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The TEDx Experience: A Faculty Advisor's View Behind the Scenes

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I attended my first TEDx event in April 2014. It was held on the campus of my alma mater, the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), nestled right off the Dan Ryan Expressway on the South Side of Chicago. More than a day well-spent, this was a game-changing experience for me, one that gave me plenty of light bulb moments. One year later, my adjunct professorship at the IIT Stuart School of Business paved the way for me to serve as a faculty advisor for the student-run TEDxIIT 2015 event. This opportunity provided me with a unique vantage point of the sizzling-hot TED culture and broadened my horizons as an educator.

I am a TEDhead and not ashamed to admit it. Since becoming aware of TED, I have performed multiple sifts through the video archives on its website. A good TED talk will stop me in my tracks and get my grey matter churning. These days, I find that I am not alone. TED (Technology-Entertainment-Design) has all the momentum of a runaway freight train. It is a phenomenon that is driving thought leadership in the Digital Era, lending credibility to speakers, authors, and innovators, and edifying millions of people all over the globe.

The mystique surrounding the main TED conference--held annually in Vancouver, British Columbia--spawned the TEDx movement, which encompasses thousands of independently-organized events that are staged worldwide and designed to "bring people together to share a TED-like experience." (Source: TED Blog) Initiated by cities, regions, communities, and academic institutions, TEDx events are not watered-down versions of the original; they are licensed and branded through TED and must adhere to the platform's strict set of protocols.

A few months leading up to the April 12, 2015 event, I was appointed faculty advisor by [TEDxIIT](#) Founder and Executive Producer **Amy Segami**. My role was to support Segami's hands-on, visionary leadership and help create a transformative learning experience for the students. An early proponent of the TEDx initiative, she understands what is required to mount an event of this magnitude and sets the bar high. According to Segami, TEDx events run at colleges and universities are "golden opportunities for current students to engage with faculty, administration, or alumni."



JD Gershbein (left) with Amy Segami, TEDxIIT Founder & Executive Producer.

From the initial meeting, Segami set the tone. The students, realizing what was on the line, mobilized toward the goal. As the weeks went along, I observed with great interest how the team organized into committees, brainstormed their way through assorted challenges, and moved the project forward. I stayed in the background, mentoring as needed, chiming in when prompted. It was the students that carried the flag. The result was a beautiful TEDx event that went off without a hitch and drew raves from the attendees.

TEDx as a Microcosm of the Workplace Experience

As the dynamic of the corporate workplace has changed, so have the demands of the entry-level position. College graduates, at the headwaters of their professional careers, feel that they are well-equipped academically to handle the rigors of the first job. They move into the workforce adrenalized, confident, and eager to apply what they learned in the classroom. Their wide-eyed enthusiasm, however, cannot supplant the lack of practical, real-world experience gained from managing complex assignments, handling people, and pushing through roadblocks. This is something that they must discover as they go.

The TEDxIIT team understood the privilege of participation. Not a one treated the work as extracurricular; rather, each viewed the experience as an essential piece of professional development. They were encouraged to contribute. Hence, the planning meetings took on a boardroom-like atmosphere. The students understood that their performance would be measured on how well they presented and defended their ideas, micromanaged their responsibilities, and met strict deadlines. Such is the essence of today's workplace.

Throughout the process, I was impressed with the manner in which the students comported themselves, executed on strategy, and accomplished their objectives. They covered all aspects of business--finance, accounting, marketing, advertising, social media, public relations, HR, logistics, and fundraising--and gained an appreciation for the impact of project management on organizational effectiveness. The students, representative of various cultural backgrounds, also emerged with a deepened understanding of diversity and inclusion principles and practices.

TEDx Creates a Uniquely Collaborative Learning Environment

From the get-go, Segami made it clear that the event would not stage itself. At the first organizational meeting, she went around the table and questioned each student as to what they hoped to gain from the TEDx experience. Many responded in similar fashion, expressing that they were "just here to learn" and "make new connections." Not until the students moved into their roles (chosen through a true democratic process) were they able to contextualize what they were there to do--that is, to work cooperatively toward achieving a common objective.

With each meeting, the project took on the look and feel of a peer support system. The students exchanged on an increasingly meaningful level, opening a wider aperture through which they could refine ideas, address problems, and build consensus. When pressed into situations that required critical thinking and problem solving, they showed respect for the process--and each other. As the event drew nearer, the benefits of collaborative working became evident. The team was hitting its stride. Nobody laid back. The decision making improved. Things got done.

TEDx Brings Leadership Qualities to the Fore

Planning for a TEDx event strikes a harmonic blend between science and art, as well as the intellect and the emotion. The group dynamic fosters individual thought that solidifies core values, heightens self-esteem, and enables growth. Some students were ecstatic to just be part of the team; others wished to assume greater accountability and be considered for leadership roles. Those who were elected as leaders (again, a democracy in action), dug in, took on the challenges, and quickly raised their profiles within the organization.

In addition to planning the event, many of the students were to have a hand in the actual production. In order to receive stage time, and introduce a speaker, which required preparation and rehearsal, they had to audition. Others were given responsibilities that necessitated direct contact with attendees. In either scenario, the student was charged with communicating effectively and confidently--unquestionably, a top trait of good leadership--and represent themselves (and the TED brand) with the utmost of professionalism. .



The TEDxIIT 2015 Student Team

Parting Thoughts

♦ TED is a cultural phenomenon rooted in curiosity, inquiry, and self-discovery. It is a medium through which ideas prevail, and the allure of the stage, the clamor for tickets, and the sweeping pageantry of innovation fans the flame of inspiration. These days, there is no shortage of demand for enlightenment.

♦ As more colleges and universities enter the TEDx arena, they will undoubtedly see the process as an opportunity to teach and bring communities together. An annual event becomes an essential piece of a school's brand identity, woven into its academic culture. "Sooner or later," says Segami, "everyone will be involved in the TED experience, either as a speaker, an organizer, an advisor, or an attendee."

♦ Be it the leadership piece, the exercise in teamwork, or the desire for new knowledge, there is an incredible endorphin rush that comes with the TEDx work. For the students, the common thread in gauging the professional and personal growth is the feeling of accomplishment that comes from a job well done. This is an experience on which they can build, one that is sure to carry them forward in their careers and clear a path to greater learning.

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