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MBA students learn that all the business world's a stage

By Aimee Steen

In business, everyone has a role to play. From presentation to management, impact and influence vary hugely depending on an individual's behavior.

Business schools are drawing lessons from the theatre to enhance their students' ability to become strong leaders and communicators. But, rather than training students as actors, they are using strategies from the stage to enhance students' approach across a range of business situations.



Using acting skills in business training is mainly a western phenomenon. In the US, a number of business schools offer tailored drama electives, such as MIT Sloan School of Management and Stanford Graduate School of Business. In the UK and continental Europe, universities tend to use a specialist training agency rather than run a course in-house, according to Geoff Church, director and founder of UK-based acting company Dramatic Resources.

"There is no question that it started in the west, the UK is a hub for this," he says. The trend for the theatrical approach is less common further east, he adds, although awareness is building. Dramatic Resources has begun working with Insead in Abu Dhabi and recently worked in Bangkok and India for Adecco, the temporary employment agency. It has also collaborated with the Saïd school at the University of Oxford, Durham University Business School in the UK and IMD in Switzerland.

"Bringing real actors into class is extremely powerful and effective," says Arturo Bris, director of advanced strategic management at IMD. "An executive's job is very often like an actor being on stage and giving craft to a particular, written role."

At MIT students on the “EnActing leadership: Shakespeare and performance” program become a theatre company for the course duration, culminating in a performance of Hamlet. According to Christine Kelly, a senior lecturer in managerial communication at MIT, identifying with Shakespeare’s characters in a leadership context gives students more presence and the ability to project well even in stressful scenarios. “Having to perform fools the brain into thinking ‘this is a real situation’,” she says.

MIT lecturer Daena Giardella teaches improvisational leadership in which she coaches students to experiment by responding differently.

“Some people are by default more outgoing, some are more retiring, more quiet,” she says. “We look at those default habit roles and I challenge them to move out of their comfort zone.”

A crucial skill spanning acting and business is making others look good, Ms. Giardella adds: being able to welcome others’ viewpoints while adding your own creates greater influence than putting down conflicting ideas.

Teaching acting skills in business school is not about trying to put on a mask, says Deborah Gruenfeld, who teaches “Acting with power” at Stanford. “Everybody has sides of themselves that they don’t use often, but what learning to act does is give you an opportunity to find the parts of yourself that can relate to the characters and the role you are playing.”

Part of self-development is finding more effective ways to behave, Prof Gruenfeld adds, such as a student recognizing they are not very authoritative and using acting training to bring out more authoritative traits.

Students are often concerned that acting means a lack of authenticity, but Ed Freeman, who teaches “Leadership and theatre: Ethics, innovation and creativity” at Darden School of Business, University of Virginia, says this view is incorrect. “It is about emotional intelligence. A lot of people think of acting as big emotions, but that is just generally bad acting. We have got to be authentic.”

Being imaginative can bring out the skills that businesses seek, he says. “Every chief executive I know wants organic growth but very few people are willing to turn loose their people in terms of their creative sides.”

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Many core drama skills are based on body language. “A lot of actors will say you use your body language to help transform your psychology,” says Prof Gruenfeld. The basics start with experimenting with different ways of holding the body and vocal exercises. Lessons then move on to how to use physical signals to show power or deference.

“There is always an objective sense of who has power in an organization,” she says. “But ... if you really want to understand who has influence, there is a lot more to it. You can look at peers and know that some have a lot more power than others.”

For James Rice at Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, in New Hampshire, who teaches the “Communicating with presence” course, something as simple as learning to breathe properly can improve communication. Identifying inhibitors in a rehearsal environment can lead to greater success in a real scenario, he adds.

“To relax, to live in the presentation moment, you have to spend some time in self-observation and see what things keep you from doing that.” Actors and leaders need to be persuasive and inspirational, he adds, yet only actors properly study how to achieve that.

According to Mr. Church, too much emphasis is placed on outward appearance in business: “People assume that if someone can stand up in front of a room and be convincing, inspiring, engaging, that tells you they are a good leader in other ways, and if they can’t do that they are in some way incompetent.”

Acting skills can help combat this by instilling greater confidence, he adds. “Our role is to get people to be themselves confidently while getting people to listen to them,” says Mr. Church. All skills must ultimately be applied to the business world, but it is not about learning to mask behaviors; it is about exploring emotions, empathy, confidence, projection and authenticity.

As Prof Freeman says: “It is really learning to be more effective as a human being.”