

Trends in Business Schools

Theatre techniques help managers develop their management skills

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Daena Giardella, MIT Professor, visited Buenos Aires, Argentina to teach Improvisation Workshops.

What are Argentinian Business Schools doing? Business schools such as Stanford, MIT Sloan School of Management, or MID (Switzerland) are incorporating theatre techniques into their curriculum to help students become leaders. In addition to role play exercises, which have been traditionally used to help managers develop their “soft skills,” MBA programs are currently offering elective courses that cover a wide variety of acting techniques.



Such is the case in the course “Improvisational Leadership and Influence: In the Moment Leadership Skills, which is taught by Professor Daena Giardella at the MIT Sloan School of Management. In addition to being a professor, Giardella is an executive leadership coach, actor, organizational consultant, and actor. Last month, she visited Buenos Aires, brought by the MIT Club de Argentina, to teach two workshops on improvisation and leadership. One of these workshops was offered to business students at the Universidad Di Tella; the other one was attended by members of the Entrepreneurial Team at the Buenos Aires City Government.

“An actor on stage can be compared to a business leader: they both face uncertainty, ambiguity, and an unclear scenario where the most unexpected of all things can happen” Giardella told iEco in an exclusive interview. Workshops on improvisation and leadership “help managers respond adequately to unexpected and uncertain situations” she said. Through improvisation exercises, Giardella teaches how to develop effective responses to conflicts and stressful situations as well as the ability to see a conversation from another person’s perspective.

Improvisation techniques are also used to improve communication. “One of the improvisation tools involves the use of “status” in interactions. Many times, in the business world, people don’t change their status when they speak. One person keeps a high status, while the other one has a low status. In dynamic and effective conversations, each person moves freely from one status to another to help gain trust, set limits, or influence the forward momentum of the scene. In improvisation, this is called “status changes,” which means that the actors in the scene keep changing from high to low status or from low status to high status with great fluidity as they influence each other. This ability can be improved and practiced through exercises. Status changes offer a vital tool for negotiators and leaders who wish to create productive dialogues as they influence others.” Giardella explained.

The incorporation of these techniques involves being aware of body language and non-verbal communication as well as the ability to be authentic in the moment and take risks. But the MIT expert explained that “although it is sometimes believed that businesspeople might not be familiar with these kinds of exercises, I find that they are generally excited about the idea of doing something new and learning these skills. They quickly become engaged and open to the experience. According to Giardella, many business schools are starting to realize that theatre techniques are useful. “There

is a demand for this kind of active learning: where students get up, do, and try new approaches” she said. Business schools such as Stanford, MIT Sloan School of Management, or MID (Switzerland) are incorporating theatre techniques into their curriculum to help students become leaders. In addition to role play exercises, which have been traditionally used to help managers develop their “soft skills,” MBA programs are currently offering elective courses that cover a wide variety of acting techniques.

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