

MIT

Leadership Center

Imagine That: To Invent a Better Mousetrap, Use Visual Art

Business students and artists connect at new workshop

Like artists, business innovators are constantly creating.

Like artists, they must imagine, see the big picture, and communicate vision to others. Like artists, they face financial, time, and materials constraints. Like artists, they find inspiration in seemingly unlikely venues.

For 12 MIT Sloan students, that venue was the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA). The MBA students created a computer animation and drew cartoons at an all-day workshop, “21st Century Visual Arts Workshop for Business Leaders,” during Sloan Innovation Period.

David Kelley, Museum School faculty member, introduced the SMFA workshop by quoting from Bob Dylan’s autobiography, *Chronicles*: “Creativity has much to do with **experience, observation and imagination**, and if any of these key elements is missing, it doesn’t work.”

The March 2006 workshop, organized by the SMFA and the MIT Leadership Center, used studio art to illustrate ways of working in teams, brainstorming ideas and communicating in a global world. During the day of intense studio exercises, the students learned critical leadership lessons from their unfamiliar environment.

Experience: Start with What You Know

Most of the MBA students had had little or no recent experience with art. In college, Hagos Mehreteab majored in computer science. Mehreteab commented, “Being immersed in the artistic exercises was outside my comfort zone.”

But SMFA faculty member Kelley observed that the students applied their business-school skills to making art. “They worked in teams, and they communicated based on the skills they had. In an unfamiliar situation with colleagues who had the same skills, they were able to quickly problem solve,” Kelley said.

Observation: Learn from What’s Around You

Leaders often feel pressure to make fast decisions. But pausing to reassess a situation can result in new insights and better choices. The SMFA workshop showed the importance of slowing down and really looking.

Artist Luanne Stovall and the MBA students spent more than two hours discussing 11 color swatches: what they meant to individuals, how cultural ideas varied, where emotion came into play, what all this might mean for marketing in the 21st century. They developed new respect for their environment – and their classmates’ perspectives – that they had previously taken for granted.

Three workshops at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts challenged MIT Sloan students to think with the right sides of their brains.

First-year student Kielo Ahomaa said, “It’s important we don’t just learn business from cases. That narrows your view of the world. We have to find a different angle to approach things. Art is a great avenue for that.”

Imagination: Think Big, Be Flexible

Unconstrained by the realities of an operating budget or factory capacity, imaginations ran wild. In one animation, “The Internal Life of Monsters,” students conceptualized the viewer as diving into each image and finding the next image inside. Drawing a comic book, students somehow had to connect a yogi meditating on a mountain to fish jumping out of an airplane. The visual challenge provoked them to work together imaginatively, finding right-brain answers to a collective conundrum.

The students connected these challenges to their everyday activities. Mehreteab said, “Life is about problems and finding solutions to them.” Making art was just like attacking a case study. Even artists, Mehreteab commented, have to deal with the constraints of their media. “You have to improvise,” he said.

Making the Connection: Art and Leadership

Deborah Ancona, faculty director of the MIT Leadership Center, notes that similar tasks face artists and leaders. “Leaders need to make sense of new environments, to develop a creative vision, and to communicate in order to inspire others. Visual art also involves sensemaking, vision, and communication,” Ancona said.

At the end of the day, both artists and business students hoped for more opportunities to collaborate. Ahomaa said, “The day was fun, but it was not only fun. It opened my eyes.”

Managers' Smorgasbord

One week MBA-fest replete with seminars, workshops, games

MIT Sloan students taste all sorts of management concepts during Sloan Innovation Period (SIP). Twice a year, students break from regular classes to savor new ideas and connect with alumni and other business leaders.

In March 2006, the MIT Leadership Center sponsored 14 workshops. In intense all-day and half-day meetings, students played a challenging business simulation, created a business plan for a nonprofit organization and—guided by a former CEO—explored decision-making challenges.

About the MIT Leadership Center

The MIT Leadership Center is dedicated to advancing the extraordinary knowledge, perspectives and experiences that enable leaders to transform their passion into action. The Center's world-class researchers and practitioners create cutting-edge theory and research, pragmatic tools for action, innovative education, and dialogues and networks that connect diverse individuals, organizations, and communities across the globe. Poised at the dynamic nexus of technology and business, the Center develops leaders who improve the world.

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