

CASE STUDY: Engaging with the Future, 21st Century Challenges

Alan Clark, the European MD of international brewing giant SABMiller, set out to create a revolutionary development programme for his top team. Not your usual practically-oriented business school programme but something visionary and inspiring – “a programme that reached out into the future”. Clark explains his reasoning: “For executives at this level a much broader view is needed of the way the world could unfold and the implications for our organisation. I wanted a long-term look into the future so it would not hit us as a surprise.”

Clark and Richard Waters, SAB Miller’s HR Development Manager, approached a shortlist of five leading business schools. They decided to work with Oxford University’s Saïd Business School, because of Oxford’s long tradition as a seat of learning, its broad-ranging intellectual resources, and the willingness of programme directors Tracey Camilleri and Ron Emerson to engage with SABMiller in the design of an innovative, challenging and complex programme covering a wide range of topics.

Oxford worked with 120 of the most senior SABMiller executives from around the world to deliver a programme which would enlarge the business context for senior management, establish macro environmental and scientific threads of meaning and reflect on the consequences of these for the SABMiller Group.

The intention was to expose senior management to a ‘larger conversation’ than might be presented by their current range of business issues so that management would be able

and prepared to engage in new challenges that might emerge for the business from any and all of these areas at some time in the future.

Associate Fellow, Ron Emerson says: “SABMiller wanted real, hard science – there was to be no dumbing down. The sessions were not to be in the form of presentations, rather open-ended debate. They were in a way asking us to re-invent Oxford’s ancient tutorial tradition – but for a high level modern business audience.”

The programme exposed participants to the University’s leading thinkers in a wide range of relevant areas including politics, economics, ethics and science and technology.



Sessions included:

Professor Lord Robert May on climate change

Professor Sarah Harper on shifting patterns of population distribution and their implications

Professor Julian Savulescu on ethical issues involved in genetic and stem cell research

Professor Tariq Ramadan on Islamic and European cultures – their integration and tensions between them

Dr Ian Goldin on the issues and forces which will shape the 21st century and their relevance to large scale organisations

Professor Sir Richard Gardner on genetics and stem cell research

Dr Ngaire Woods on global economic shifts and the future role of institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO

Professor of Physics, Nick Jelley presented the balance sheet for alternative energy resources.

There were rich discussions on all these issues and more including the economic drivers of China, India and SE Asia; future uses of DNA; stem cells and regenerative medicine; nanotechnology; the future of democracy; global water resources; and, at the JET labs in Culham, fusion and the reality of alternative energy.

Post-programme, what was the verdict? “An extraordinary way of driving us out of our daily box and waking our collective responsibility to the challenges of the twenty-first century,” judged one participant. What was also an eye-opener to the participants was how effectively top Oxford academics could communicate to a business audience, injecting energy, humour and drama into their presentations, as well as rigour.

Clark believes the organisational returns should be long-term. “It is about stimulating ideas, imagination and creativity, and ultimately we will benefit as an organisation. Strategy involves linking diverse threads and concepts and crafting them back into the organisation.”

Associate Fellow Tracey Camilleri sees the programme as the start of something new in corporate learning – a trend that takes the study of the business context to a much higher level and in the process revolutionises leadership education. “If we are going to go beyond merely incremental change, we are going to have to re-imagine leadership education,” says Camilleri. “We have got to engage with, and understand, forces of change at a much more fundamental level – which the Saïd Business School with all the resources of the University is uniquely well-equipped to do.”

For further information about custom programmes at Saïd Business School, please contact Steve Ludlow at steve.ludlow@sbs.ox.ac.uk