

Programme leverages delegate diversity to empower managers

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The UCT Graduate School of Business' Programme for Management Development, aimed at middle to senior managers who have the potential to progress to general management, will be running from 26 August to 8 September this year. The two-week residential programme is designed to leverage the accumulated knowledge and experience of delegates, supported by a Systems Thinking approach and a focus on implementation, to provide a robust perspective on the role of the general manager within an organisation.

In the past the programme has attracted delegates from many major South African companies, as well as delegates from outside of South Africa. According to programme director, Bruce MacDonald, roughly 70% of the delegates come from outside of South Africa, mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa.

"There have been people from as far as Southeast Asia, the Arab Emirates and Europe, but mainly from South Africa's neighbouring countries. A typical class will contain delegates from some twenty companies, about fifteen different industries, and up to ten African countries," he said.

"The programme has managed to attract an incredibly diverse range of people, providing a rich mix of different perspectives and experience, which feeds into the process of debate and discussion that is strongly encouraged," said MacDonald.

"The people participating in the programme are all mid- to senior-level managers, with at least ten years each experience. In a programme of 35 participants, we try to draw on the 350 years of accumulated experience that is represented in the class. To ignore the value of that diversity and experience would be a real waste," said MacDonald. In addition, the diversity offers the opportunity for the building of strong cross-continent collegial networks.

The presenters on the course are all well-qualified practitioners who present from a perspective of both academic expertise and practical on-the-ground experience. An action-learning post-course assignment ensures delegates have the opportunity to implement what they have learned on the programme - and to demonstrate to their sponsors that they have realised a healthy return on their investment.

"The project adds a very valuable element to the programme. Delegates have the opportunity to tackle a practical project - possibly something they have been meaning to do for years, but never got round to doing it - and to see it through to implementation," said MacDonald.

The programme incorporates a considerable 'soft-skills' focus. "Managing means managing people, and if managers do not understand their own behaviour and that of those who they are managing, they will not be successful managers and leaders," he said.

"Another aspect of reaching general management level is that the manager's role takes on political aspects. There are divisions within an organisation that are inherently in conflict with one another - although, paradoxically, all managers have a common overarching interest: the survival and good health of the organisation. The general manager needs to have a skills set that enables him or her to mediate these conflicts," he said. "The basic goal of business is to stay in business."

Over the years the programme has developed regularly, but incrementally. MacDonald is sceptical of the management tendency to focus on 'flavour of the month'.

"The programme has proven successful over and over again. Return business - some 80% to 90% of any one class comes from organisations that are regular supporters - is proof of that. It provides the basic essentials of general management - managing people, understanding processes, learning the language of business, improving leadership skills - enriched by rich interaction between people from diverse backgrounds," he said.

For more information please contact Joanne Boulton at the UCT Graduate School of Business on 021 406 1431 or via email at joanne.boulton@gsb.uct.ac.za. Alternatively, please visit www.gsb.uct.ac.za/pmd.

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