

15.321 IMPROVISATIONAL LEADERSHIP: In The Moment Leadership Skills, Fall (H2) 2017

DAENA GIARDELLA

Tuesdays 4PM—7PM: October 31—December 12, 2017 (7 sessions)

Oct 31, Nov 7, Nov 14, Nov 21, Nov 28, Dec 5, Dec 12, 2017

(Please note: Class will be held on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, November 21)

See below for complete mandatory attendance policy as well as paper due dates.

Class Location - **E62-233**

Email: daenag@mit.edu

Office Hours **E62-417**: Tuesdays 7:15pm – 8:15pm by appointment. Also, other times by appt.

Course Overview

Everyone has to improvise to get through life. Some of us feel more comfortable improvising than others. But like learning how to be a great leader or how to play the piano, your skillfulness at improvisation can be cultivated. Improvisation is a practice. There are specific methods and techniques that make you a better improviser. The skills that actors develop to become adept improvisers happen to be the very same competencies that are most needed for leadership excellence in business. Effective leaders and facile improvisers possess similar qualities. Among these qualities is the ability to think, speak, and act freely on your feet, to be in the moment, to listen actively, and to influence others. Improvisational leadership means being “at home in yourself,” flexible and adaptable, so that you are ready to embrace the unexpected with a spirit of yes instead of no. The improvisational leader has the confidence to be authentic and the insight to bring out the best in others.

In today’s highly competitive and rapidly changing world, leaders and business professionals cannot afford to be anything less than master improvisers. Improvisation is the art of the unexpected and the science of the unknown. Outstanding leaders improvise. The more you can adapt, respond, and extemporize, the more persuasive and effective you’ll be. Great influencers and master improvisers can respond proactively to sudden changes and twists in the road. Whether it’s finding a way through changing economic environments, devising organizational strategies, brainstorming new ideas or visions, or tackling complex team dynamics -- the leader who is a master improviser has an advantage.

This course is designed to give you a practical grasp of the skills of improvisation and their application to leadership. You will have an opportunity to learn and develop valuable improvisation tools that will help you expand your ability to influence and lead effectively. We will examine the essential elements of successful leadership and influence, including presence, creativity, emotional intelligence, and the ability to develop effective strategies and build dynamic teams. Specific competencies from improvisation will be introduced and practiced to help you cultivate these aspects of leadership. We will also examine how innovation and growth thrive when improvisational experimentation and curiosity are valued.

Each week you’ll practice a wide variety of improvisations in class. Think of our sessions as experimental labs, where you can master the fundamental building blocks of improvisation and then learn how to apply them as leaders. Many of the exercises are designed to help you get into the improviser’s “mindset,” which encourages a spirit of discovery, creativity, and collaboration as well as an ability to trust your impulses and make proactive choices. You’ll also learn how to make role-plays more “real” and dynamic by using improvisational acting skills.

A key component of the course will be the exploration of each student's current leadership profile and style. You will get an understanding of your "comfort zone" and "challenge zone" as a leader as well your patterns, obstacles, and goals for development. Students will be asked to contribute real life scenarios and case studies that illustrate our learning goals and provide material for improvisational role-plays. You will have an opportunity to learn about your leadership strengths and potential growth areas and expand your improvisational skills.

Topics to be Covered Include:

The Complementary Skills of Improvisation, Leadership, and Influence
 The Improvisation Skill Base & Rules
 Your Personal Leadership Profile
 Playing Many Roles – Stretching Beyond Your Habitual Stances
 Improvisational Leadership and Influence Strategies & Tools
 Trusting Your Impulses – Embracing the Unexpected
 The Improviser's Mindset
 The Improvisational Offer: The "Yes, and..." Attitude
 Using Effective Influence Offers
 Projecting Presence in an Impromptu Interaction or Presentation
 Improvisational Leadership and Emotional Intelligence
 The Improviser & the "Inner Critic"
 Generosity, Curiosity, and Adaptability: The Essential Improvisation Elements
 Building Strong Teams and Relationships in Improvisation
 Giving and Receiving Effective Feedback
 Empathy in Communication
 High Stakes Listening
 Identifying and Using "Subtext" and "Back-Story"
 Taking Stage, Taking Risks
 "Status" in Conversations and Team Dynamics
 Navigating Difficult Conversations
 Improvisational Leadership and Organizational Systems
 Advanced Role Play Techniques
 The Stages and Cycles of the Creative Process
 The Art of Adaptability

Participation and Feedback

This is a highly experiential class designed for people who want to be part of a dynamic, hands-on learning laboratory. Your ideas, questions, and contributions will be an important aspect of the course. Our consideration of the improvisational leadership model will be primarily achieved through an interactive empirical learning approach. You will be expected to approach each exercise, improvisation, role-play, feedback period, and written assignment with a spirit of experimentation and openness. Be prepared to actively participate, offer insights, contribute ideas, and take risks. The key to your success will be your willingness to "jump in," get involved, and explore your growing edge. **However, this is not an acting class and you will not be expected to excel at improvisation.** Instead, the goal is to learn and practice new improvisation skills as we investigate how they might enhance your leadership abilities. Your class participation will be graded on the basis of your demonstrated commitment and engagement as well as your effective application of the Improvisational Leadership Skill Base during class exercises and interactions as well as in papers. We will also look at effective ways to give and receive feedback on improvisations and leadership choices we observe in scenes enacted in

class. Generosity is one of the cornerstones of improvisation. This quality will guide our dialogue and interactions as we collaborate together each week toward the common goals of helping yourself and others cultivate improvisational leadership skills. We will be building a safe, non-judgmental learning atmosphere together that encourages trust, teamwork, and plenty of humor.

Course Materials:

Required Readings: To be handed out in class or posted on Stellar

Recommended and Optional:

**Teaming* – Amy Edmondson (strongly recommended)

**Difficult Conversations* – Stone, Patton, & Heen (strongly recommended)

A Whole New Mind - Daniel H. Pink

Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To – Sian Beilock

Blink – Malcom Gladwell

Impro – Keith Johnstone

The Leadership Moment – Michael Useem

Course Requirements:

Attendance & Tardiness

Since this is a highly experiential course, attendance at every session is mandatory and required in order to receive a final grade and credit for the course. No Exceptions. *There are only 7 classes in this fall course, and your participation in each session is essential to facilitate your learning, practice, understanding, and mastery of the skills and exercises offered each week. Since a great deal of the course involves teamwork and partnering with others, your absence will greatly affect your learning as well as the group. Make-ups are not possible as the material covered is experiential in nature and it is not feasible to find a substitute for your attendance and participation in class. Your papers will depend greatly on what you learned from your participation in class.*

Because we start class promptly with interactive exercises, tardiness is very disruptive and distracting. Please come to class on time. **Punctuality is mandatory. Tardiness or early departure from class may result in your not being able to continue in the class.**

If you must miss a class due to an emergency, it is your responsibility to notify me ASAP (daenag@mit.edu) before the specific class, as we will need to set up a time to discuss together whether you can continue to be in the class, given the missed course material. It is up to my discretion whether an absence will be deemed an emergency or not.

Any non-emergency absence from this class will result in your being advised to drop the class as you will receive a failing grade for the course due to the mandatory attendance requirement.

Interviews, Sloan events (or non-Sloan events), meetings, conferences, recruiting meetings, labs, holiday travel, or other non-emergency travel, etc. are not considered emergencies.

There are no exceptions to these policies.

These attendance and punctuality guidelines have been set in place to help us all build a strong team ensemble atmosphere in class where the presence and contributions of every individual matters. If you have any

questions, *please feel free to contact me before the first class.* I very much appreciate your cooperation and collaboration in making this course a valuable experience for all.

Assignments: There are 2 required papers as well as required daily journal pages.

1. Personal Leadership Profile Paper (7 pages minimum – see prompts for details)

Personal Leadership Profile Paper Due Date: Tuesday, November 14, 2017, 4pm.

Note: We will discuss in detail the content of this paper as well as the Personal Leadership Profile concept in class in advance of your paper so that your familiarity with these topics will be well developed before you write the paper. This paper will focus on skills, models, and exercises you will learn and practice in the first two classes.

Prompts will be posted on Stellar.

**** Please submit a hard copy in class as well as a digital version on Stellar. No late papers accepted.**

2. Final Paper (10 pages minimum –see prompts for details)

The content, focus, and details of this paper will be discussed in class.

Prompts will be posted on Stellar.

Final Paper Due Date: Friday, December 15, 2017 before 2pm. Prompts to be posted on Stellar.

****Please submit a hard copy at the designated DROP OFF BOX outside my office at E62-417 and please submit a digital version on Stellar. No late papers accepted.**

3. Journal Pages (1 -2 pgs. each) will be assigned at the end of each class and will be due at the next class. The Journal Pages are based on your experiences and learning in class that day and are intended to give you a forum to digest and integrate the day's learning, while also reflecting on your own growth, challenges, and insights. **Journal pages are required and count toward your class participation grade.** *No late journal pages accepted—Please submit hard copy in class as well as digital version on Stellar.*

Recap of Course Guidelines:

1. Participation in Class Exercises

Full, interactive participation will be the essential element if you want to get the most out of this course. Your learning experience (and your grade) will depend upon your active engagement in the group process as well as your effective application of the Improvisational Leadership and Influence Skill Base. Come to each class prepared to try new skills, offer useful perspectives, and apply readings as we discuss experiential exercises. We will discuss and encourage participation with the “mindset” of the improviser, which will give you a creative compass for how to approach each class. (See #3 Written Papers below for a summary of the improviser's mindset)

2. Debriefing/Feedback

Each class will include a debriefing period, where we discuss and examine what we observed, experienced and learned from the improvisations, exercises, role-plays, and written assignments. Your contribution in those debriefings is a vital dimension of the course.

3. Written Papers (continued - see next page)

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The first paper is an opportunity for you to take a closer look at your current leadership style as you also investigate how the skills we practice in class might help you expand your choices as a leader. The final paper will give you a three-part format to explore your accumulated learning during the course as well as examine specific, practical applications of improvisational leadership. (*Be sure to read the specific paper prompts to be posted on Stellar before writing your papers*). Both writing assignments offer a vehicle for you to demonstrate your understanding of the competencies, application, and value of improvisational leadership in business/organizational environments. As you write, try to apply the mindset of the improvisational actor: Get curious. Make discoveries. Offer ideas and build on them. Use your imagination. Trust your instincts and impulses. Develop themes. Think outside the box. Be creative. Be bold. Take risks. Support your ideas with clear, specific illustrations. Get to the heart of what matters. Enjoy the process. *Write/create something that you would want to read in ten years.*

4. Grading

You will be graded on the quality of your in-class participation as well as your written work. You will not be graded on your improvisation abilities as an actor. Highly engaged contributions to class and thoughtfully rendered written work will raise your grade, while disengagement from class or written work will lower your grade. You will be graded on the basis of your demonstrated commitment and engagement as well as your effective application of the Improvisational Leadership Skill Base in class exercises, interactions, papers, and journals.

Grading will be based on:

Class Participation (Includes Journals)	60%
Personal Leadership Profile Paper	20%
Final Paper	20%

Journal Pages are not graded. Credit for submission will be given and extra credit for particularly thoughtful and insightful journal entries that demonstrate outstanding self-reflection and engagement in class exercises. **Lack of submission of Journal Pages will lower your final grade.** Journal pages are considered to be an essential aspect of your engagement with the class as they provide an opportunity for you to digest and synthesize your learning experiences.

As mentioned above: absence, tardiness, and lack of submission of papers and/or journals will negatively impact grades or your ability to continue in the class.

Always feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

I very much look forward to collaborating together!

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