

The New York Times

Hot Ticket in B-School: Bringing Life Values to Corporate Ethics

By MARCI ALBOHER

Published: May 29, 2008



Ben Sklar for the New York Times

Stewart D. Friedman, a Wharton business professor, took his message to Bazaarvoice, a company started by a former student.

STUDENTS talk about Stewart D. Friedman, a management professor at the Wharton School, with a mixture of earnest admiration, gratitude and rock star adoration.

When they join his class, they commit to sharing intimate details with their classmates about their most important relationships, and many of them later credit Mr. Friedman with changing their lives. At least one alumnus has asked Mr. Friedman to train an entire company in his style of leadership and living.

It may not sound like the stuff of business school education. But Mr. Friedman and other like-minded leadership educators have tapped into a desire by both students and established entrepreneurs for more integration of their careers and personal lives.

Mr. Friedman's philosophy is fairly straightforward. The fundamental premise is that leadership can exist in every person, whether at the top, middle or bottom of any group.

Mr. Friedman also teaches that leadership should not be confined to work, but extended to one's personal life, community involvement and family life.

In his class, Mr. Friedman guides students through exercises to identify their core values and to express ways that they are feeling out of sync with those values. Students then develop experiments intended to create what Mr. Friedman calls "four-way wins," changes that will have positive effects in all aspects of their lives.

Many business schools have their versions of Mr. Friedman. The professors are generally charismatic figures who form close relationships with their students and create a network of graduates who are encouraged to stay in touch and help one another long after their coursework is completed. They also tend to move between academia and the business world, often offering variations of their programs for academic or corporate use.

Experts in the leadership field say that today's business climate is especially conducive to a type of leadership informed by strong personal values. Allan R. Cohen, the dean of [Babson College's graduate business school](#), who has taught leadership for over 30 years, says that while the current language of leadership focuses on authenticity and looking at the whole person, this type of thinking has been around in some form since the 1940s, when human skills were first starting to be addressed in academia. In the 1960s, he said, sensitivity training, like EST (Erhard Seminars Training), was in vogue.

"There was a period when you'd never talk about the emotional or sensitive side of leadership," Mr. Cohen said. "Then the pendulum swings and you find out that some of these people are tone-deaf and emotion-blind, that they lose their followers and make decisions that aren't so good. We have seen a lot of unethical leadership, and all of a sudden devoting your career to just making money isn't looking so attractive. So different kinds of courses become more interesting."

[Srikumar Rao](#), an adjunct instructor at [London Business School](#), created a similar phenomenon with his popular class, "Creativity and Personal Mastery," which he developed at [Long Island University](#), then took to Columbia Business School.

Like Mr. Friedman, Mr. Rao published a book, "[Are You Ready to Succeed](#)," based on his course. He has also conducted versions of his programs, at daily rates as high as \$25,000, at companies including Saatchi & Saatchi, Chubb and [McDonald's](#). Several of Mr. Rao's alumni, referred to as Raoists by some, are gathering this summer in New York for his first alumni retreat.

Mr. Friedman encourages networking by pairing students with alumni coaches who serve as mentors to students going through the course. Harry Weiner, a founding partner of [On-Ramps](#), a recruiting and consulting firm that focuses on flexible work arrangements, took Mr. Friedman's Wharton class in the spring of 2006 and has acted as an alumni mentor ever since.

“The course had a profound effect on me,” Mr. Weiner said. “As part of the class, you have to create a leadership vision for yourself, and he asks you to write a brief analysis of yourself 15 years from now. That exercise made me realize that what I was doing at the time — recruiting for hedge funds and venture capital firms — was not having any societal impact other than driving up compensation for people who were already grossly overpaid. I wanted to do something that was still financially rewarding, but had more of a positive impact on society.

“In the end, it wasn’t just about how I could do better at work, though it’s very much about business results. It is holistic.”

Mr. Friedman, who has taught at Wharton since 1984, has a long history of work and scholarship in the fields of organizational behavior, work and life integration, and leadership. He earned a doctorate from the [University of Michigan](#), and has spent time in the corporate sector. His latest book, “[Total Leadership](#),” which will be published next month by [Harvard Business Press](#), grew out of a program he developed during a two-year assignment at [Ford Motor Company](#) and refined in his classes at Wharton.

The course has been taught in Wharton’s regular M.B.A. program, but Mr. Friedman says it is particularly relevant for midcareer students in Wharton’s executive M.B.A. program, who often have families and children, and are feeling the pressures of managing their lives.

“The reason it’s been so well received,” according to Michael Useem, the director of Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, “is that those in their 30s and 40s have mastered many essentials — finance, accounting, strategic thinking — and they are savvy about how your private life fits and should be reconciled with your work life, as opposed to in conflict with it.”



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Brett Hurt, the chief of Bazaarvoice, hired his teacher to tell his employees how to lead better and live more richly.

One alumnus, Brett Hurt, is so dedicated to Mr. Friedman’s philosophy that he invited his former professor to visit his company, [Bazaarvoice](#) Inc. in Austin, Tex., to lead a half-day

workshop for more than 100 employees. Mr. Hurt bought the book for all employees who attended and is now leading the company in a four-month immersion in the program.

At the workshop, Mr. Friedman assigned people into randomly selected groups of three who will meet periodically and coach one another through the exercises in the book. This moderated book club format shares elements with [Oprah Winfrey](#)'s book club, especially the online discussions she led around [Eckhart Tolle](#)'s book "A New Earth."

Mr. Hurt blogged about the book and the training session, writing that he expected a "massive impact" on his company's culture even though it might mean a near-term decrease in the time employees spend at work while they are going through the exercises. Once the process is completed, Mr. Hurt wrote, he expects productivity and effectiveness to increase.

Tung Hung, a community manager for Bazaarvoice, described the Total Leadership experiment as reflective of the company's unique culture.

"Brett, our C.E.O. and founder, is well attuned to the latest theories and methodologies of business and wanted to share this book with our company," he said. "It started out as a surprise. He asked us to be free on this date, and then Stew Friedman was the surprise visitor."

Mr. Hurt "believes we can all be better leaders, and after two years at the company, I am now starting to see more of why he believes this," Mr. Hung said. "Brett might be the only person more excited about this than me."