IDEAS China
Raising a New Generation of Leaders

As the Chinese economy continues to grow and to become more tightly integrated with the rest of the world, the country’s leaders are looking for ways to solve challenges that arise with globalization as well as moving toward a knowledge-based economy. To address issues like demographic shifts, energy efficiency, innovation and sustainability on a nationwide scale, China requires a new generation of leaders capable of thinking holistically and collaborating across societal boundaries.

The IDEAS China program is the next chapter in the partnership between MIT Sloan School of Management, Tsinghua University and United in Diversity (UID), a non-profit organization serving as an educational platform and a catalyst for trust building and cooperation among business, the public sector, and civil society. Cherie Nursalim, the UID co-founder and member of MIT Sloan Asia Executive Board and a regional business conglomerate Giti Group, has been one of the visionaries behind this partnership. “China is becoming a learning, service- and innovation-oriented society and we hope this dynamic, action-based program will contribute to China’s continuing success,” says Nursalim, adding that “specifically, we hope that the program will help participants find blind spots in their leadership on individual, institutional and societal levels, and, ultimately, improve their leadership for practical and sustainable development in long run.” Based on a model developed by MIT Sloan’s Otto Scharmer and Peter Senge called ELIAS (Emerging Leaders Innovate Across Sectors), IDEAS (Innovative Dynamic Education and Action for Sustainability) is part leadership training, part hands-on practical problem solving, and part personal journey. It emphasizes action learning designed to help participants from diverse backgrounds put aside their differences and learn to work together toward a common goal of building a better future.

Launched in 2012 in the Zhejiang province, the pilot IDEAS China 1.0 program was delivered in partnership with the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University, one of the leading schools in China. The pilot focused on a tri-sector audience—business, government, civil society—with the goal of building a network of leaders capable of addressing the most pressing societal needs of the region through collaborative action. Over the course of seven months, the program participants, or IDEAS Fellows, spent thirty days in experiential workshops, learning journeys, and prototype-building action learning. They learned new methods and social technologies such as “Theory U” and systems thinking based on the work of Scharmer and Senge; system dynamics, a concept first introduced in the 1950s by the MIT Sloan Professor Jay Forrester; and rapid-cycle prototyping, an approach developed by the design company IDEO.
THE MIT EDGE

Delivering on the MIT Sloan mission of educating principled leaders that make the world a better place, the IDEAS China program creates opportunities for immediate and practical solutions resulting from program prototypes and action-learning projects, and lays a foundation for long-term positive change on a national scale.

“\What sets this program apart from usual training programs is that it doesn’t only give you knowledge, but rather enhances your way of thinking, helps you recognize different perspectives. It enables you to grow as an individual—it’s really an eye-opening program."

Ms. WANG Xiaofang
General Manager
Staff Training Department
ICBC

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The results of these prototypes are already evident. “We have gotten very positive feedback from IDEAS China 1.0 program,” reports Nursalim. “Mr. Chu, who was the Chief Executive of Ninghai County Government of Zhejiang province at the time, shared that he is implementing the prototype on Old Aged Care Centers in his region, as well as that his own leadership style has been transformed, his team’s motivation has gone up, productivity increased and investments multiplied along with societal endorsement.” A prototype that focused on localization of the IDEAS program led to IDEAS China 2.0. “We were thinking about how to introduce the concept to more organizations to China. And who needs it most urgently,” explains MENG Bo, Associate Dean, School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua University and an IDEAS China 1.0 participant.

Launched in 2013, IDEAS China 2.0 is offered in context of one organization—the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC). Headquartered in Beijing, ICBC is one of the largest banks in the world by profit and market capitalization. In 2013, Forbes Global 2000 ranked it #1 among the world’s biggest public companies. ICBC competed with several other large state-owned organizations for the opportunity to send a group of 25 of its high-level executives to the program. With direct involvement and support from ICBC’s most senior leadership, the IDEAS curriculum was adapted to best serve the bank’s specific multi-stakeholder issues like innovation in products and services, increasing globalization, operations and management. “ICBC is growing really fast and is becoming increasingly globalized. We want to continue to be the leader in our market and to provide even better products and services to our customers. To do that, our high-level executives hope that as managers, we can reflect on ourselves and on ICBC as a whole and use that reflection to improve our leadership capabilities across the organization,” explains Mr. LIU Jin, General Manager, Investment Banking Department at ICBC.

From customizing the IDEAS model to the needs of multiple stakeholders in a single large organization to facilitating a series of workshops in China to providing simultaneous translation during the time at MIT, IDEAS China 2.0 requires close collaboration between the bank and the faculty and staff at MIT Sloan Executive Education and Tsinghua University. During the eight days at MIT, not only do participants engage in classroom discussions and exercises, but they also visit innovative companies in the MIT eco-system. “I used to think that innovation was something hard to attain and beyond our reach, but now I know that innovation can be anywhere as long as you really use your heart, as long as you have passion, and are able to change your perspective—it’s not difficult at all,” says Ms. WANG Xiaofang, then General Manager, Staff Training Department at ICBC, adding that “We hope that more of our executives will have an opportunity to go through this program in the future.”