, Inc.; Wally Walker, president & CEO of the Seattle Sonics & Storm; John Fluke, chairman of the board, Fluke Capital Management; Susan Sigl (MBA 1979), general partner of SeaPoint Ventures. The A-list goes on and on, with execs from REI, Cingular, Icos, Infospace, Wright

Runstad, Microsoft, Weyerhaeuser, Deloitte & Touche, Russell Investment Group, and many more of the region’s major companies.

These are high-powered people who MBAs would desperately like to meet, but would have little chance of doing so on their own.

“Our program is unique,” says director Susan Canfield, who regularly fields inquiries from top 20 business schools. “Most mentor programs are not as well developed, and don’t seem to attract the level of executives that ours does.”

TRADITION IN THE MAKING

The Mentor Program began in 1999, powered by a start-up grant from the Herbert B. Jones Foundation until the Business School made it self-supporting a few years later.



Shurgard

American business is not necessarily usual for a Belarussian entrepreneur. And Liudmila Khomchanka, who came to the UW MBA program last fall after starting a wholesale textile company in Minsk, found herself fascinated by the Shurgard self-storage facility she drove past on her way to school.

“We don’t have self-storage facilities in Belarus,” Khomchanka says, “and I wanted to find out more about the business model.”

When she realized that the international company’s CEO and founder, Chuck Barbo, was available for mentorship, she was eager to make his acquaintance. “I really wanted to meet with somebody

who can share an entrepreneurial experience with me,” she says, “somebody who built the company from the ground up and has been successfully growing it over time.”

Through conversations with Barbo, Khomchanka learned the importance of passion, integrity and self-confidence. But it didn’t stop there. “I learned from other mentors in the program that it is much more valuable for the students if they get to meet with others in the organization,” Barbo says. “This gives them a much richer experience.”

In meetings set up by Barbo, Khomchanka met senior execu-

tives in legal, finance, accounting, human resources, capital markets and assets management. Through one of these connections, she landed a summer internship, and learned about Shurgard’s organization as a real estate investment trust, a valuable lesson for a once and future entrepreneur.

Barbo claims to get the most out of his mentor interactions. “I always learn more from the students than they learn from me,” he says, “and Luda was no exception.”

To that claim, Khomchanka might take exception. □

The first year 25 executives met with small groups of first-year students, with the intent of enhancing their classroom experience.

“We wanted to help them learn to apply theory to real-world settings, to look at what it takes to be a business leader, to further hone in on industries and functions of interest to them, and to learn more how they can build a career around their MBA,” Canfield explains.

Formalization of the program took advantage of the new, more proactive rules of engagement in mentoring. In the old model, a relic from the era of life-long employment, a superior would identify a young person with promise, and guide his rise through the organization. The new model,

made necessary by more frequent company and career changes, requires the promising young person to seek out appropriate career guides and negotiate the terms of a relationship.

The UW program now counts nearly 70 able and willing mentors who serve one of two distinct experiences. First-year MBAs, typically just beginning to explore new industries or functions, select several mentors and make an extended site visit to each. During the visits, the mentors give tours, tell tales of success and setback, discuss philosophical issues, field questions or arrange meetings with colleagues in areas of specific interests. Second-years choose a single mentor and meet with him or her on regular occasions, working together to tailor a more targeted experience.



Microsoft

At some point in her early years meeting with UW MBAs, Debbi Gillotti realized she could be more than just a mentor. She could be a hub to the many reaches of Microsoft, an organization that many MBAs would like to know better.

Gillotti had joined Microsoft from Starbucks, where as CIO she had previously participated in the Mentor Program. In her new role overseeing executive audience programs, she had unique access to a wide range of subject matter experts throughout the company. “If I had been in another Microsoft line organization, I might not have had as much visibility to the different groups to connect students to people who interest them,” she says.

“But I had exposure to a very wide community of resources through the Executive Briefing Center.”

Lucky for Ran Feder (MBA 2002), who wisely chose Gillotti as his second-year mentor. During monthly meetings, Gillotti found speakers to meet all of the marketing inquiries that Feder and a classmate requested.

Today Feder is global product manager for Xbox 360 accessories. “I didn’t get my job through the mentorship,” he says. “But it did teach me a lot about Microsoft ways. It gave me an inside view of how the company and its divisions work, information that is not available to a student.”

More valuable, perhaps, was information gleaned from conver-

sations with Gillotti that continue, across the organization, three years later. “What I got out of the mentorship was less about business,” he says. “It was more about how to work in a large organization—important details for the growth of a person that you usually don’t have time to think about. Debbi sees things in a much broader perspective. There are a lot of things that school can’t teach, but a good mentor can.”

Gillotti, now senior director of Strategic Business Development for Microsoft’s Worldwide Public Sector team, still provides UW MBAs expert guidance to the people who move Microsoft, and to lessons more valuable still. □

A RECIPROCAL ATTRACTION

Nearly 95 percent of MBAs participated in the voluntary program last year. The benefit to students is not difficult to see: It’s a chance to define career goals and develop the networks necessary to achieve them. It’s a source of information about new industries and functions. It’s a way to deepen their education and connect with the business community. And it’s a glimpse of where they want to be.

“You get a lot from class and related activities,” says Balu Chenicheri (MBA 2005), who worked with Hitachi’s Chandler last year. “But there are certain skills you can’t learn in the classroom. Not just skills, but how to interact

with people, how to be successful and still be a nice person. I hope this interaction with Tamra will help me be a more complete person, rather than just another MBA.”

The value to mentors may be less obvious, but it’s just as real, or so the growing ranks of busy senior executives who participate each year would suggest. Sharing the wealth of experience and insight provides genuine satisfaction.

“All of us have had the advantage of someone mentoring us, either officially or unofficially, throughout our careers,” says Chuck Barbo, chairman and CEO of Shurgard Storage Centers, Inc. “This is certainly true of me. And my only way to pay them back for all their help is to mentor the next generation.”



Boeing Ventures

Miller Adams is accustomed to technical questions. As director of Technology Ventures at Boeing Phantom Works, the aerospace company’s advanced research and development unit, he’s all about investing in strategic new technologies.

After becoming interested in venture capital and high-tech entrepreneurship, Ed Hansen (MBA 2005) chose Adams to be his first-year mentor, and sought technical advice about both sides of the new business equation.

He got much more. Hansen and several classmates requested additional meetings with Miller, and eventually got to talking about his

life outside of Boeing, his volunteer work, his interests, his time with family and church. “We started talking about work/life balance because somewhere along the way, people were asking me about what sort of schedule we maintain here, which is, to some people’s minds, pretty grueling—lots of travel, very long days—and how do you balance that?” Miller recalls. “Since you have a limited amount of time that you’re going to put into things other than work, pick the things that are really important to you. Don’t just take on anything because someone at the organization says to do it. This happens a lot in the corporate world. It’s far

better to have an environment where you can find something that you’re really interested in and passionate about.”

Hansen has taken Miller’s words to heart, and to the Alliance of Angels, a sort of mentor and matchmaker for early stage technology companies. “I don’t mean to trivialize it, but I realized that technology is kind of a detail,” Hansen says. “It’s relationships that are more important. What I really got out of this mentorship was that to be a better business person, you need to just be a better person.” □

There’s also much to be said for connecting with the next generation of leaders and, in another sense, customers. “I get a lot out of being around young people,” adds Tait, who works in a young person’s business. “They bring such a level of enthusiasm and innovative thought. They have such a fresh perspective on everything. Because they ask ‘why?’ They don’t rely on precedent to determine future behavior. That causes us to constantly reevaluate and think differently.”

In the end, though, it is the students who have everything to gain from mentoring. And Canfield makes it clear that this program, like their entire MBA experience, is only

the start. “There is a feeling among students that when they finish their MBA, that first job they take is the end-all, be-all for them. And it’s sometimes difficult for them to gain perspective,” she says. “The Mentor Program helps them see that a career over many decades is full of twists and turns and chance and risk and success and failure and serendipity. When they listen to their mentors, I think students develop a sense of what it takes to build a career and become a leader over the long haul.” ■

Steven Bangs contributed interviews to this article.