



# A LEAD OF THEIR OWN

**While others  
may argue  
over whether  
leaders are  
born or made,  
MIT Sloan has  
a better plan:  
to build  
their own.**

*Illustrations by Paul Wearing*

In between conducting simulations for a group of GE's IT executives from around the world, Professor John Van Maanen takes a few moments to share an anecdote of a recent *New Yorker* cartoon that illustrates some of the ethical problems inherent in leadership.

In the center of the cartoon is an executive with a devil resting on his right shoulder and an angel on his left, both of whom are whispering in the executive's ear.

*"Should I run it by accounting?" asks the devil.*

*"Should I run it by legal?" asks the angel.*

Van Maanen says that the cartoon speaks to organizational culture, and how it rarely allows for certain questions to be asked, even if they should be. When leaders are posed with planned or unplanned scenarios, what is the best behavioral approach to take? Is it the ethical route? The moral route? Maybe a bit of both? Or should one simply seek the safest or routine way out of the situation itself, no matter what the consequences may be?

“Whom do you turn to when something serious is coming down the line?” Van Maanen poses. “I think, in some sense, there is a discomfort with power ... there is a negative tag.”

But what if that tag were changing? And while the word “power” may connote images of varying degrees—some positive and some not—what of the tag of leadership, perhaps one of the most utilized words being bandied about business school campuses today, including that of MIT Sloan?

### LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS

If you were to ask Professor Deborah Ancona, faculty director of the two-year-old MIT Leadership Center, talking about leadership—and how it is best created, cultivated, and harnessed—is the first step toward altering the landscape of certain set behaviors typically found in organizational structures of all kinds.

“Unlike other centers, we are not only in the business of creating executive leaders and not only creating teams, but also working with organizations to create change,” says Ancona, the Seley Distinguished Professor of Management. “We are not looking only to create the leader at the top, but leaders at all levels. That’s our philosophy and our overall viewpoint. ... That’s the essence of what we do.”

At the Leadership Center, what feeds this philosophy is the Four Capabilities Leadership Model, developed in 2002 by Professors Ancona, Wanda Orlikowski, Tom Malone, and Senior Lecturer Peter Senge as “a powerful tool for understanding and integrating the four critical components of leadership: sensemaking, relating, visioning, and inventing.”

“Teaching leadership is very difficult, and there is a debate on whether such a thing can be taught,” says Orlikowski, the Eaton Peabody Chair of Communication Sciences, who took part in discussions with Ancona and others that led to the creation of the MIT Leadership Center. “We talked about what might be an effective program not just to teach leadership, but also to create programs for students to learn leadership ... so we moved to an understanding of leadership not so much as a clear-cut domain knowledge, but to a set of capabilities that students can develop.”

But can such skills truly be developed by anyone, or are true leaders predestined for greatness?

“Leaders are made, not born,” says Van Maanen, the Erwin H. Schell Professor of Organization Studies. “There is a place for change in all of us.”

“Anyone has the potential for leadership, of course, but certain people have a greater set of skills and aptitude,” says Ancona. “But the question is, where does leadership start? It starts with someone wanting to make a difference ... when people are truly motivated toward a goal or a vision, they will do it, even if they have to change themselves.”

“In many ways,” says Ancona, “leadership starts with what’s important to you.”



## The secrets of SIP week

**IF THE PROVERB CITED** by the character Antonio in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* is correct—citing that the world is a stage and every person plays a part—how valuable would it be to have the chance to rehearse one's part as a leader before taking to the world stage?

For MIT Sloan Senior Lecturer Chris Kelly, the correlation between acting and leadership is significant, and it led her to create a course some 15 years ago where the reciting of several monologues from Shakespeare's *Henry V* is central to exploring “the life of a very human, yet very powerful and articulate leader.”

“Acting is all about making choices ... and like leadership, the role can expand or shrink,” says Kelly, now in her fourth year of facilitating “Leadership as Acting” as part of the semianual weeklong Sloan Innovation Period (SIP), where students and alumni alike engage in more than 40 leadership and management offerings created to test boundaries and broaden perspectives.

“SIP week is uniquely MIT,” says Kelly. “Students get to explore so many different things ... and it is entirely different than anything else they do here.”

“There are many ways to get outside the usual classroom structure, but to do something where you don't have multiple sessions is relatively rare,” says MIT Sloan Manager of Special Projects Jonathan Lehigh, MBA '05. “It gives you a lot of pedagogical and innovative freedom.”

Started in the fall of 2003, SIP week—and its offerings that focus on leadership—has more than doubled since its early days, from 13 to 14 leadership-based courses to this year's total of 25 out of the 43 sessions. Of that 25, 13 were first-time offerings, a number that stays fairly static, says Lehigh, to maintain diversity and innovation among courses that stress “learning by doing.”

“We really go into great detail and great depth,” says Professor Wanda Orlikowski, who facilitates the three-day-long Bosnian peace-keeping simulation set in the 1990s. “It's an immersion experience ... and it's very realistic, complex, uncertain, and fast changing, where students are working with multiple stakeholders. It is one thing to learn the concepts and do some practice, but here they actually have to enact. They are the NATO forces; they have to go out and negotiate ... and they realize that if they don't do a good job, people end up suffering. It gets very real for them.”



SIP classes set aside seats for interested alumni who may choose to participate in back-in-time simulations on the \$800 million Jumuna Bridge project in Bangladesh or other highly experiential yet nontraditional offerings, such as the newly created “Improvisation and Influence” taught by consultants Deborah Slobodnik and **Daena Giardella**.

Based on the premise that great leaders improvise, **Giardella**—a professional actor, director, and author who has built a long-time career as an organizational consultant and executive coach—says that the skills of improvisation happen to be the same skills that are needed for success and leadership in business, government, and the nonprofit world.

“The more you can adapt and respond ... the more persuasive you will be,” says **Giardella**, who has shared her talents in this area for 25 years with clients such as Citibank, the European Commission, and Hewlett-Packard, to name a few. “Somehow, when it comes to living our lives and improvising, we feel that we are supposed to know how to do that instinctively, but improvisation is a set of skills that can be developed and mastered through practice. I like to say that improvisation is the art of dealing with the unexpected and the science of navigating the unknown.”

In October, **Giardella's** group of 15 were faced with the unexpected from the very start of the two-day session: They danced to music that ranged from hip hop to African drumming to Parisian club tunes in a warm-up exercise intended to set any tensions—and egos—at ease before delving into heavier themes of making and accepting offers, team building, employing high-stakes listening, and practicing “status” tactics to understand how power dynamics affect the scene.

“At this workshop, everyone immediately jumped in with a spirit of yes,” says **Giardella**. “I was extremely inspired by the brilliance, openness, and expressiveness of the people in the room ... they were extraordinary. MIT Sloan is obviously doing something very cutting edge here.”

## THE “X” FACTOR

For MIT junior Anna Jaffe, her reason to lead came as a result of an ambitious concept developed over conversations with senior Robyn Allen.

Armed with the idea to build a highly proficient vehicle for introduction in India that would “demonstrate a 95 percent reduction in embodied energy, materials, and toxicity from cradle-to-grave,” Jaffe and Allen approached Ancona and the Leadership Center about what could be done to move their concept forward.

“When we first started the project, we wanted to understand what inhibits students from solving problems in the world ... and we decided it was a confidence issue. Whether it is global warming or poverty or conflict, it is not something that one person can solve on [his or her own],” says Jaffe, a civil and environmental engineering major. “That’s where the X-Teams came in. It was the perfect framework ... to allow people to tackle these problems.”

Ancona could not have agreed more, and utilized her model of X-Teams—“combining high levels of external activity with extreme execution inside the team”—to bring the Vehicle Design Summit project to an international level.

“They had the initiative, but they needed some help on how to make it work,” says Ancona, who is now teaching a course for the Vehicle Design Summit, a project of major international interest which currently involves more than 250 people and 38 X-Teams spread out over six continents.

“Initially, we didn’t have a common framework to enable everyone to work together,” says Jaffe. “X-Teams gave us a framework to clearly and easily say, ‘Here is the framework. Here is what is important and why.’”

In her class on X-Teams held in the spring, titled “Leadership Tools and Teams: A Product Development Lab,” Ancona says the focus is less about how the teams are put together, and more about how to set up the proper structure and process for people to work cohesively and successfully within the distributed leadership model. To that end, Ancona—co-author of the recently published *X-Teams: How to Build Teams*

*That Lead, Innovate, and Succeed*—says students in her course do not simply learn the theory of X-Teams, but more effectively become an X-Team. At the end of the semester, each team is expected to produce a product or tool “that helps MIT students to become better leaders.”

Roxanne Chen, MBA ’08, says the experience served as a means for her X-Team to create a manual to improve the training of the MIT Sloan Ambassadors, a group of student volunteers who are often the first face of the School for prospective students visiting campus.

“We thought the program could be improved and asked, ‘How do we build stronger leadership among the Ambassadors?’” says Chen. “For our actual product, we decided to make a guidebook for new Ambassador captains, and we thought by having great captains, we could build great volunteers.”

““ I learned that leadership is more about social processes ... and leadership is for everyone.”

—Naoto Kanehira, MBA ’08

For Chen's own X-Team, the performance and self-evaluation portion of the exercise proved to be as fruitful as the creation of the product itself.

"We had to stop and ask ourselves, what went well and what didn't?" says Chen. "It really allowed us to build on our strengths and identify our weaknesses."

"It was an eye-opening experience," says Naoto Kanehira, MBA '08, whose X-Team last spring created an MIT Sloan-inspired leadership course to be taught in his native Japan. "I learned that leadership is more about social processes ... and leadership is for everyone. Everyone can capture the opportunity to make progress, and everyone can contribute and bring in different perspectives. ... I started to observe the world through different lenses."

"In working with the Leadership Center ... there is a general culture that says, 'We are going to let you take this risk,'" says Jaffe. "I don't think this culture exists everywhere."



### BUILDING A BETTER LEADER

As a professional actor, director, and author who has also built a long-time career as an organizational consultant and executive coach, **Daena Giardella** brings a unique perspective to what makes—and what may hinder—an effective leader. In October, Giardella brought her expertise to MIT Sloan as part of the semiannual Sloan Innovation Period (SIP), an intense weeklong event when regular classes are suspended to make way for leadership seminars taught by faculty and industry leaders (see sidebar, pg. 25). In **Giardella's** two-day class, 15 MBA candidates learned the art of improvisation and how such skills may be used in the workplace.

"What we believe we are, or are not, limits how effective we can be as leaders," says **Giardella**. "Improvisation forces you to break out of your habitual roles. You have to be ready to respond with dexterity to the moment. ... You have to dare to make an impact in the scene without worrying about looking stupid or seeming silly. Improvisers learn how to manage the 'inner critic' voices that chatter in everyone's head as we go through life. The inner critic might be saying, 'Stay small, don't get too big for your britches' or 'Give up, you can't do this.'"

To counterbalance the effect of falling back on whatever internal default setting one might have—be it the role of the conflict avoider, the initiator, the observer, or the confronter—**Giardella** challenges participants to shift their internal setting despite what their reflexive instincts might tell them, and do something different.

"Great improvisers and great leaders learn to play many roles and be adaptable scene to scene," she says. "In improvisation ... the goal is to make the other person look good and to bring out the best in the other person. ... An improvisation is destroyed if someone is up there saying, 'me, me, me.' The same is true of leadership. Master leaders and master influencers know how to bring out the best in their teammates."

# MIT's Leadership Center

**WHEN SPEAKING LAST FALL** with a colleague at another top U.S. business school about how leadership is being taught at their respective institutions, Professor Deborah Ancona was told, “We are trying to catch up with MIT.”

As the faculty head of the two-year-old MIT Leadership Center, the mere recollection of the story brings a smile to Ancona's face, in the same way that a proud parent might mention a recent milestone of his or her young child.

“The novelty of what we do here at the Leadership Center is we engage people at so many levels,” says Ancona. “I've been teaching here for 25 years, and it does not get better than this.”

The central focus of the Leadership Center is framed around a few key principles, not the least of which is the Institute's *mens et manus* ethos (Latin for mind and hand), where one is expected to understand the foundational in order to execute the practical.

“The ‘mind’ part includes multiple models of leadership and teams, and the ‘hand’ part means that our students know how to make change happen when they leave here,” says Ancona.



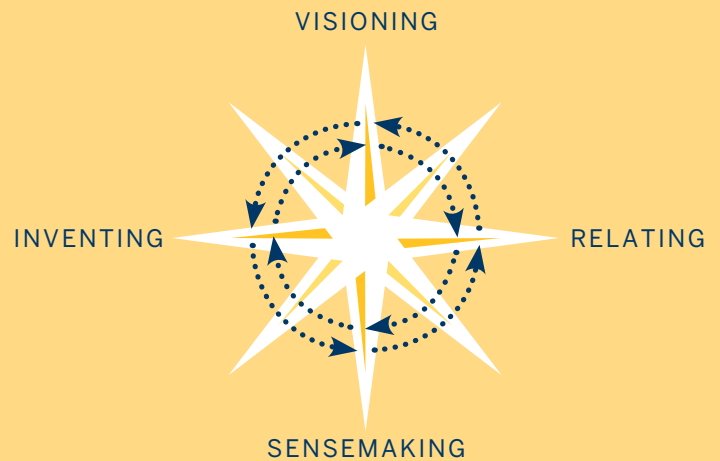
Professors Orlikowski, Van Maanen, and Ancona

At the core of this foundation is the Four Capabilities Leadership Model, developed in 2002 by Professors Ancona, Wanda Orlikowski, Tom Malone, and Senior Lecturer Peter Senge, as “a powerful tool for understanding and integrating the four critical components of leadership: sensemaking, relating, visioning, and inventing.”

“We are a center committed to distributed leadership,” says Ancona. “There's no longer one omniscient person at the top who hands down the answers. We are a globalized world, working in a hypercompetitive environment. ... There has to be a different way of thinking about how we consider leadership.”

“We give [the students] concepts and tools,” says Orlikowski, the Eaton Peabody Chair of Communication Sciences and Professor of Information Technologies and Organization Studies, “but that's just the beginning.”

## FOUR CAPABILITIES LEADERSHIP MODEL



A beginning, says Executive Director Mary Schaefer, with no clear end in sight as the MIT Leadership Center continues on its evolutionary path.

“We are like a research and development lab,” says Schaefer, “and the Center is developing and advancing the role of leadership. One of the things we look at is, ‘Why leadership at MIT?’ Where better than MIT to combine management and technology with leadership? It's a powerful combination for today's world.”

Included among the programs that fall under the Center's umbrella that bring students together with some of the world's top business practitioners and theorists are the semiannual SIP sessions (see p. 25), the Dean's Innovative Leader Series, and the Sloan Leadership Conference. In addition, more than 100 X-Teams, mainly comprised of executives in custom executive education programs, have been created, following a model developed by Ancona that demonstrates how teams manage external and internal dynamics to improve performance in the workplace.

“We're not just focused on theory, but also on how we get people to catalyze action,” says Ancona. “It's about the doing, so people don't just leave here knowing, they're doing. Doing is central to who we are.”

“From the very beginning, I've said MIT has a special opportunity and a special responsibility to provide leadership in a society which is becoming increasingly technical,” says Dana Mead, PhD '67, chair of the MIT Corporation. “I think the Leadership Center can serve a great, great need by being a catalyst, an intellectual center where the best ideas in leadership can be brought home.”

What also seems to work are the variety of experiential opportunities, via SIP week, the Dean's Innovative Leader Series, and the Sloan Leadership Conference, where experiences run the gamut from simulating a Bosnian peace-keeping mission from the 1990s to receiving public speaking tips from the world's Toastmaster champion. Among the more recent additions to the MIT Leadership Center is a "think tank" comprised of top-notch academics and practitioners, as well as members of MIT's Media Lab and Harvard, who are exploring what it takes to make organizational change and how to do it more effectively.

Says Ancona: "At the MIT Leadership Center, we focus on developing and testing research-based models along with action-based learning, with a particular focus on developing leaders and leadership at all levels of an organization."

"The MIT Leadership Center—like MIT—is about doing rigorous, practice-based research and applying it in the world to make a positive difference," says Mary Schaefer, executive director of the Center. "MIT has always operated that way."

"The Leadership Center is a lot about 'how to,'" says Ancona.

#### FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

It is the week after the October 2007 SIP session and the mailbox outside Ancona's office is not simply full, it is overflowing. Upon entering her office and its picture-perfect view of the Charles River and Boston, one sees a larger reflection of what is likely contained within the stacks

of mail: invitations for speaking engagements, management books to read, and a host of folders and papers for review.

If the week had not been busy enough, it was made even more so by the Leadership Center's Advisory Council meeting, a daylong gathering of the non-governing board comprised of influential leaders from all sectors who provide advice and support to Ancona and the staff. Ancona reports that the meeting went well, and relays a story told to the Council members by Ian Livett, a senior project manager with BP, who had recently used the Center's Four Capabilities Leadership Model "to great effect."

Livett had been placed in charge of overseeing the resumption of oil production in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, the origin for 8 percent of the country's overall oil production, which was temporarily shut down due to corroded pipelines. In the normal-case scenario, the situation—with hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil per day at stake—would require replacement of up to 16 miles of pipelines on

the North Slope of Alaska and would not be remedied for a minimum of 12 to 15 months.

"He told me that he kept the model in the back of his mind every day," says Ancona, "but it was not only in his brain, it had become part of his behavior. He used visioning, sensemaking, inventing, and relating to help plan and implement alternative means of restoring production ... he met with the many stakeholders, and he had all these people working with him instead of against him."

The result: the 15-month, normal-case scenario was ultimately resolved with Prudhoe Bay back to its full production schedule in 80 days.

"He honed the skills as well as the theory," says Ancona, "and that is the model of how we are going to change the people who are going to go out and make a difference in the world." ● ● ●

