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Future Business Leaders Cut Loose at MIT

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Kevin Ma for The Chronicle

Pairs of M.B.A. students are heatedly debating the merits of doing away with final exams when a Tibetan meditation bell chimes. In midsentence, they switch sides. The "pros" are suddenly vehement opponents, the "cons" passionate, if occasionally confused, advocates.

When the energy seems to flag, their instructor tells them to run around the room, skipping, hopping, twirling, or shooting imaginary baskets. She turns on some pulsing hip-hop music, and the students begin dancing and laughing. When it stops, they dash off to make their case to new sparring partners, now

energized and even more fervent in their delivery.

It's hardly what you would expect to see at one of the nation's top business schools, one known

The M.B.A. students do warm-up exercises to prepare for some serious improvisations.

for its analytical emphasis. But this improvisational-leadership course at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management has become a wildly popular break from tradition for students who spend much of the day sitting in front of their computers.

The course is taught by Daena Giardella, who, in addition to being a lecturer at MIT, is a professional actress, leadership coach, and organizational consultant. She has taught similar courses to medical residents, psychotherapists, and law students, but she says the M.B.A. students are among the most creative and ready to cut loose. That's good news, she says, because at a time of economic uncertainty, improvisational skills are more important than ever for future business leaders.

"Whether they're CEO's or people trying to create start-ups, the skills they need are the same ones the improvisational master uses," Ms. Giardella says. "They need to be in the moment, to respond to what's happening instead of what they think should be happening, to cut through a lot of distracting information and get to the heart of what matters."



Kevin Ma for The Chronicle

With the sound of a chime, Daena Giardella prompts students in her improvisational-leadership course to switch roles.



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Ms. Giardella (background, in orange sweater) uses dance to help her students develop the skills that they may well find useful in business to handle ever-changing circumstances.



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Using dance moves, Jeffrey Feng (left) tries to keep his fellow student, Simone Gammeri, interested in interacting. But the negotiations eventually broke down.

Her two-day course, "Improvisation and Influence: An Experiential Leadership Lab," was offered in March during the Sloan Innovation Period, a one-week break each semester during which students take some often offbeat courses. The class is a condensed version of the semester-long course in improvisational leadership that Ms. Giardella teaches every other semester at Sloan.

Teaching Flexibility

"The improviser is making change happen and is open to change," Ms. Giardella tells the 14 second-year students assembled in a hotel conference-room for the March lab. By contrast, "we often are like driftwood on a sea bobbing along on the currents of the fast-paced world we live in." And so she urges the students to experiment and take risks as they engage in impromptu problem-solving sessions.

In one exercise, students jump in and out of skits that they make up on the spot. One is unclogging a toilet; others are trying out a bed in an Ikea store, staging a drug deal, or posing for a sexy-model shoot. At times, the energy reaches near-manic levels; inhibitions fly out the window as the acts get progressively sillier. As the day wears on, the students seem comfortable bursting into monologues about sagging corporate earnings or the effect of Japan's tsunami on macaroni prices.

If students pause to craft a response to a prompt, Ms. Giardella urges them to blurt out what they're thinking: "In improv, you have to go with your first impulse, rather than waiting for the brilliant insight, because if you wait, the train will have left the station."

All the physical activity helps with that.

"Doing something silly like dancing around helps you give up that shell you often wear and drop the artifice," says Miro Kazakoff, one of the students.

Ms. Giardella agrees: "Dancing breaks the ice and puts you in an improvisational state of mind." And switching back and forth between two characters in a debate helps students become better negotiators, she says.

"If you want to influence people, you have to be able to anticipate their arguments and understand why they would believe passionately in their position," she says.

One of the major themes in the class is discovering nonthreatening ways to influence people and bring them around to your point of view.

In one exercise, students pair off and try to draw each other into an interaction through dancing. If one loses interest and stops moving, the partner has to come up with a new move or some new energy to keep the "conversation" going.

Duo No. 1, Jeffrey Feng and Simone Gammeri, hit the dance floor. Mr. Feng pauses for a moment before trying out a few awkward dance moves. They fail to impress Mr. Gammeri, who stands still, arms folded. Ms. Giardella comes to the rescue. "Jeff, you have a very complex thing going on in your mind, like an engineering thing. Let it go and just let loose."

He smiles, relaxes, and finds his comfort zone, and Mr. Gammeri joins in. If this were a business negotiation, they'd be off to a promising start.

But business relationships often go awry, and some of the role-playing exercises have students facing off against the unproductive team member or the power-hungry boss.

Mr. Kazakoff gives a convincing performance as a besieged techie whose boss is upset because a prototype program is flawed. He says the role-playing is good practice for the real world of business.

"The best leaders are people who can pick an approach and tone that's appropriate to the situation, and the improv exercises in which we switch tones and voices are really helpful," he says.

In another exercise, students engage in a negotiation during which they climb up and down from chairs as they find their status in the debate elevating and lowering.

They see that arguing from a position of power isn't always the most effective way to influence someone. Getting off the chair, listening to the other person, and engaging them in the solution can be more effective.

"Sometimes you have power when you can convince the other person that doing what you want them to do is in their self-interest," says Mr. Gammeri.

Later in the day, in one of the more unusual exercises, the students morph into dogs negotiating with their owners on how they want to be treated. At one point, several students are on the floor, pretending to lap water out of plastic cups; then they're told to switch into being part of a business team that's run into a problem marketing its sports drink. "In the middle of the conversation, you're going to turn back into dogs," Ms. Giardella says.

"Dogs that talk?" a student asks. "Just wanted to get that clear." A conversation of intermittent human chatter and barking ensues.

There's method to the madness, Ms. Giardella assures them. "Sometimes a conversation can get very dull, and when you're asked to play dogs, there's laughter and a playful energy." When students take that energy into the negotiations, she says, inertia lifts and they get things done.

Mr. Gammeri acknowledges that this is the first time he has lain down and played the role of a dog while at Sloan. "But it fits perfectly in terms of what we do all the time at MIT, mixing the theoretical and practical. And it was very entertaining."

Comments from Chronicle Web Site

“I love it. Excellent job! This not only makes learning fun, but it also brings in new instructive methods that enhance participation in the classroom.”

~C.M. Letamendi, MBA

:This sounds so perfect - I wish all managers would be forced to attend (and the House and Senate too)!”

~keis8427

“Just the mental image of John B dancing with Harry R makes one giddy....”

~janesdaughter

“You have to be an engineer and be an MIT former student to appreciate how MUCH people like Giardella and exercises like those described above---release MIT students/faculty from their private hells of hiding behind maths. That place is SO neurotic in harmful ways (but they buy genius with those neuroses so I am not so sure reducing the neuroses is worth the reduction in genius likely from it---dangerous to tinker with actual done greatness repeated for generations as at MIT).

I have been in bank negotiations and venture capital presentations where EXACTLY the above sorts of exercise would have GOTTEN the DEAL DONE, and instead it failed due to MEN hiding from emotions behind various silly MBA math-ish types of formulas. No one had the guts to laugh at the cowardice that MBA degrees drives into human souls---hiding for a lifetime behind maths. Yuk Yuk and applause applause for Giardella (and her MIT sponsors). SHAKE EM UP BABY”

~richardtaboegreene