

Laugh Breathe Invent

Suffolk's executive-in-residence, Sushil Bhatia, knows a thing or two about inventing successful products. How does he do it? SAM sits in on his class and discovers a fascinating mix of Eastern mysticism, chortling, and team building.

By **Sharron Kahn Luttrell**
PHOTOGRAPHS by **Justin Knight**

On the Saturday of Memorial Day

weekend, the cloud layer that shrouded the city for most of May had finally lifted, drawing sun-starved people out of their homes and into the streets. They draped themselves over benches or sprawled out on patches of grass, absorbing the warmth. But in a windowless room inside the Sawyer Building, 17 executive MBA students sat under fluorescent lights discussing patent law and product development. That is until three-quarters into the five-hour class, when they were, to a person, leaning back in their chairs, noses pointed to the ceiling, eyes closed. One would think their instructor would be mortified, but he was in the front of the room, doing the same.

The course, *Virtual Teams, Global Innovation and Product Development*, was either boring beyond belief or there was another explanation. The instructor, Dr. Sushil Bhatia, stirred and checked his watch. "Okay, one more minute," he told the class before shutting his eyes again. There was another explanation.

Bhatia is teaching business executives not only how to bring products from concept to marketplace in a global environment, but to do it without losing sleep. Or their sense of humor. Minutes before the group meditation, Bhatia led the class in a rip-roaring, knee-slapping round of laughter "therapy."





Bhatia weaves Eastern-style meditation and what he calls “the art of laughter” into his curriculum. His theory being, when people empty their minds of mental clutter through meditation or laughter they think more clearly, better retain information, and solve problems more creatively.

“We say, ‘Think neutral.’ When you have your mind in that neutral state you can absorb more information. But knowledge by itself has no meaning unless you can apply it effectively. Whatever tools you can use to get there, you do it,” says Bhatia.

REAL WORLD CURRICULUM

Bhatia offers his students a real-world perspective gained from more than 30 years of developing new products and doing business internationally. As a Suffolk Executive MBA degree-holder himself, Bhatia knows what works in the classroom, and what doesn't. Bhatia earned his MBA in 1979.

He returned to the school as executive-in-residence last year at the behest of Sawyer School of Management Dean William O'Neill, who saw in Bhatia someone who would bring to the position a keen understanding of innovation and entrepreneurship. After receiving a Ph.D. in Chemistry from the Universite de Liege in Belgium, Bhatia landed a job at Dennison Manufacturing Company in Framingham, MA. Bhatia realized that to move ahead in the corporate world, he had to prove he understood the management side of business. He enrolled in the Suffolk Executive MBA program and did his thesis on markets in his native India. Later, he used his research to drive the company's entry into India by convincing the CEO that opportunities existed there.

Two years after Dennison merged with Avery Corp., in 1991, Bhatia left and founded his own company, JMD Manufacturing. The firm makes contact printers which date-stamp packaging materials for consumer products. It counts among its clients: General Motors, Proctor and Gamble, Colgate, Kraft Foods, Johnson & Johnson, and GlaxoSmithKline.

Throughout his career, Bhatia has launched new products or found different ways to use existing ones. Among his innovations: the adhesive that allows convention-goers to peel off those “Hello My Name Is” stickers without ripping away a hunk of their shirts in the process. He is also responsible for a development that was undoubtedly applauded by kindergarten teachers everywhere—the Glue Stic. In addition, Bhatia created scratch-proof labels for shampoo, cosmetic, and food containers; inks used on milk cartons, bottles, and boxes; electro-sensitive paper; heat binding systems; and the DeCopier—a machine that removes toner from paper. That last invention earned Bhatia a finalist spot in a *Discover* magazine inventors' competition.

So, when Bhatia and Suffolk Director of Executive Education and Lifelong Learning Michael Barretti sat down to develop a course on product development and global innovation, Bhatia didn't have to look far for ideas. In fact, he treats his own life as a field lab of sorts, pulling into the classroom those lessons, challenges, and solutions that he has encountered as an entrepreneur.

“One of the things that we are not afraid to do, obviously within some guidelines, is to experiment with new methods of teaching,” says Barretti. “We don't do it across the board. There are some courses that don't lend themselves to this kind of activity, but when you're talking about new product development, you're now getting into the area of creativity and design, and these methods are supported by the tech-



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niques that Sushil has brought into the classroom.”

Take JMD Manufacturing, for instance. It does business globally, which means Bhatia and his employees had to develop an awareness and respect for different cultures, not to mention time zones. Bhatia and Barretti worked out a way to replicate the international arena in the classroom. Students are grouped in teams of three to five students each. Each team is expected to develop a new product by the semester’s end, the catch being that they must behave as though team members live in different parts of the world. Each student adopts a country and assumes the identity of a native. The teams research their members’ countries and agree to communicate within their respective time zones. Cultural norms, holidays, and customs must be honored.

“The end result is that if one of the team members doesn’t deliver, the whole team falls flat,” Bhatia said. Just like in real life. Given those obstacles, it becomes clear why Bhatia relies on meditation to relax, and laughter to forge relationships.

CLEARING THE CLUTTER

Bhatia has meditated for 20 minutes each afternoon for the last 25 years. Before that, he lived the life of a stressed-out executive, nursing a two-cigar a day habit and relaxing in the evening with a tumbler of Scotch whiskey. He and his family were also experiencing culture shock, having just moved from Framingham back to India after a 13-year absence to establish Dennison’s presence in that country.

One of Bhatia’s customers suggested he learn to meditate. Bhatia agreed, but made it clear he wasn’t interested in changing his lifestyle. His lifestyle changed anyway. After three months of daily meditation, Bhatia lost his taste for the big cigars he was so fond of. After six months, he stopped drinking. What’s more, he found that meditating made him a better business person. With a clear mind, creativity came more freely. He was meeting challenges and solving problems in ways he hadn’t before.

“Sometimes the fastest way to get there is to slow down.” Bhatia says, repeating one of the fortune cookie-size truisms that slip easily into his conversations.

Bhatia returned to Massachusetts after four years in India—meditation and yoga now firmly established in his daily routine. Several years ago Bhatia started reading about laughing clubs, which were springing up in India. During a business trip to the country, he investigated further, learning that a 10-second belly laugh offers the same physiological benefits as three minutes on a rowing machine—and is a lot more fun. Laughter reduces the heart rate, stimulates endorphins production, and aids breathing, he says. No jokes necessary. A forced laugh will lead to real laughter, especially when done in a group. Bhatia was so taken by the notion of laughing for health and stress relief, that he brought the idea back home to the U.S. where he founded The Laughing Clubs of America. The organization seeks to spread the word about what Bhatia calls laughter therapy—a combination of laughter, yoga, and meditation.

“There’s too much clutter in our minds. There’s too much buzz. Corporations want to be innovative and to find the next big thing. How do you get there? You get there by having your employees be happy,” he says.

True to his management philosophy, Bhatia invites the employees of his company to join him each morning at 9 A.M. to meditate, practice yoga, and laugh. In April, ABC’s *Good Morning America* sent a camera crew to JMD Manufacturing for a segment on the health benefits of laughter.

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THE LANGUAGE OF LAUGHTER

So, this is how Sushil Bhatia gets a dozen and a half executive MBA students to laugh when they're trapped inside a classroom on a warm, sunny Saturday afternoon.

First are the breathing exercises. Bhatia strikes a key on his laptop and a message appears on the overhead screen: "Three Most Important Things: Breathing. Breathing. Breathing." The students shift in their seats, anticipating what's to come.

"Is everybody breathing in class today?" he asks, prompting a hearty, "Yes!" from the class. "Take a deep breath in," he instructs, and lifts his left hand like the Pope blessing the faithful, then slowly lowers it while the class exhales a collective hum.

More breathing exercises follow. Then it's time to cut loose. Bhatia strikes another key on his laptop, bringing up a cartoon sketch of himself, rolling with laughter. Already some of the students are giggling.

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How do you get there? You get there by having your employees be happy."

"Let's try some laughter," Bhatia hollers. He and the students raise their arms, then bend over, slapping their knees and barking out ha-ha-ha's while Bhatia jogs about the room like a game show host, high-fiving each student.

Next comes a laughter variety pack: there's cocktail laughter (refined tee-hees mixed with some drunken chortles); lion laughter (a snarling har-har-har accompanied by paw-like hand gestures); and finally, quiet laughter.

Then the class is silent, save for a few stray giggles and the rustling of students fixing their hair and wiping their eyes. A few people uncap bottles of Poland Springs and guzzle water.

"Laughter is a language that binds across cultures," Bhatia says, bringing the class back to the lesson on global product development.

Outside, the sun may be shining, but inside Room 325, people are fairly glowing with pleasure. Sam