

PRESS RELEASE

Corporate Leadership and Social Responsibility Alive at Sloan

"I have never thought that leadership is something you can teach. I thought it's something you have or haven't, something you feel or something you don't feel. Something you are interested in or something you are not. This class let me change this perspective. Leadership can be learned. I believe this, because I have seen it."

This compelling quote is from a student in a great new leadership course at the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The course -- Leadership Lab in Corporate Social Responsibility (15.974) -- is organized by Professor Otto Scharmer and features such notable speakers as Peter Senge, author of the best-selling leadership book, "The Fifth Discipline;" and Joe Jaworski, founder of the American Leadership Forum (www.cmcfoundation.org/leadership) and author of the 'servant leadership' book, "Synchronicity." The course also features direct involvement with organizations that are leaders in the area of corporate social responsibility, including: the world-renowned product design firm IDEO (www.ideo.com); community-friendly Ben & Jerry's ice cream (www.benjerry.com/); socially responsible investing firm KLD Research & Analytics (www.kld.com/consulting/consulting/); environmentally-aware fuel cell developer Plug Power (www.plugpower.com/index.cfm); originator of the Triple Bottom Line in accounting, Price Waterhouse Coopers (www.pwc.com); the United Nations Global Compact initiative for sustainable development (www.unglobalcompact.org); and the cradle-to-cradle design inventor MBDC (www.mbdc.com). The course presents students with a full-circle view of the many ways in which individuals can lead profound social and organizational change.

The course begins with a series of lectures about corporate social responsibility. These lectures inform students about recent trends in the field and about the various drivers of these trends. For many students, this is an eye-opening experience, as they discover that some companies really do care about things that many people think more companies should care about -- namely, the cumulative effect we are all having on our world, whether in terms of environmental impact, social change, economic growth or other factors.

The next exercise is a day-long trek with designers from IDEO, the purpose of which is to teach students breakthrough leadership and problem-solving skills. Students use techniques such as direct observation, categorization, brainstorming and rapid prototyping to solve a variety of real-world problems. Along the way, they discover that these lessons in leadership can be applied to virtually any problem-solving situation.

Students then divide into teams according to their individual interests, and then each team visits one of the partner companies mentioned above. Teams learn how each company approaches the issue of corporate social responsibility. In doing so, students get a glimpse into the compelling culture at each of the firms. In some cases, the company visits are a revelation -- even "a life-changing experience," according to one recent student.

Reconvening after the visits, teams compare notes on their experiences. What they discover by sharing their experiences provides yet another surprise: that there is a deep underlying synergy among the companies they visited. What at first appeared to be unrelated organizations are seen as pieces of a larger picture. Companies like Ben & Jerry's and PlugPower create socially responsible organizations, so they want to communicate their corporate values to potential investors. An auditing procedure, like PWC's Triple Bottom Line, can then provide these companies with a mechanism for measuring and reporting the company's performance across metrics related to corporate social responsibility. Companies like KLD can then use these audited reports to allocate investment dollars. Meanwhile, the U.N. Global Compact provides international leadership to help standardize the metrics and goals of corporate social responsibility.

Another unique experience in the spring 2003 course was a dinner party with noted author and leadership consultant, Joe Jaworski. The resulting conversation evoked deep reflection by each student, with comments such as, "This was why I came to Sloan," being mentioned by several students. One student in the MBA Class of '04 went so far as to say, "This is perhaps the best class I've ever taken, period. The hands-on experience, access to top-notch thinkers in the socially responsible business space, and access to progressive companies is truly unique. Otto Scharmer is light years ahead in his teaching model."

The course finishes with each team integrating all of the course lessons to design and implement a project in social responsibility. Each team summarizes its results in a project report that it turns in at the end of the course. Each student also writes an individual reflection paper that describes some of what he or she learned in the course. These final projects are fitting conclusions to the course, because they ask students to articulate their own valuable lessons from the course -- a sense-making process that is itself key to effective leadership.

What is perhaps most remarkable about the Leadership Lab is not only that students get so much hands-on learning about both leadership and corporate responsibility, but that the course only convenes six times. This not only drives home the point that leadership can be learned, but that it can be learned quickly with the right stimuli. Perhaps one student expressed this realization best by saying, "I thought that the [leadership] lab was one of the best learning experiences that I have had at Sloan." If you are looking for a great leadership course, the Leadership Lab at Sloan will exceed your expectations.