

IEDC Faculty: Learning from the best



A School with a View

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Prof J.B. Kassarian, a Mastermind behind the Discover Entrepreneurial Management Program at IEDC, a Professor of Management at Babson College, USA, and a Professor of Strategy and Organization at IMD, Emeritus,

“WE WANT EVERY PARTICIPANT TO STRETCH TO THE LIMIT OF THEIR ABILITY”

J.B.M. Kassarian is above all an inspiring personality, a dedicated and accessible professor, who is being loved by students for the clarity and his highly interactive, lively presentations. Prof Kassarian is one of the world's leading experts on change management, who has worked in Harvard Business School, its partner university ICMS in Iran, IMD International in Switzerland and Babson College in the USA. When being asked, why do you teach, he answers: “Because I find the interplay between what drives business and what drives people as infinitely fascinating,” and he adds with full confidence: “I know my students will make a difference in the world!”



He was born in Aleppo, Syria, to Armenian parents, but left Syria for Europe and the USA at age 16. Besides a book, numerous articles, and a large number of award-winning case studies, his brainchild is also an International Summer School titled ‘Discover Entrepreneurial Management Program’ (DEMP). Since its inception in 2002, the program has been reaching an ever-wider audience of young graduates and it boasts with being the most international program at the IEDC-Bled School of Management, with 20 nationalities represented in each classroom! Until 2016, the program was called DMP, but as a need for more entrepreneurial thought and action was spotted, its curriculum was updated and the name changed – from DMP to DEMP, where, obviously, stands for - entrepreneurship. However, the aim of the summer school remains the same: to stimulate participants to think in new, wider, and deeper ways about important dilemmas in today's business.

Tonja Blatnik, External Cooperator for Content Marketing

When and how did you decide to become part of IEDC story?

My becoming part of what you call the IEDC story has actually two roots. I had heard about this extraordinary woman in the small country of Slovenia, who had started a business school closely modelled after IMD Int'l in Lausanne, Switzerland. I think I may have met her briefly at IMD. I have held a joint appointment at Babson College in the US, and at IMD in Switzerland for many years, and one spring I discovered during my IMD residence that Easter holiday was longer than I had expected, and a Slovenian MBA student wanted to visit home, but was not sure he could afford the airfare, so I decided to give him a ride to Slovenia, he was delighted to be driving in a Porsche! So we drove together, and I asked him about Prof Purg, and he promised to take me to IEDC. So I ended up meeting with Danica at that old hotel in Brdo, years before IEDC had built the new campus in Bled.

Initially, I taught in the MBA Program, then I did some company executive programs, and gradually I got more involved in IEDC programs. One year I got a letter from Danica, challenging me to redesign the summer school totally, in a way using on me my own theory of how to motivate people to achieve great things: she challenged me to create a completely new summer program. We decided to call it Discover Management Program (DMP), with the clear emphasis on the process of self-DISCOVERY.

As a mastermind behind DEMP Summer School, how would you describe this program? What is the most distinctive about it?

From its earliest years, DMP was designed to stretch and challenge

students to learn to think as managers, to be willing to take thoughtful and responsible action in the complex and uncertain world of modern business organizations. The underlying theme of all DMP sessions is to stimulate participants to think in new, wider, and deeper ways about important dilemmas in today's business. All of us teaching in DMP, and now DEMP, are committed to challenge our students to develop certain fundamental skills, but beyond the acquisition of specific skills, we try to provoke our students to think in new ways. We want every student to stretch to the limit of their ability. The cases and exercises we use in the Program are often similar to materials used in senior executive programs, and I am happy to report that DEMP students sometimes make more creative proposals than experienced managers!

In my initial efforts to evaluate existing "summer schools", in Europe and in the US, I was struck by the over-simplified reading material, by the abbreviated cases meant to make the students' task easier to achieve, by the overall dilution of content to make the program more palatable. Our aim in DMP/DEMP has always been to present the world of business in its full complexity and ambiguity, and to refrain from spoon-feeding students; instead we ask them to tackle cases (such as Easy Jet and AirBnB) in their full reality and complexity. For me, year after year, the most remarkable outcome of the Program has been watching the students delve deep into real and complex cases, to compare and debate different approaches, and to take reasoned stands on how to overcome performance problems, or how to confront new competitors, or how to lead the necessary change. I believe these are the specific elements

that give DEMP its distinctive edge.

Whom would you recommend it to?

I think DEMP is particularly targeted at students in their mid-twenties, who have completed their university education, who possess either demonstrated or strong potential leadership abilities, who are willing to work hard in order to develop a new level of awareness about the way business functions these days globally, and to discover their own capabilities to become active and effective leaders in their field of choice.

How do you assess the success of your students?

DMP/DEMP graduates have gone on to challenging jobs in national or multinational companies, some have gone on to graduate schools, from MBA to PhD programs, and some have even become academics. But in all cases, our graduates have exceeded their hopes and aspirations, they have discovered new capabilities in themselves, and they have achieved results beyond their own expectations.

In last editions of DEMP also a few refugees attended the program. What is your experience with them?

In the past two years, we have had refugees (from Afghanistan and Iran) join us in DEMP. Their example of personal courage and determination has raised the bar for our other students, and their participation in discussions and exercises has enriched the discourse in every class. I do hope we have more of them in the Program.

In 2016, the international summer school DMP re-named

to DEMP? Why?

Having spent more than three decades at Babson College (rated number 1 in the world in Entrepreneurship for the past 24 years), I had wanted to tilt the emphasis of DMP more toward “entrepreneurial thought and action” (the tag line has been registered by Babson), and I am very glad that two years ago we decided to redesign the program, to include more entrepreneurial cases and exercises. In today's business world, speed, uncertainty, and ambiguity are becoming increasingly more prevalent, and the redesigned DEMP tackles these realities with greater emphasis.

Is there any particular student, story, or anecdote from the program that really touched your heart?

Sometimes a true story, about one particular student, captures the essence of what I have tried to describe about the aims and

outcomes of DMP/DEMP.

I will call her Vanya, and she came from a neighbouring country, where she had successfully completed a degree in Chemical Engineering. Although she had participated in extra-curricular activities at university, she had not played significant leadership roles. After her graduation there were no attractive jobs that could use her engineering education. In DMP, she soon developed and demonstrated clear leadership qualities, I distinctly remember: during an outdoor exercise, which was physically challenging and required focused team work, Vanya emerged as a well-recognized leader, and what I suspect seemed entirely natural to other classmates, to Vanya I believe it was a revelation, she had discovered her true calling as a leader of teams, as an organizer, and ultimately as a task leader. With some lengthy correspondence, she decided to travel to another country where she had relatives, and soon landed a much more fulfilling job.

What will the future of management education look like?

In the rapidly evolving world that is being described as VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous), focusing on narrow disciplines does not provide the type of education that can prepare effective leaders. In fact, the only kind of learning that can prevail in the VUCA world is learning-to-learn, technically known as Deutero-learning. The important trends are precisely the words that compose the acronym above: we are just in the process of developing new ways to prepare students for the VUCA world.

Do you consider yourself as a global citizen?

I think all sane and well-informed people should consider themselves “Global Citizens”, on the one hand, and “local heroes” who are willing and able to lead change in their own local sphere, on the other hand.

MEET JB

What makes me happy?

Increasingly, I get my greatest joy in life by noting the achievements of my past students, spread literally all over the world.

My biggest achievement in life is ...

... the ability to stay cool in difficult situations and to act with energy and passion when I think action is called for.

I find inspiration in ...

... the composition of elegant solutions to tough problems in any domain, solutions that are based on informed novel thinking.

Advice I would give to my younger self ...

Grow up in knowledge and compassion, but keep your childhood playfulness.