

# STRONGER SECURITY THROUGH BETTER BUSINESS SKILLS

An Interview with Dr. Mario Moussa

By Oksana Farber

**M**ario Moussa, Ph.D., MBA, serves as Academic Director of the Wharton/ASIS Security Executive Program. He is a Senior Fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics at the University of Pennsylvania. He teaches negotiation, organizational culture, strategy and organizational dynamics to senior managers and executives in many industries. For the past two years, he has been a Visiting Scholar of Negotiation at the Medical University of South Carolina.

Dr. Moussa, who directs several programs at Wharton Executive Education, helped design the collaborative program to help security executives see their businesses from a “big picture” point of view.

In an interview, Dr. Moussa offers his perspective on the challenges facing security executives:

## **What challenges have surfaced as the most difficult for a security executive to overcome?**

Probably the biggest challenge is the perception that security is a technical function. Security professionals must be able to speak the language of business and understand business logic. Our program is like a cultural immersion experience. Participants leave it



Dr. Mario Moussa

with a heightened sensitivity to business needs and outlooks. The result is a greater capacity to influence key decisions at the senior level.

## **How did the Wharton/ASIS collaboration come about?**

ASIS approached Wharton with the idea of partnering on developing an executive development program. The intended audience was Chief Security Officers, as well as senior managers in the security area. ASIS saw that Wharton had a long track record of designing programs that successfully address managers' real-world concerns.

## **When was the program initiated?**

We offered the program for the first time in November of 2004.

## **Were the initial participants considered a test group?**

The first group through the program wasn't really a test group, though we expected to make changes in the program in response to their feedback. As it turned out, the design worked very well. Indeed, it could hardly have worked better. We'll make some small changes to the communications module, since the participants had more experience with presentations than we anticipated. Otherwise, the second running of the program will look a lot like the first.

## **What are the similarities to executive management challenges in other industries?**

In many industries, specialists are finding increasingly that they need general management skills in order to be effective in their organizations. Doctors, engineers, lawyers, and security professionals—they all need to speak the language of the “C” suite, the language of the CEO, COO and CFO.

***How are participants trained to see the “big picture”?***

In our programs, we use only the instructors who have demonstrated an ability to translate cutting-edge theory into terms that speak directly to managers’ concerns. Many of our instructors have years of business experience themselves, or are currently running their own businesses. Having a foot in both the teaching and business worlds, our instructors are especially good at facilitating discussions and cases that simulate the challenges found at the most senior levels of major organizations. Moreover, our program has built into it an “implementation laboratory”—a six-week break between the first and second week. The break gives participants an opportunity to apply lessons learned, and then discuss what did and didn’t work.

***What has been the most effective vehicle to help participants adjust their mindset?***

We spend quite a bit of time on improving the participants’ influence skills. First of all, we focus on the business basics—finance, strategy, scenario planning, change management and so on. Then, we work explicitly on ways to incorporate those concepts into day-to-day responsibilities. We even help participants plan to have effective conversations with particular executives back on the job.

***Can you cite an example of how a participant was able to effect change by practical application of theories learned?***

One participant recounted giving a speech at a high-profile conference in which he used techniques learned in our session on influence. The response was stunning. He claimed that that impact alone justified the investment in the program.

***How does the program encourage building trust to bring executives together through the delicate process of forging alliances within one’s company?***

Our program features sessions on influence, negotiation, managing change and corporate culture. These “soft” topics, which actually are very relevant to making “hard” business cases, prepare participants for the delicate aspects of leadership.

***Is any training provided on how to prioritize security risks as a result of the agenda to develop better business strategists?***

One of our sessions focuses on strategic thinking and comparative advantage. The goal is to teach the participants how to understand their companies’ strategies and align their security programs with them.

***How are the participants trained to maintain value in non-negotiable principles when determining business decision-making?***

We train our participants in strategy and finance, as well as [in] negotiation and influence. This combination of hard and soft skills is powerful. Those who have completed our program know what makes a business tick, and they know how to make compelling case for security.

***A company’s culture may be diametrically opposed to the “scariness” of security protocols. How are participants advised to strategically implement security policies and procedures?***

We teach a session on corporate culture that sensitizes the participants to the need to work within the business norms of their organization. We also focus explicitly on ways to frame security protocols so that they don’t “scare off” top decision-makers.

***How do you apply “value-driven decision-making” to a security executive’s managerial style?***

Dr. M: Our finance professor is one of the most senior executives in Israel. She has run several companies and sits on the board of many others. She teaches the participants to focus on “key success factors”—those aspects of performance essential to making a business profitable—in building a

business case. Many people who have never been able to understand finance walk away from her session with the skills needed to communicate with the CFO and the most numbers-oriented CEO.

***Influential marketing can be key to the success of a security executive’s clout. How much emphasis is put on this? How is it explained?***

Our marketing instructor focuses on foundational marketing skills like segmentation. He also teaches the participants how to create a marketing plan.

***What have you and/or other faculty members learned about the security industry as a result of this teaching experience?***

I’ve learned that security professionals have an important role to play in creating resilient organizations. In today’s risky business environment, security is much more than a technical function. It’s one of the most important aspects of business leadership.

Indeed, security is one of the most important aspects of business leadership. Successful businesses embrace demand enthusiastically and respond quickly. To be more successful, a security executive’s responsibilities uphold ethical business standards through authoritative policies and procedures to imply the freedom to do so. A security executive who is highly skilled in the company’s business agenda should have a powerful voice in shaping corporate policy. Consumer purchase of products and services effectively endorses everything that brought these products safely and securely into being. Therein lies one of the great contributions a security executive can make.

*The Wharton/ASIS program superbly stimulates security improvement through educational reform by promoting better business comprehension and decision-making by security executives.*

*If you are interested in this program, please call 800-255-3932, ext. 4401, or send an email to [execed@wharton.upenn.edu](mailto:execed@wharton.upenn.edu).*