

Saint Stew of Wharton

He leads a radical program—all about leadership and teamwork

By Larissa MacFarquhar

Five years ago, when master's candidates at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School put on their annual revue, *The Wharton Follies*, they spent the evening running down insider traders and proclaiming, in song, that businesspeople—themselves included—couldn't be trusted. But that was the tail end of the wicked Eighties. This year, the *Follies* was quite different. The students, most of whom couldn't yet order a martini when Michael Milken was arrested, played a band of angels helping eager would-be business masters to get into Wharton. The message, Sesame Street rather than Wall Street and quintessentially Nineties, was: You gotta work as a team.

The person Wharton's dean appointed in 1991 to effect this spiritual transformation made a cameo appearance at the beginning of the second act, playing Saint Stew, the patron saint of teamwork and self-discovery. Saint Stew, known in civilian life as Stewart Friedman, holds a doctorate in organizational psychology and is a consultant on balancing business and family. He earned his mock canonization as the director of Wharton's yearlong Foundations of Leadership program. Leadership is Wharton's more adventurous version of the people-skills courses that have recently become prominent in business master's core curricula nationwide, and are the most noticeable sign that business schools have finally entered the era of total quality management, reengineering, and men's-movement drummer boy Robert Bly. Its immodest pedagogical goal is the embracing of the two components of leadership (as distilled by Friedman from the hundreds of opinions he has collected on the subject): (1) a sense of the value and mechanics of teamwork and (2) self-knowledge.

A TIME OF TRIUMPH

In the *Follies*, Leadership was credited with Wharton's biggest triumph of last year: displacing Northwestern University in *Business Week's* biennial survey of national business master's programs to become, for the first time ever, number one. The singling-out of Leadership was significant, since the victory

might equally have been attributed to any other aspect of the massively revamped program Wharton recently put into place. The wide-ranging new curriculum, after all, addresses the three complaints recruiters made about business master's graduates in the late Eighties: (1) that they had no people skills, (2) that they were provincial, and (3) that their training was too segmented and academic. These days a course in "global strategic management" is part of Wharton's



core, and many classes are team-taught by professors from different departments to approximate the blending of skills required in the real world.

But Leadership is undoubtedly the most radical departure from the traditional business program. With its techniques of self-examination and mutual criticism, its stress on heartfelt reform, and its goal of training students away from unreflective individualism toward appreciating the superiority of group process, Leadership bears an amusingly close

resemblance to the retraining programs young Maoists were put through in China's revolutionary universities in the 1960s. Wharton has always been the hardheaded finance school—the alma mater of such take-no-prisoners entrepreneurs as Donald Trump, Michael Milken, and Saul Steinberg. Northwestern was the place for softy subjects such as management and marketing. Friedman's Leadership program is a departure indeed.

Leadership begins, Robert Bly-ishly enough, with a two-day retreat in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. There, some 750 proto-business masters participate in various bonding exercises, Outward Bound style. They scale a thirty-foot artificial wall; they use planks, cinder blocks, and their teammates to get across a length of ground without touching the earth. All this is supposed to force them out of their suits, metaphorically as well as literally: to mark a break between the dull, hackneyed ways they thought before and the new, creative ways of thinking that Wharton hopes to inspire in them.

DISTINGUISHING KEYS

The retreat is also a social occasion, but in a specific, carefully planned sense. Its chief role, in Friedman's view, is as the place where students divide into five- or six-person "learning teams," in which they will do much of their work and receive many of their course grades throughout the year. "The retreat starts the teams on their yearlong journey," Friedman says. "The geographic isolation magnifies the sense of moment."

The learning teams, Friedman's favorite brainchild, are the key to Leadership, and are one of the features that distinguish it from its equivalents elsewhere. Every school requires study groups for certain projects, but the experience of being forced to work together for a whole year seems to be unique to Wharton. This mandatory togetherness can be pretty difficult, as might be expected—most teams experience clashes of some kind, and several disintegrate altogether. This is mostly because \$25,000 worth of grades are at stake, and team members have conflicting notions of how

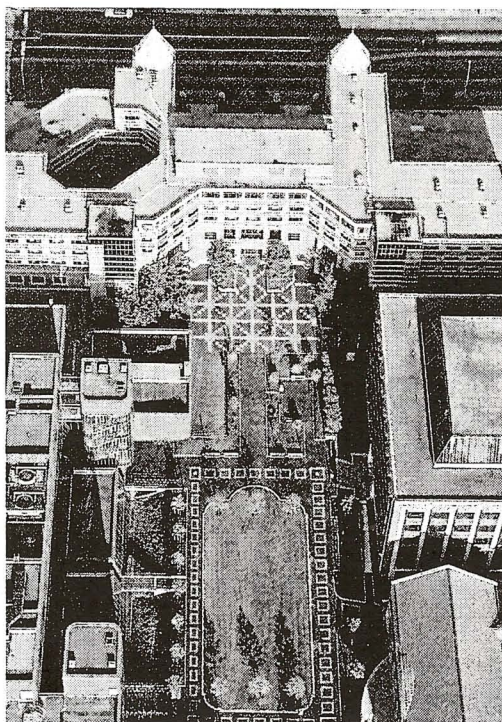
much work they may sanely expect from one another. Overachieving individualists that they are, they must learn to compromise. Thus Friedman's first goal for his charges: mastering the mechanics of teamwork.

The ordinary, grade-related tensions in the learning teams are compounded, moreover, by the requirements of Friedman's second goal, self-knowledge. It is not enough for Friedman that students learn how to resolve conflict; they must also understand why conflict occurs—not just in general, but in relation to their own personalities. Hence, throughout the semester, members of each team write critiques of one another and their team dynamics. Some of these are collective self-analyses, written as a group (“Authority in Our Team,” for instance); others are written by individual students about the personalities and flaws of their teammates.

Toward the end of the semester, students also fill out a lengthy questionnaire in which they rate themselves and each of their teammates on fifty different qualities—everything from “help[ing to] provide a sense of purpose for our team” to “listen[ing] to the opinions and concerns of others before making decisions.” The results are tabulated in a separate report, which students can use to compare their teammates’ ratings of themselves with their own (checking for self-delusion).

Much of Leadership’s class time is taken up with games and simulations—designed, like the learning teams, to lay bare the niceties of group dynamics. The most fascinating of these is the “Star Power” exercise: A class of thirty students is divided into three groups, identified by red, green, and blue ribbons. Each student is given a portion of colored chips that may be traded to increase one’s wealth. The key to the game is that the ribboned groups are not equal, either in terms of initial chip allotments or in terms of the rules by which they can play. The class system is not completely rigid—you can, technically, move into different classes by gaining or losing chips—but on the whole the rules are skewed enough that little mobility is possible.

The game lasts about an hour, during which the students negotiate, trade chips, and form alliances. The wonderful thing about the exercise is that, by all accounts, even within that short space of time most of the students become emotionally involved, and exchanges become heated. “The people in each group start to act like people in the parallel economic and social stratifications in society,” says Seth Faler, a Wharton student who played the game last September. “The people at the high end started acting like real jerks. I was in the middle, and I started to



Wharton: neo-Maoism and the global marketplace.

feel a lot of resentment toward people in the high group, but I still felt better than people in the lower group.” Even twenty years after Stanley Millgram’s “obedience to authority” experiments should have wised everybody up, games like this evidently still produce dramatic effects.

THERE’LL BE A TEST

The model of leadership Friedman holds up to his students is “the leader as learner”: someone able to acknowledge mistakes and change his or her behavior accordingly. Here again, Friedman believes, self-knowledge is the key. To this end, the students are assigned nine learning profiles in which they examine themselves for two or three pages, guided by headlines such as “Experiences of Prejudice,” “Listening Skills,” and “Life Vision and Priorities.”

At this point the students have already filled out a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator form—a widely used test that categorizes personalities in terms such as “intuitive” versus “sensing,” and “thinking” versus “feeling.” The Myers-Briggs results are designed to help students analyze their team dynamics by means of comparing types. But the function of the learning profiles is slightly different: While the Myers-Briggs test analyzes fixed traits, the learning profiles (ideally) narrate a student’s progress toward becoming a learning leader.

Doesn’t Friedman, formerly a clinical psychologist, find it odd to evaluate such personal documents? Isn’t it like grading a patient on a session? Doesn’t it come down to judging a personality? “We try to differentiate people in terms of how much they learn,” he says. “But it’s clear that people with a greater inclination to introspection and a greater skill in interpersonal relationships have an advantage in this course—just as people who worked on Wall Street have an advantage elsewhere in the core curriculum.”

The focus on self-knowledge is another thing that makes Leadership different from similar courses. Other university programs, such as Harvard’s Leadership and Organizational Behavior, Stanford’s Human Resource Management, and Northwestern’s Organization Behavior, focus on case studies, which are intended to teach students, via other people’s mistakes, what kinds of behavior lead to success. But Friedman is after more than a change in behavior—he wants a change of heart. “Be honest,” he urges his pupils in his instructions for their homework assignments.

This year’s *Follies* was definitely a victory for Leadership, and yet Friedman is defensive about the program. It hasn’t been easy being the touchy-feely guy at Wharton. The course has been subjected to continual criticism and ridicule from both faculty and students since it was first implemented in 1991. Wharton’s dean, Thomas Gerrity, is firmly in favor of it, as are most corporate recruiters, which would seem to bode well for Leadership’s future. But there are still the more immediate customers to deal with: Students who come to business school to learn about spreadsheets don’t like spending their precious class hours in what seems like group therapy. “One of the main issues we face,” Friedman says, “is making these issues relevant for our students. We need to do that every day, every session.”

Ultimately, though, if the recruiters like the program, the students like it, too. The whole school got a boost from the *Business Week* rating, and as long as Management 652 (Leadership plus a segment on business ethics) is perceived as its cause, then total quality management and neo-Maoism should survive at Wharton. As one student sang in the *Follies* this year, “They love the new curriculum / Our groups and global stand / Perk up, your starting salary / Just went up several grand. / You know 652 / I think that was our winning card / Now that it’s paid off big, the past / Few years don’t seem so hard.”

Larissa MacFarquhar is a contributing editor at *Lingua Franca* and an advisory editor at *The Paris Review*.