When Warner Burke spoke to TC employees this past fall to help introduce a new performance evaluation system, he didn’t pull any punches.

“We have a lot of work to do,” said Burke, the College’s Edward Lee Thorndike Professor of Psychology and Education and chair of its Department of Organization and Leadership.

Burke’s words were aimed at managers, not their reports. Consider that:

- Companies are notoriously bad at choosing senior executives, routinely disregarding psychological data (including measures of cognitive ability and normal personality) in their decisions, despite the proven track record of such information in predicting leadership successes;
- Half of all executives fail or are fired, and estimates of incompetent leadership range from 30 to 67 percent;
- A full 70 percent of organization change efforts fail—including 75 percent of mergers and acquisitions.

“There is a growing body of evidence that suggests competent leadership is hard to find in organizations,” Burke writes in a recent report he compiled with a team of TC students. The bottom line: Most managers negatively affect their people and their organizations.

Where are the Buffets and Gerstners of yesteryear? The raw talent is still out there, but finding it has become more crucial than ever. In a business world that now moves at a rapid-fire pace, with little margin for error, survival depends on the ability of leaders to adapt and think on their feet.
“Organizational change used to be planned for over time, but now it’s part of what happens every day,” says Debra Noumair, Associate Professor of Psychology & Education. “It requires leaders to be immediately responsive to emergent issues.”

Equipping organizations with the capacity to handle change in all its incarnations is the challenge that has prompted TC to create a new 45-credit, year-long Executive Masters Program in Change Leadership (known as ‘XMA’ for short) that is launching in summer 2011 under Noumair’s leadership. The program, which received support from the Provost’s Investment Fund, is situated within the larger social-organizational psychology component of the department. It is itself a response to an evolving marketplace, replacing a certificate program with the more staid title of Advanced Organization Development and Human Resource Management. Rather than appealing to human resources employees interested in a wide overview of their organizations, the XMA targets mid-level executives who could be tapped to manage change, planned or unplanned. The going-in premise is that these insiders have the potential to be more effective than expensive consultants who don’t really understand what’s happening inside the organization.

“Companies have a lot of experience bringing in the Deloittes and the McKinseys and the Booz Allens,” Burke says. “And they have not been overly euphoric about what they get for the high degree of money they spend. A major objective of this program is to increase capacity so that a line manager doesn’t have to hire McKinsey every time he’s got a problem.”

The inaugural class, which will likely total 18 students, will draw from a range of professions, including law, health care, marketing and the nonprofit world. Beth Johnson, director of recruiting at O’Melveny & Myers, a New York City-based law firm, is typical of the incoming group. A mid-career executive who was considering getting an MBA, Johnson was interested in organization development and wanted a master’s degree—and the program’s focus on change further piqued her interest.

“We’re at a really interesting point here in the legal industry,” she says. “With the economic downturn, the relationship between law firms and their clients has been changing. We have to think about how we’re going to do business in the future.”

Students in the XMA program will work primarily with three key TC faculty:
- Noumair, who has more than 15 years of experience in executive education. She has worked with senior managers in leadership development programs and consulted to a wide variety of public companies and not-for profits.
- Burke, co-developer of the widely studied Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance & Change, and a former consultant to British Airways and SmithKline Beecham.

“Organizational change used to be planned for over time, but now it’s part of what happens every day. It requires leaders to be immediately responsive to emergent issues.”
William Pasmore, a new faculty member who is also affiliated with the Center for Creative Leadership and was a partner in the corporate learning and organizational development practice at the consulting firm Oliver Wyman Delta.

XMA students will dive into the literature of organization development, absorbing eight books for the program's first week-long module, as well as a seminal article, “What We Know About Leadership; Effectiveness and Personality,” by Robert Hogan, Gordon J. Curphy and Joyce Hogan. They will spend four such modules with their cohort and professors, two at the Tarrytown House Conference Center 45 minutes north of New York City and two at TC. In between, they will be expected to spend 10 hours a week on course-related assignments and attend monthly half-day virtual sessions for project supervision, teamwork, information sharing and any additional hot-topic lectures.

Most importantly, the XMA students will spend at least a quarter of their time on action projects—actual issues at each other's companies or organizations that they will cooperatively discuss, study and try to help solve. For example, one entering student who is a district sales trainer and manager at a pharmaceutical company will work on reshaping operations in preparation for the launch of anticipated revolutionary new products. Another, who is an assistant vice president at an overseas branch of an American bank, will focus on helping top leaders build an effective internal culture to support the bank's planned metamorphosis from being American-driven to a "dynamic global entity."

"There's a long tradition of applied learning in this field," says Pasmore, who previously taught at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University and recently was named editor of the Journal of Applied Behavioral Science. "This is not something you read in a book and do without going out and trying. People really need the combination of adult experiential learning and the foundational work to understand what it means and how it works. Plus their organizations are paying and they want to see some benefit."

Like the executives they hope to prepare, the XMA founders know they will need to remain on the cutting edge of their field to stay competitive. One such innovation has been developed over the past three years by a Psychology of Management and Leadership Competencies workgroup composed of top Social-Organizational Psychology Ph.D. students, led by Burke. Students in the group, who will be available to help the executives in the program with their action projects, have been developing a potentially groundbreaking tool for reliably assessing leadership potential among employees. That tool is a questionnaire that will gauge employees' comfort and ease with learning new things—a skill the field has dubbed "learning agility," and that research has shown may well be a key predictor of an employee's ability to lead.

“A major objective of this program is to increase capacity so that a line manager doesn’t have to hire McKinsey every time he’s got a problem.”
‘We know what leaders do, but we don’t know what they do that’s really effective,’ Burke says. ‘I’d read some research that said that one’s learning approach is important to growth and development, and that seemed to align with leadership effectiveness as well. That’s what sparked me—well, maybe effective leaders are learning-agile. Maybe they are more adept at learning what they need to know than other people.’

Dissatisfied with existing measures of learning agility, Burke set his students to creating a learning agility assessment scale. The team whittled some 128 questions down to a questionnaire of 19, currently in pilot testing. The incoming XMA program students will likely be given the test, helping the Ph.D. students to further refine it based on their results. The XMA-ers also represent potential consumers for the instrument once it’s perfected, and other such synergies may well follow.

‘When you’re in an organization, you’re so in that daily market, that daily industry, that you just can’t stop seeing things a certain way,’ says Kate Roloff, a fourth-year doctoral student in the workgroup who worked at the Harvard Business School doing research and helping to write teaching cases before coming to TC. ‘Our empirical research process can provide a fresh perspective. The flip side is, we need them, too. We can do only so much research in a Petri dish, separate from the real world. So the feedback we will get from the XMA students about what does and what doesn’t work in their organizations will be really useful.’

Still, for her part, Beth Johnson says she’s looking forward to applying research methodology to workplace behavior. ‘I’m really excited about those “aha” moments that I’m going to have in class when we go through some sort of scientific theory or set of behaviors and I’ll realize, I know people who do that. That’s going to be really great.’

To view an online interview with Beth Johnson, visit www.tc.edu/news/7889.

The more things change within TC’s Social-Organizational Psychology program, the more, in some ways, they stay the same. In January 2011, William Pasmore became editor of The Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences (JABS), which was founded in 1965 under the editorship of TC psychology professor Goodwin Watson. The first issue included articles by several leading names in American psychology, including Carl Rogers and Chris Argyris.

TC also is planning the creation, possibly as soon as next fall, of a Center for Group Dynamics. The name harks back to the legendary Center for Group Dynamics Research founded at MIT during the middle of the last century by psychologist Kurt Lewin. That center, together with the National Training Laboratories, which was then part of the National Education Association, co-sponsored the creation of JABS.