

How does a world-leading university develop self-awareness in MBA leadership students?

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) is a postgraduate qualification for people who have a few years of professional experience. It's a prestigious qualification that can lead to executive careers and leadership positions. How do psychometrics contribute to students' development of leadership potential?

Imperial College Business School 'grows responsible leaders equipped to deal with the challenges for a technology-driven world.' (source: www.imperial.ac.uk). Its flagship programs for leadership development include the Full-Time MBA, the Executive MBA, Global Online MBA and Weekend MBA programs. These programs feature students from a range of sectors and nationalities, and with different levels of experience. Here are some numbers as a guide.

Executive MBA students

- Average 15 years of career experience
- Average age 38
- Two thirds of students come from the finance/banking, pharmaceuticals/healthcare, IT/communications, and marketing/PR/advertising sectors

Business Challenges

- Preparing MBA students for successful careers in leadership

Company Profile

Imperial College London is a world top 10 university, ranked 8th in the QS World University Rankings 2018-19. It has a global reputation for excellence in teaching and research and has more than 17,000 students from more than 125 countries. Imperial College Business School belongs to the College and was awarded faculty status in 2003 and now has 2,000 students.

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Weekend MBA students

- Average of 7 years career experience
- Average age 31
- Most students come from the finance, consulting and engineering sectors

Global Online MBA students

- Average of 11 years career experience
- Average age 35
- Sector breakdown similar to Weekend MBA
- Students come from a broad range of nationalities (35)

We can see that each cohort is likely to be incredibly varied. What each student has in common, though, is a desire to develop an executive-level career. This means being able to work with – and inspire – a variety of people.

SOLUTION

At the start of each MBA there is an induction program, and this is where the Weekend and Global Online MBA programs use the MBTI assessment. Ceri Willmott, Careers and Professional Services Development Coach, is the lead coach on MBA leadership development.

“At the start of the courses, there is a module called Personal Leadership Journey,” says Willmott. “We do lots of work around self-awareness as the foundation to developing people as leaders and professionals, and we use psychometrics as part of that process. We use the MBTI tool and Strengthscope.”

Starting the leadership journey

The Personal Leadership Journey has three elements:

1. Self-awareness
2. Improving leadership capability
3. Driving career strategy

Solution

- Use self-awareness tools to prepare students for leadership careers
- Help students understand themselves and their impact on other people
- Embed an appreciation of difference between people

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To start their journey, students are asked: How do you perceive yourself, and how do others perceive you?

“MBTI fits in to the first part of the Leadership Journey straight away,” says Willmott. “Students do the MBTI session in a careers day in the induction week at the start of the program. We ask students why they’re doing the MBA program and show them how it can really help them to excel in their careers.”

The facilitators talk about reflective practice and use the Johari window to discuss people’s blind spots, hidden areas and known areas. This provides context for the psychometrics sessions which follow later in the day. “It gives students a sense of wanting to reduce their blind spots,” says Willmott, “and MBTI can really contribute to that. It can contribute to hidden and known areas once they know their type.”

“The second half of the day is a large group MBTI feedback where we help students find MBTI best-fit and do the activities. It’s all about getting the students to start reflecting on their career.”

The group feedback exercises explore the preference pairs: E-I, S-N, T-F and J-P. One-to-one meetings follow the group feedback and help students to clarify best-fit (if they need it), explore some MBTI reflections and discuss developmental goals for the future. The Strengthscope tool gets debriefed at the same time.

There’s a dual purpose to the self-awareness component of the induction. First, it prepares students for working with and leading other people. Second, it helps students identify, at the earliest stage of the MBA, what their goals and needs are.

Challenging times

In Willmott’s experience, MBA students can be one of the most challenging groups to work with. They can sometimes reject the ideas being put forward in the group exercises – as you might expect from a group of experienced professionals training to be

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Ceri Willmott,
Careers and Professional Services
Development Coach, Imperial
College Business School

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future leaders. Is there a type profile in the MBA classes that explains these challenging behaviors?

“No,” says Wilmott, “but we do see a lot of ENTJ, ESTJ, INTJ, ISTJ and ENTP types coming through the Global and Weekend MBA programs. There are some ENFP, INFJ and INFP types too. It is mixed but I’d say there are more of the TJ types.”

Often, though, students’ challenges come from preconceived ideas. In an E-I exercise where Extraverts and Introverts are put in different groups to draw their ‘ideal working environment’, a recent student rejected the concept of the exercise. This is because she described herself as ‘being an extravert but liking quiet’.

Tensions like this often demonstrate valid self-awareness points. They just sound negative or dismissive because they come from a place of disagreement.

And this is one of the valuable outcomes from MBTI self-awareness: to show that there are differences, and we’re not solely ‘one or the other’. People can be, and are, both. Everyone is not the same.

Does it really make a difference?

If you’re asking whether self-awareness really matters in leadership then research says yes, it does. A report by The Engagement Institute in 2016 found that leaders today need to be trustworthy, able to build relationships and able to communicate effectively. And while relationship building and communication appear to be based on understanding others, such understanding starts with the self. To know yourself is, according to the Harvard Business Review, ‘leadership’s first commandment’.

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RESULTS

Talking about the careers day experience, new inductee Cecilia Ghilea said, “What I loved about the Careers Day is that it touched on more complex matters such as the various personalities that can arise in a group and how we can best work with each other given our MBTI scores. The MBTI tests will definitely help me in the long run, in understanding my strengths and in identifying areas for development!” (source: www.imperial.ac.uk)

Willmott and her team are in no doubt that the induction sessions make a valuable contribution both to students’ quality of MBA learning experience and to their longer-term career aspirations. Willmott explains this in terms of energy, and understanding people’s differences and strengths, both of which are crucial for leadership roles.

“Two of our key aims are to talk about energy and difference. We want to show how students manage their energy between what takes effort, and what comes naturally. We want students to appreciate difference so they can manage people in teams, work with colleagues and fellow students on the course, and have an awareness of underlying tensions. And we want them to be able to appreciate complementing strengths.”

“Students need to be aware that there aren’t necessarily ‘best’ or ‘only’ ways of doing things,” adds Willmott. “To get results, we need to be open to all ways and all types.”

For Willmott, the MBTI self-awareness module goes beyond how people perform within a particular role. It helps students find the right role to begin with.

“We want people to make the best choice possible in careers going forward. We want the sectors and organizations they choose for themselves to be based on self-awareness so they can find fulfilment and success.”



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