



ARTS, REFLECTION AND LEADERSHIP

An increasing number of companies are including artists and artistic processes in their approaches to strategic and day-to-day management and leadership. For very good reasons.



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Presentation

Leadership Insight: Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management

References

1. Adler, Nancy J. (2010) "Leadership Insight: Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management", *Journal of Business Strategy*.
2. Adler, Nancy J. (2006) "The Arts and Leadership: Now that we can do anything, what will we do?", *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, vol. 5, n°4, p. 466-499.

In the first few years of the 21st century, we have seen the rapid development of a new trend: artists and business people working together.

Major corporations worldwide, in all sectors of the economy, now invite poets, theatre directors, orchestra conductors and musicians, painters, dancers... for models, guidance, and coaching. In 2004, World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, offered a workshop entitled "If an Artist Ran Your Business", with contributions from such noted artists as photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Hermitage Museum director Mikhail Piotrovsky.

Corporate recruiters in North America are increasingly visiting top art and design schools in search of corporate talent. According to Daniel Pink, in the *Harvard Business Review*, "not only is an arts degree the new hot credential; the MFA (Master of Fine Arts) is becoming the new business degree."

We are also seeing business schools in many countries add artistic approaches to their curriculum. In Denmark, the Copenhagen Business School opened the Center for Art and Leadership. In the USA, Wharton, MIT's Sloan School, and the University of Chicago, among others, are leading the trend, as are Oxford and Cranfield

universities, in the UK. At McGill, an arts and leadership seminar has been offered in the MBA program for the last 10 years.

How can we explain this trend? According to many academics, and our own research and observations¹, it's because the skills needed for business to succeed in the 21st century's complex and chaotic environment have been used by artists for years!

"Society today yearns for a leadership of possibility, a leadership based more on hope, aspiration, and innovation than on the replication of historical patterns of constrained pragmatism", writes the business strategist Gary Hamel.² Until now, those qualities have been more the domain of artists and artistic processes than of most managers.

The time is right for the cross-fertilization of arts and leadership.

Poet David Whyte, who is invited by major corporations worldwide to address their senior executives, notes: "The time seems right for this cross-fertilization [of the arts and leadership]. It seems that all the overripe hierarchies of the world, from corporations to nation states, are in trouble and are calling, however reluctantly, on their people for more creativity, [more] commitment, and [more] innovation."³

"The economy of the future will be about creating value and appropriate forms, and no one knows more about the processes for doing that than artists", explain former Harvard business professor Rob Austin and theatre director Lee Devin.

NEW CENTURY, NEW TRENDS

Three challenges caused by the overall pattern of chaos and complexity - discontinuous change, networked teams, and simultaneity—help explain business' use of more arts-based approaches.

Discontinuous Change: Continuous Improvement Is No Longer Good Enough

Leaders search for successful strategies, only to discover that the most viable options need to be invented; they cannot simply be replicated. Designing innovative options requires more than the traditional analytical and decision-making skills taught during the past half century in most MBA programs.

Enhancements and increased efficiency are no longer sufficient for economic survival, let alone business success. "By the time an organization has wrung the last 5 percent of efficiency out of the *how*, someone else will have invented a new *what*. Inventing new whats—that's the key to thriving in . . . the 21st century" , explains Gary Hamel. Inventing "the next great thing"—or, as Michael Lewis refers to it , the *new new thing* —defines a business's success, or if it is invented by competitors, its demise.

Creating the next great thing demands constant intuition-based innovation; it's a design task, not merely an analytical or administrative function. Historically, such creativity has been the primary competence of artists, not managers.

REFLECTION INTO EVERYDAY LIFE.

Another trend has taken on increasing importance with the arrival of the 21st century: Leaders have begun to re-appropriate the ancient traditions of reflection into their everyday life.

More than 2500 years ago, Confucius admonished leaders to seek perspective and wisdom through reflection, rather than simply attempting to learn through experience and imitation. Confirming Confucius' understanding, Harvard Professor Howard Gardner's contemporary research identified daily reflection as one of only three core competencies that distinguish leaders who make an extraordinary difference in the world from their more ordinary counterparts.

Building on Confucius' wisdom and Gardner's research, along with the yearnings and experience of hundreds of managers from around the world, it is clear that today's leaders need to:

- > **Reflect** – to return to the quiet and contemplation it takes to be wise;
- > **Gain perspective** – to acquire the courage needed to see reality as it actually is, rather than continuing to rely on illusions perpetuated by colleagues, the media, and the broader culture;

- > **Aspire to exceptionally exciting possibilities** – to envision extraordinary possibilities by drawing on the depths of their own and others' hopes, aspirations, and creativity; and
- > **Inspire others** –to move beyond current reality back to possibility

Based on these four fundamental leadership capacities, and drawing from a range of artistic traditions, we created the Leadership Insight journal to support managers' and their companies' capacity to craft and implement strategies that produce outstanding financial results by making a positive difference in the world.

Combining paintings, insights from world leaders, reflective questions, and most importantly, blank pages, the journal is designed to draw managers away from their often frenzied lives and to return them to a deeper dialectic with their influence, and potential influence, on the world. By reintroducing a daily practice of reflection, the journal offers leaders the quiet and contemplation it takes to be wise.



“The artist must paint or sculpt or write, not only for the present generation but for those who have yet to be born. Good artists, it is often said, are fifty to a hundred years ahead of their time, they describe what lies over the horizon in our future world. (...) They must rely on the embracing abilities of their imagination to intuit and describe what is as yet a germinating seed in their present time, something that will only flower after they have written the line or painted the canvas”, writes David Whyte. He adds : “The present manager must learn the same artistic discipline, they must learn to respond or conceive of something that will move in the same direction in which the world is moving, without waiting for all the evidence to appear on their desks. To wait for all the evidence is to finally recognize it through a competitor’s product.”

From Hierarchies to Networks – Individuals to Teams

Organizations increasingly have shifted from single-company hierarchies to flatter, more networked, multi-organizational structures, including global strategic alliances, international joint ventures, and a wide array of cross border mergers, acquisitions, and partnerships. Within such networked partnerships, people contribute much less frequently as individuals and much more frequently collaborate collectively across networks of both co-located and geographically distanced global teams.

Actors, dancers, and musicians—performing as ensembles—have developed team-based collaborative skills to a much greater extent than have most managers. Rob Austin and Lee Devin, are already advising managers to “look to collaborative artists rather than to more traditional management models if they want to create economic value in this new century.”

Leaders are also shifting away from the more hierarchical machine-like models to more human and biological metaphors to guide their strategies. Among the most powerful human metaphors are those of the arts.

Simultaneity and the Collapse of Time: Planning No Longer Works the Way It Used To

Extremely high rates of change, ambiguity, unpredictability, and turbulence define the environment faced by business. Managers have to deal not just with change, but with an increasing proportion of discontinuous, disruptive change. They have to respond to unpredicted and unpredictable threats and opportunities. Without the luxury of the lead time necessary for planning, managers must use their professional expertise and experience to respond spontaneously— in other words, to improvise.

As Canadian management professor Mary Crossan explains: “improvisation occurs when planning intersects real-time problems and opportunities... In order to keep pace with change, it has become essential to blend the traditional skills of planning

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and analytical foresight with the ability to respond in the moment to problems and opportunities as they arise. Although improvisation has been evident in the arts, it has [only] more recently been acknowledged as an important [managerial skill].” In moving from traditional managerial approaches to improvisation, core skills shift from sequential planning-then-doing to simultaneous listening-and-observing-while-doing. Successful improvisation only occurs when team members trust that their colleagues are taking care of the team’s best interests. Individual star performance undermines, rather than supports, effective collective action.

It is no surprise, then, that managers are increasingly turning to improvisational actors, dancers, and musicians for guidance as they attempt to shift from sequential planning to approaches incorporating more spontaneity.

Rob Austin and Lee Devin give another reason to learn from artists. “Managers and management students don’t understand how to create on cue, how to innovate reliably on a deadline. . . Artists are much better at this. . . [It’s] something theatre companies do all the time.”

WHOLENESS, MEANING AND INSPIRATION

“To succeed in the 21st century, a company must give its members a reason to bring all of their humanity to work”, writes Gary Hamel. Following a century focused on the efficiencies gained through mechanistic and reductionist techniques, we yearn today for wholeness and meaning.

“The artist’s sensibility is one that grants life to things outside of our normal human ken. It understands that our place in this world can never be measured by the Dow Jones, that our ultimate arrival on our deathbed entitles us to other perspectives than mere fiscal success or the size of our retirement account,” notes David Whyte. It’s another reason why we see the confluence of people’s yearning for societal significance and the invitation to artists to partner with business leaders.

Combining the global influence and entrepreneurial skills of business with the inspirational creativity and improvisational skills of the artist community gives us hope that we will not settle for anything less than our highest levels of aspirations, and that we will have the capacity to create the kind of world that we all wish for and that our children deserve. 