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How future managers learn “soft skills” at MIT

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These classes provide students with the “improvisation” skills they need to face uncertain economic and social situations and be able to influence others in a successful way.

An important businessman is about to make a presentation in front of a large audience. Suddenly, someone who works in his company tells him: “Topics A, B, and C are not part of the program anymore”. And it turns out that 90% of his presentation focuses on these topics. How can this businessman live up to the expectations of his large audience?



That is exactly what Daena Giardella, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Sloan School of Management, teaches to the new generations of business leaders through her course “Improvisational Leadership: In the Moment Leadership Skills.” This course is part of the MBA offered by the MIT Sloan School of Management, which is ranked #8 among the best MBA programs in the world, according to the last ranking published by the Financial Times.

But, what is “improvisational leadership? It is the skill set we use when we face unexpected, uncertain situations.

It may sound obvious but for Giardella, who was invited to Chile last week by the MIT Sloan International Program Latin America Office, and has taught prominent business leaders, these types of abilities have become essential in our rapidly changing business environments. The globalization of business creates economic conditions that “can evolve quickly into great opportunities for innovation and it can create great uncertainty or risk. Organizations need employees who are ready to respond proactively to the unexpected because it is difficult to make predictions when we face uncertainty. Leaders need to be ready to make the most of opportunities, while being adaptable in the face of change.”

This workshop focuses on the skills of improvisational leadership and influence. According to the expert, “Many people believe that using improvisation skills in business settings implies a lack of preparation but it is the exact opposite. Professor Giardella states: “Improvisational leadership requires preparation and helps us feel ready to respond in the moment to the unexpected so that we can make the best influence choices. It develops a ‘360 degree circle awareness’ of what is going on around us in meetings, conversations, or business negotiations.”

This laboratory workshop teaches how to get out of our comfort zone to play new roles and how to apply this ability to the business world, as we practice effective influence “moves” and learn how to navigate challenging conversations, conflict, and complex team dynamics. In addition, the seminar covers real-world examples of business scenarios and case studies.

“Our goal is to build well-rounded leaders, to give them the ability to maintain higher quality relationships, so that they can be open, adaptable, flexible, and capable of building strong relationships while creating the right conditions to effectively influence others.

Another example could be the effect of the financial crisis in 2009, which ruined a great number of companies and caused a domino effect. Many of the greatest business leaders and employees did not know how to deal with this uncertainty.

According to Giardella, Chilean business leaders have learned to be prepared to face the great emergencies caused by natural disasters that happen on a regular basis. “This may help them be prepared to know what to do and how to proceed when faced with difficult and uncertain circumstances”.

Empathy and culture

In addition, Professor Giardella teaches company workers how to develop their empathy and initiative to their full potential. She calls it the “Yes, and” attitude, which is the exact opposite of the “Yes, but” attitude.

“It does not mean that we need to agree with everyone, which is a common misconception. “The ‘Yes, and...’ attitude affirms our conversational partner and invites further dialogue, even if we do not agree with everything they are saying. ‘Yes, but...’ negates the other person and blocks collaboration and problem solving. People stop listening when they hear ‘Yes, but...’” Likewise, she stresses the importance of promoting creativity, innovation, and the ability to learn lessons and rebound from failure.

Our expert states that we should be able to interface with the many different cultures that coexist in today’s global world.



“Improvisation in Leadership” es el curso que imparte el MIT. FOTO: BLOOMBERG

Giardella says that “if one is leading a global company, it is imperative to understand the culture of each country we are doing business with as well as the organizational culture of our business partners.” The same rationale applies to body language: eye contact, non-verbal cues, or how to make a correct greeting.

She stresses that “we need to learn about other people's cultures and experiences because in the modern global business environment multicultural awareness is considered to be a key to business success. It is about using “High Stakes Listening” which means listening to the other person as if the life of our project, financial success or partnership depends upon how well we hear the other’s perspective.”

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