

# Wild horses couldn't keep them away

Today's time-pressured executives are doing mini-MBAs in surprising ways, writes **Rachel Lebihan**.

Executives take their cue from myriad sources, including boards of directors, consultants and life coaches — but a horse whisperer seems an unlikely choice.

However, that won't stop a group of executives swapping their pinstripe suits for leather chaps and cowboy hats next month and learning to communicate with wild horses in their quest to better understand and motivate staff.

While the dress code isn't compulsory, the venue is: a spectacular four-hectare ranch on Ryeback Ocean Beach on the edge of Victoria's Mornington Peninsular. Here, about 20 executives will gather to complete a component of the advanced management program (AMP) at Mount Eliza executive education, part of Melbourne Business School.

It is one of a number of such courses being revamped, relaunched, or rolled out more frequently in response to increased demand from time-poor executives for short professional development programs that give them a taste of a master of business administration.

Often called a mini-MBA, or an MBA-lite, AMPs are typically aimed at managers who are looking to be, or have been, fast-tracked into more senior roles, but haven't completed an MBA — or did so years ago.

The popularity of such courses is soaring during the buoyant economy because many executives don't have time for, and businesses are disinclined to encourage, participation in lengthy, drawn-out studies.

"At the moment it's probably one of the most significant issues we're dealing with," says a director at the University of Western Australia's faculty of business, Suellen Tapsall.

"Many individuals or organisations are dedicated to professional development, but just finding the time to do it is a problem



Marc Stigter . . . 'The horse whisperer thing is about communication, body language, how you position yourself.' Photo: JAMES DAVIES

we're hearing repeatedly." The university usually enrolls about 25 managers on its program, which is delivered once a year, but broke new ground last year in accepting 30 participants on the course.

It will be delivered twice this year, if a venue can be found, and a venue has already been tentatively booked to deliver the program twice in 2009.

"Last year we took 35 and put people on a waiting list and turned people away. The program could quite easily have taken 45," Tapsall says.

"And WA is so busy now that finding the appropriate venues and making sure we have time to schedule the program is not as easy as it used to be."

Macquarie Graduate School of Management will relaunch its renowned advanced management program in August after a hiatus of several years.

Its director of executive education, Craig Hawke, says demand for the program receded when the MBA programs flourished several years ago.

"I think we are now seeing the pendulum swing back where there are a large number of senior managers who say they don't have time for an MBA," Hawke says.

The three-week program will cover topics such as leadership, financial acumen, change management, strategy development, innovation strategy and leading

## "We're showing them to break out of that limited paradigm."

high-performing teams.

MGSM is also evaluating the possibility of linking with an overseas business school so that participants get the opportunity to study components overseas and gain a global perspective on issues, such as doing business in Europe or Asia.

MGSM participants will begin a personal development journal during the program that they will continue to keep once they return to

work. For example, a participant may realise during the program that they need to change their leadership style and focus more on empowering people who report directly to them — the journal will allow them to update and capture their progression in this area of development.

Hawke says those who did an MBA when they were younger could complete an AMP as a refresher program.

"That's where the advanced management program has been so incredibly successful. What it does in a three-week period is like a mini MBA," Hawke says.

"Often people complete an MBA in their 20s or early 30s when they haven't had the management experience to understand some of these concepts. The beauty of the advanced management program is learning about strategy and leadership often when they're in very senior roles and can apply it to their current role."

Mount Eliza Executive Education

regards the AMP as its flagship program.

The four-week residential program, delivered in two sessions, usually attracts about 20 people in two intakes a year.

Program director Marc Stigter says the program was most recently revamped to include Confucian and Islamic management, climate change issues, new media communication, such as Facebook and MySpace, and ethics, part of which is presented by Victoria police whistleblower Simon Illingworth.

The program has also been adapted to include innovative delivery methods, including participation by the Victorian College of the Arts, which conducts percussion music sessions, in which the participants have to work in groups to produce a short musical excerpt.

The exercise is used as an analogy for listening to each other, synchronising, leadership, as well and working as a team to come up with an end product.

Participants are also taken to Stigter's ranch to work with seasoned horse whisperer Frank Calleja to help break in wild horses.

"We find it a little bit cliched or corny, that horse whisper thing, but it is about talking the horses' language," Stigter says.

"It's about communicating, body language, how you position yourself. That becomes a metaphor for staff: how do you motivate your staff."

Stigter says typical advanced management programs focus only on the rational aspects of leadership, such as finance and strategy and use lots of case studies to investigate these issues.

"A lot of these people still have a very mechanistic mindset and are expecting toolkits and frameworks and methodologies," he says.

"That is nice in the mid-20s when people want to have the basics under their belt, but we're showing them to break out of that limited paradigm. I would argue that this is the ultimate way of learning," Stigter says.