Adapting to lead... at speed

The exceptional disruption of 2020 means leaders must gain skills to equip them for “the new normal”, even as it unfolds around them. An MBA from the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Business School or a short course from the school’s Executive Education suite gives leaders the tools, techniques and frameworks to navigate rapid change, as well as the confidence to make the bold decisions required to build progressive, resilient, ethical, inclusive and sustainable business models for the future.

Most modern leaders are well versed in dealing with the opportunities and risks of disruption but we are now navigating a period of unprecedented upheaval. For Australia, the year began with what’s become known as the Black Summer: fires brought devastating loss of human and animal life, homes and bushland, along with huge economic effects. Almost before we had caught our breath, the pandemic was upon us.

Australia has so far been fortunate to avoid the tragic impact that COVID-19 has wreaked on many nations. Nevertheless, the social and economic consequences of the pandemic require leaders to sharpen their entrepreneurial skills, enhance their adaptability and find stronger ways to connect with their teams, customers and the wider community.

“Adaptability now sits across multiple dimensions,” says Magnus Gittins, director of Executive Education at AGSM. “It’s like a Rubik’s Cube: the scenarios in which someone has to adapt are getting more complex, more frequent and more significant in terms of order of magnitude. Leaders are being tested in ways they haven’t been tested before.”

“Expectations of responsible management are much higher,” says Michele Roberts, program director at AGSM. “Purpose and profit are regarded as equally important by employees and the larger community. Corporate and social responsibility is no longer a box to tick; there’s a whole new standard.”

To support leaders on a mission to “do well and do good” and to cope with rapid change, new programs have been rolled out across the AGSM MBA stream and the school’s short-course Executive Education offerings. On the following pages, Roberts and Gittins discuss how they’re adapting what and how they teach, an AGSM alumnus shares how she put her MBA to use during the pandemic and a sports star describes his journey of learning during lockdown.

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Adaptive leadership in action

The performing arts has been one of the sectors hardest hit by the pandemic. Adele Schoenhart, a 2018 AGSM MBA (Executive) graduate and arts management specialist, partnered with a colleague to come up with a pivot so successful it’s become a startup. Schoenhart is media and public affairs manager at Musica Viva, Australia’s oldest arts organisation, and chair of SMBS Fine Music radio station. “When the coronavirus hit, a lot of music venues had to close to keep the community safe, orchestras cancelled their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says. Schoenhart and her friend, Chris Howell, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues “suddenly had no income… They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says. Schoenhart’s and her friend, Chris Howell, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues “suddenly had no income… They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says. Schoenhart’s and her friend, Chris Howell, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues “suddenly had no income… They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says. Schoenhart’s and her friend, Chris Howell, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues “suddenly had no income… They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says. Schoenhart’s and her friend, Chris Howell, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues “suddenly had no income… They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says. Schoenhart’s and her friend, Chris Howell, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues “suddenly had no income… They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says. Schoenhart’s and her friend, Chris Howell, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues “suddenly had no income… They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says. Schoenhart’s and her friend, Chris Howell, a cellist and long-time music festival director, watched as their friends and colleagues “suddenly had no income… They went from feeling quite secure, with work lined up for their seasons and tours were postponed or cancelled completely,” she says.
The COVID-19 lockdown forced professional sportspeople off the playing field, during which time AGSM worked with Cricket NSW to offer players access to its Short Courses programs – an opportunity made possible by education grants from the Australian Cricketers’ Association.

The AGSM Short Course team also keeps the school’s ethos to build business models that “do well and do good” in sharp focus. “It’s now well understood that positive customer and employee outcomes directly equate to the sustainability of an organisation,” says Magnus Gittins. “In the past, corporate social responsibility was something tacked on to one side for organisations; now it’s fundamental.”

Gittins says AGSM’s Short Courses weave the concept of doing well and doing good into everything they teach and not just because it’s the school’s philosophy. “If you do the right thing by all the stakeholders, it leads to mutual benefit and greater loyalty for the organisation,” he explains.

“The AGSM Short Courses gave the players (including Ashleigh Gardner, Moises Henriques and Alyssa Healy) the chance to use the pandemic downtime to learn skills for their life after cricket. However, Cummins – who already has a Bachelor of Business – regards it as real-time learning for his sport. “In leadership, a lot of the problems and opportunities come down to how you interact with people within your organisation. For us in cricket, it’s when you’re sitting around in the change room or during training and games. But the crossover with the business world is huge: you bring in a set of diverse people with different sets of motivations and beliefs and try to march towards the common goal. The problems we deal with aren’t unique; they’re common problems slightly altered towards the cricketing situation. We spend our life around cricketers so it’s a breath of fresh air listening to different perspectives.”

Cummins and his fellow players joined in the weekly 90-minute webinars – one session for each course – and breakout rooms. He says the virtual classes were more engaging than he expected. “You had 30 people on one call and by the end of each week, you knew most of the people in your class through the breakout rooms.”

That flexibility means Cummins can see a future – when the world has returned to some normality and he’s on tour – where he could use tournament downtime to further his studies. “The barrier to study for us as full-time cricketers is that we’re often travelling,” he says. “To be able to finish training and jump on a call for an hour-and-a-half from your own home and learn was pretty cool. I’m sure I’ll be back for some kind of learning.”