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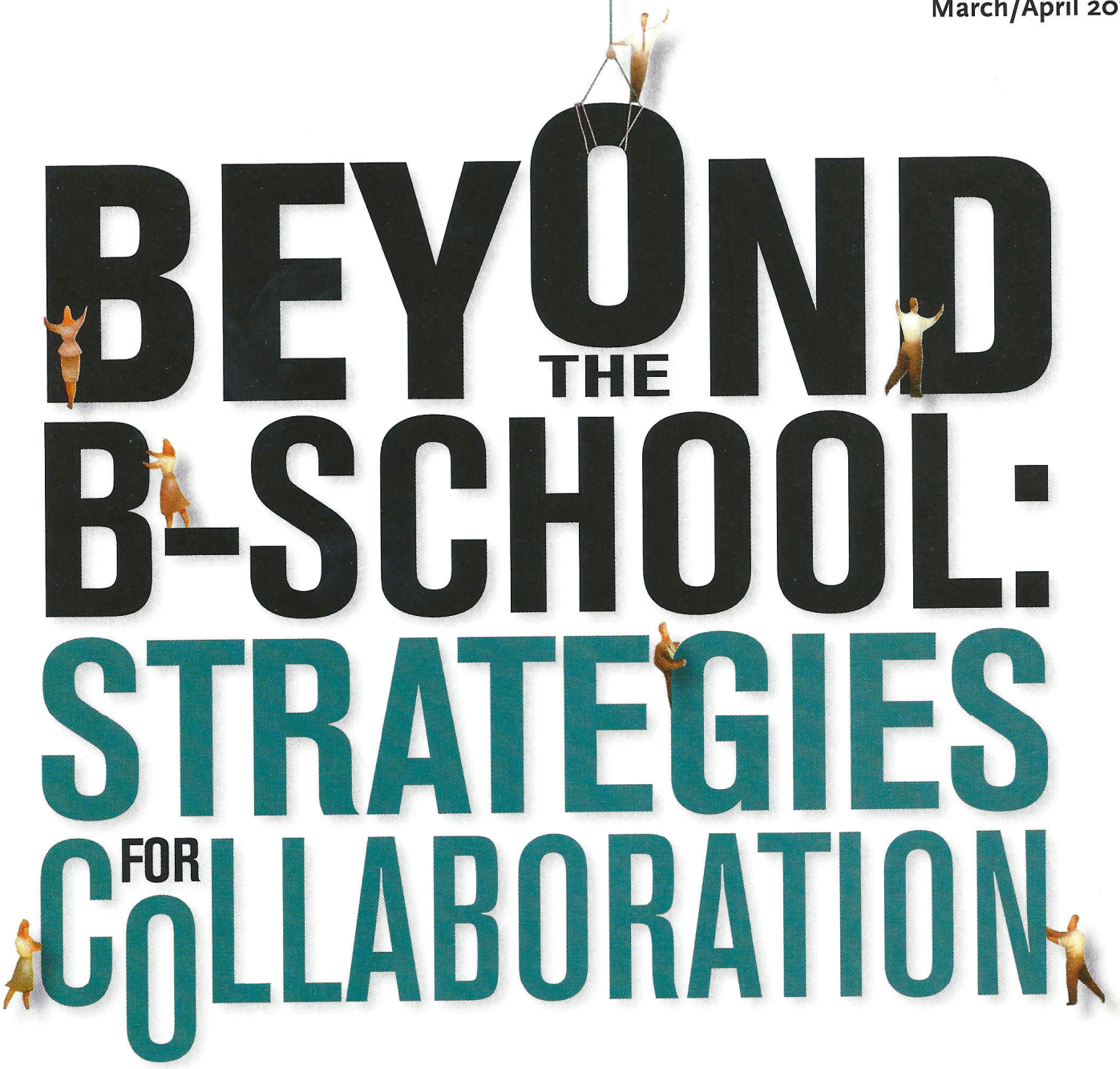
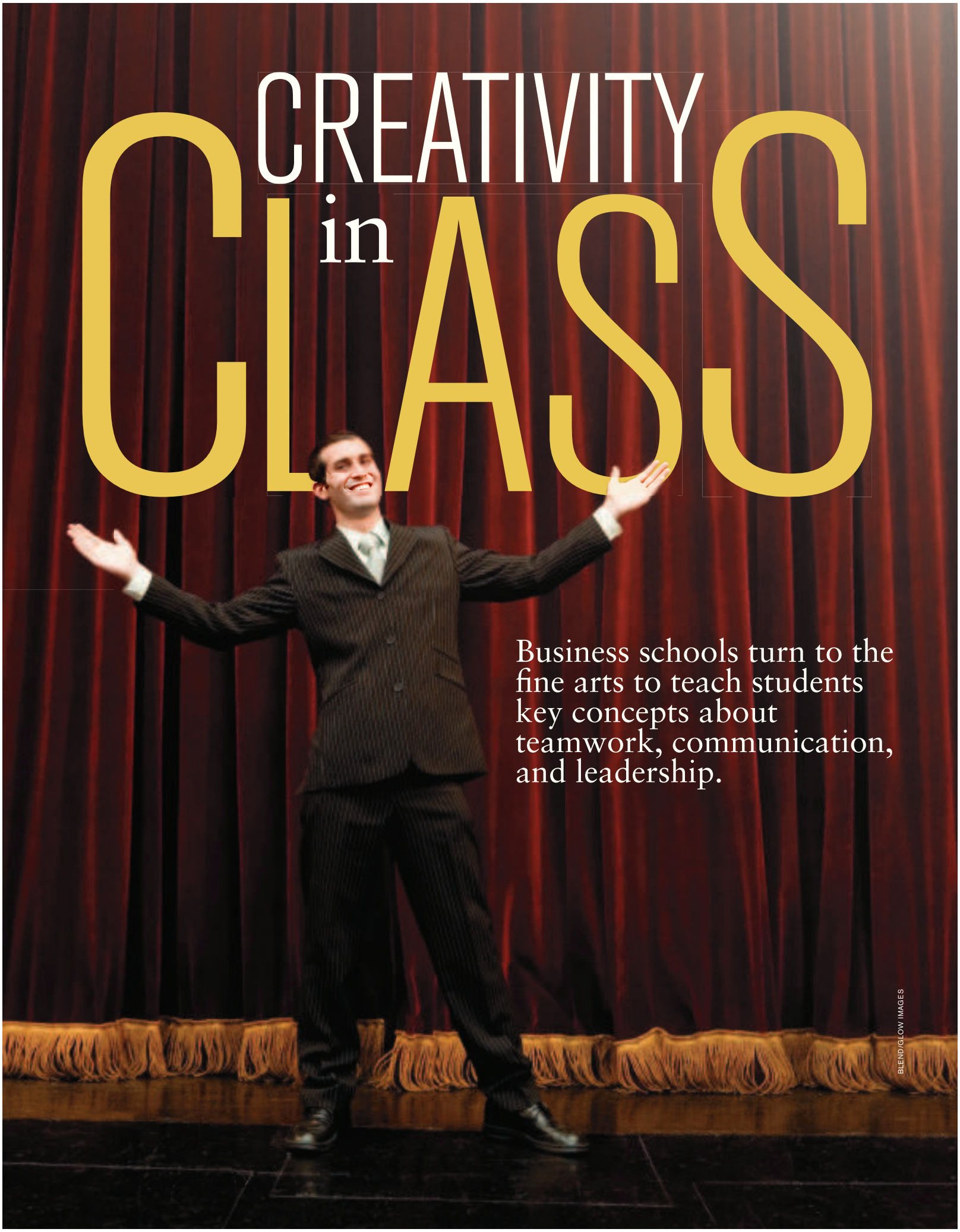


BEYOND THE B-SCHOOL: STRATEGIES FOR COLLABORATION

The Advantages of Online Education | Leadership Gets Creative

CREATIVITY in CLASS

Business schools turn to the fine arts to teach students key concepts about teamwork, communication, and leadership.



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BY SUSAN FEINBERG

Most MBA students don't expect to be playing percussion instruments on a symphony stage or performing improvisational scenes and monologues during the course of their studies. But as business schools look for memorable ways to teach leadership and critical thinking skills, the fine arts have gained a presence in many programs. The idea is that students need to learn how to think creatively every bit as much as they need to learn how to manage the supply chain.

"So much of what we do in an MBA program is directed toward analyzing and solving problems," says R. Edward Freeman, University Professor and Elis and Signe Olsson Professor of Business Administration at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business in Charlottesville. "For the most part, the MBA curriculum doesn't help students exercise the right part of their brains. If business schools are to stay relevant in the globalized world of the 21st century, we have to help students create and discover new ideas. The problems that today's business leaders face require a substantial dose of creative imagination."

Leadership has always been a critical competency for business executives. But the current financial crisis has underscored the need for them to sharpen their thinking skills, whether they need to question their assumptions or look at problems from multiple perspectives.

"Sometimes we have this concept that creativity is a softer skill in business," says Daena Giardella, a lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management in Cambridge. In addition to being a leadership coach and organizational consultant, Giardella is a professional actress. "However, in an economic downturn that involves global and institutional changes that we've never seen before, these so-called softer creative skills—the ability to listen, influence people, and form powerful relationships—are now the hard skills. Creative thinking helps people respond in the moment with authenticity to the needs of their team or organization."

Economic downturns are major opportunities for growth, she adds. "Business executives need to be able to look at the big picture and say, 'Things are tight right now, but what's the five- or ten-year plan, and how am I positioning myself?' Now is the time when innovation and creative thinking are needed most."

Here, three schools share the programs they've created to help students develop the necessary creativity and confidence to be leaders in the new business environment.

KELVIN MA

In MIT Sloan's "Improvisation and Influence" class, students dance, perform improvisational scenes, and deliver dramatic monologues to learn about creativity and leadership.

Under the Influence

When Giardella teaches "Improvisation and Influence: An Experiential Leadership Lab" at MIT Sloan, she moves aside all the furniture in the classroom and gets her students on their feet. She often plays music to help them warm up. Sometimes they dance around the room. Then they form small groups and perform on-the-spot improvisational exercises, scenes, and monologues. In the debriefing afterward, Giardella always draws lessons in leadership and creativity from the performances, and applies them to real-life business and professional settings.

One of the major themes of the class is how individuals can learn to persuade people to support their points of view. Students are asked to examine their habits and default responses and come up with new ways to approach situations. In one scene, a student plays an employee who tries to persuade a type-A, intimidating boss to provide more money for a key project. In another exercise, a student plays a boss who is annoyed with an employee who didn't respond to e-mails. Giardella also has students identify and play a bullying or bossy person who is difficult to influence.

DAMIAN HICKEY

Lecturer and professional actress Daena Giardella (left) works with a student during an improv exercise.

"There's a lot of conversation after these exercises, which consist of putting yourself in another person's shoes," says Giardella. "Students begin to understand the choices and motivations of the characters they're playing and realize that they have some of those qualities. They become desensitized to the behavior of the difficult person. When they go back to an actual work situation, they have more information about that person and are not relating to the bullying, but to the motivation behind it."

In another improvisational exercise, a student will argue one side of an issue, such as privacy on Facebook, then switch positions and advocate for the opposite point of view. This helps students become spontaneous communicators who can think fast on their feet, hear what someone else is saying, and respond creatively. "If you want to influence people, you have to be able to anticipate their arguments and understand why they believe passionately in their positions," Giardella says.

In the beginning of the class, students are often skeptical. "They're enthusiastic but wondering, 'Wow, can I really do this? I'm not good at this stuff," says Giardella. "I put a lot of focus on establishing safety and trust in the room. That helps harness their creative enthusiasm and dispel any fear and self-consciousness. I tell them that our first agreement is that they give themselves permission to be silly. That provides them a lot of freedom."

Whether students go on to be CEOs or entrepreneurs, improvisational skills are important to their future success. "The improvisational approach is a doorway into moment-to-moment creative thinking," says Giardella. "Whenever we're presented with human interactions and conflicts, we need to imagine ways to circumvent obstacles, find solutions to problems, and invent new options. With the improvisational mindset, you're ready to meet the moment with a 'yes' instead of a 'no.' You can cut through a lot of distracting information and get to the heart of what matters."