

## MIT Brings Improv to the MBA Classroom

**Posted by: Alison Damast on December 14, 2010**

A group of MBA students at MIT's Sloan School of Management tossed aside their briefcases and book bags this month to flex their creative muscles, doing everything from playing an imaginary game of soccer to inventing office conflicts. The second-year MBA students were participating in a leadership class called "Improvitational Leadership: In the Moment Leadership Skills," according to a release from the Sloan School. The acting class is the latest step by a leading business school to integrate creative arts and drama into the business school curriculum. It's a trend that has been brewing for several years at a small but growing number of business schools, as I wrote about in an article a few years back.

Most of the business schools I focused on in that story offered acting classes, but the Sloan School (Sloan Full-Time MBA Profile) appears to be one of the first business schools to bring improvisational acting into the classroom. Daena Giardella, a professional actress, director and leadership coach, teaches the class and guides the students through experiential exercises, interactive improvisations and real-life simulations. The financial crisis and shaky economy has heightened the need for this type of training, which brings lessons from psychology and theater to business education, said Giardella, in the release. Students are asked to examine their habits and default responses and come up with new ways to approach the situation, without a script in hand, she said.

"We need these skills so we can adapt to new circumstances to come up with new fixes," Giardella said. "If there has ever been a time when there is a need for great spontaneous communicators who can be in the moment, embrace change, and make things happen, it's now."

The three-hour, once-a-week class has some readings and two required papers, but the majority of the class grade comes from class participation and scenes and monologues that students are expected to enact on the spot. For example, in one scene a student played a boss who was annoyed with an employee who didn't respond to e-mails. In another, students banded together to form a corporate team that was frustrated when a member who was planning to leave hadn't yet told the team leader.

"I always take it back to a professional and business setting, so they can apply the improvisational skills to leadership and influence situations," Giardella said.

MIT's improv class is yet another example of business schools choosing to pay more attention to the so-called "soft skills" that recruiters say they are looking for in MBA candidates. For example, the Wharton School (Wharton Full-Time MBA Profile) recently announced that it be focusing more attention on oral and written communication in their curriculum overhaul. Other schools have added classes and workshops in public speaking. Sloan is perhaps taking an unusual approach to teaching these skills, but it might be onto something.

Readers, what do you think about Sloan's approach to teaching leadership skills?