



INTERVIEW MAARTEN VAN HASSELT

SAILING INTO THE WIND

How does a business leader and RSM alumnus present an uplifting, inspirational graduation speech to newly-minted MBAs in what is perhaps the least-positive economic environment since the 1930s?

Text Lesa Sawahata

That's exactly what stellar alumnus Maarten van Hasselt (MScBA '79) did for RSM's International Full-Time MBA09 and Executive MBA08 classes in March; he delivered an engaging, encouraging speech in which he shared not only anecdotes and personal advice, but seven key learnings that are crisis-proof.

Currently dividing his time between Houston, Texas (where his family resides) and Den Haag (Shell headquarters), Van Hasselt, who is Global Implementation and Change Manager for Shell Global Solutions, could be the prototype for the sort of 'global business leader' RSM's MBA programmes are aimed at developing.

He's lived around the world, is fluent in five languages, understands his strengths and passions, is equally aware of his weaker points and has made a concerted effort to improve them. "Remember your career can go in some unexpected directions," he's been known to tell young managers. "To be honest, in my own career serendipity has been the strategy."

His educational strategy was a bit serendipitous as well. He earned a Bachelor degree in the very practical discipline of mechanical engineering at Delft Technical University in 1978. Delft

TU was also the home of the then-relatively-new Interuniversitair Instituut Bedrijfskunde (IIB) – a graduate school of business begun with the initiative and investment of several major Dutch businesses, including Royal Dutch Shell, and which would ultimately become the Rotterdam School of Management. Although he found mechanical drafting 'calming', he was happily persuaded to enter the IIB programme, and never looked back.

"When I did my Master's I did every elective and exchange, everything I could, to get work experience in business; I worked as a consultant, basically," he says. His exchange took him to Wharton in the USA, which opened his eyes to differences in attitude in business education. "When I went to Wharton, it struck me that European education is more theoretical – you learn to think," he says. "In America, it is more about learning to do. When you hire a North American MBA, they arrive and are immediately very productive." Van Hasselt's advice to all MBAs is to recognise that they are generalists. "You can do anything; the problem is that you can do anything. You have to find one thing you're passionate about." His own passion is for turnaround

management. "That's the 'red thread' for me; taking a bad situation and turning it around. In hindsight, this is apparently what I love to do; I am passionate about it." He currently leads a group of 45 global consultants who focus on the 'non-technical' side of implementation: "especially on the 'people' side," he says, "we implement change management."

An avid sailor from a ship-building family, Van Hasselt peppers his language with nautical allusions. With his career trajectory, he's well qualified to talk in terms of stormy seas, smooth sailing, and trawling for new jobs – all things the graduating MBAs and EMBA's were anxious to hear about. He even found a positive spin to the current economic climate: "MBA graduates from 10 years ago are the ones to really feel sorry for," he said. "Anyone can sail with the wind at their back. Now there's a leak in the boat, the crew is seasick and the maps are no good. Current graduates have to learn to manage in a no-growth environment. They'll be better managers due to the rough circumstances. If you're training in a headwind, you get stronger."

Encouraging words. And what about the 'seven learnings' he offered to the MBA09 and EMBA08 graduating class?

1) What got you here won't get you there. Van Hasselt took this truth from the title of one of management guru Marshall Goldsmith's books. "Looking at the road you travelled may not be the best way to decide on where to go next. This is valid at any point in your career. You will have

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to renew and change continuously as your career progresses. One actually learns how little one knows as time goes on.”

2) It is not what you know, or whom you know, but rather - which people care whether they know you or not? “Looking back on my own career and listening to colleagues, I can confirm that relationships, the skill to connect, the internal and external network are far more important than anything else. My message is to network. Hang on to this group you’ve studied with.”

3) Understanding the context and focusing on the key issue will enhance your reputation for delivery. “Develop what is called ‘helicopter vision’: being able to see the whole, and then recognising the key issues and zooming in on those details – that is crucial.”

4) Actively look for coaches. Ask questions. Obtain feedback. Listen, and act on what you hear. “I didn’t just want to give you my perspectives today. I asked some 30 colleagues what they would consider the key learning point of their careers – and

do you know what the most surprising part of this exercise was? These are extremely busy people, and they all reacted with an extensive list of things they would have done differently, or paid more attention to. People like to be asked for advice. Use the opportunity – it is natural for people to share their experience as time goes on.”

5) Brilliant performance will not cover up behavioural shortcomings. “Companies hire you because of your intellectual strengths, your analytical skills, and the latest management tools and techniques you bring. Initially these strengths will propel you ahead. But as one of my bosses wrote to me, ‘Personal style can erode unquestioned professional excellence.’”

6) Behaviour is not fixed and can be changed. “My own derailer was that I would lose my temper quite easily. I got to work with a coach, understood the deeper roots of the issue, worked on it very hard and changed my behaviour. The only thing I wish is that I would have picked up the feedback, and organised coaching, earlier. It is never too late to learn.”

7) Be yourself and not what you think others want you to be. “Be authentic. Have an opinion, stand behind it and be challenged. Defend it with rigour and professionalism, and with elegance. Remember you can only grow when you are willing to make mistakes. And remember there’s a place for all kinds of different people in major companies; consider applying to places you might not ordinarily consider.” ■