

Making the Connection Between Art and Leadership

Kevin Asbjörnson

Five years ago I was at a meeting on creative leadership at the Airlie Conference Center in Warrenton, Virginia. During a break I sat down at a piano in a common area. (In addition to being a leadership educator, I am a performing musician and composer, so I couldn't resist.) While I was playing and thinking about the discussions in which I had just taken part, I was struck by the idea that art and leadership are two sides of the same coin.

At that time I had worked for ten years in international business and had come to believe that traditional models of leadership were inadequate for the multidimensional demands inherent in leading others. These models failed to tap into the individual's emotional intelligence—the capacity for such things as self-awareness, creative expression, imagination, and empathy, competencies that I knew from experience to be fundamental for performing artists.

Then it came to me: *What if the most effective artists in the world are also leaders and the most effective leaders in the world are also artists? And what if leaders and artists have parallel creative competencies?*

Artists inspire. They bring people together. They reframe and change the way people think. Artists invent

possibilities not previously imagined. Business leaders, especially in today's complex and changing world, must also be able to do all these things.

Making the connection between the world of art, especially performing art, and the world of leadership can bring new resources to people

who are seeking to improve themselves and their organizations. More precisely, I believe that leaders must develop their emotional intelligence—some refer to this as emotional quotient, or EQ—through the practice of creating meaningful connections on the interdisciplinary, interpersonal, and intrapersonal levels. Emotional intelligence is the international language of leadership. Performing artists and leaders face very similar challenges and expecta-

EIGHT KEYS

In the years since that Airlie meeting, I have devoted myself to working on the bridge between art and leadership. I have identified the following eight keys to connecting the soul of the artist with the astute management skills of the effective business leader. These keys are the integral components of my teachings. They spell out the underlying skills in the artistry of leadership and the process by which inspired leadership releases people's imaginations, generating fresh ideas.

Reach and influence the audience. Good leaders must connect with and have an effect on a wide range of stakeholders—employees, board directors, stockholders, strategic partners, peers, and superiors, to name just a few..Leaders do not reach and influence an audience through PowerPoint presentations, memos, or meetings but rather through consistent and deliberate efforts to understand and effectively connect with people. Such connection requires more effective communication inside and outside the organization.

Performing artists and leaders face very similar challenges and expectations. They have a great deal in common and a great deal to learn from each other.

Editor's note: Issues & Observations is a venue for CCL staff members and associates to express their personal views about leadership.

Many personal and professional development programs emphasize the *science* of leadership. But the *human* aspect of leadership—the ability to create and sustain meaningful connections with an audience—is what really provides the foundation for effective leadership.

To develop this ability, ask people informally to share what is important in their connections to you, your department, and the organization, and then determine if you are using your influence as a leader to address these expectations.

Recognize the actual rather than the intended impact of your voice. I offer workshops to help people develop their artistic abilities at work. During these sessions, I come out from behind the piano to elicit participants' responses to my music. Similarly, artful leaders come out from behind their job titles and executive desks to find out whether their audience heard what they intended to say.

Concert pianists must both tune and tone their instruments. Leaders also must learn to tune and tone their voices and to anticipate and then gauge the impact of their voices on others. Leaders can dramatically increase their ability to influence others by aligning what they have to say with their tone of voice and their actions. For instance, it's hard to inspire people to be excited about an initiative if you sound bored by it.

Remember, the people you lead hear your tune (what you're saying) but feel your tone (how you say it). Ensure that you align the appropriate level of emotional engagement with your messages and actions.

Listen with intention rather than hear with filters. Listening is an art that requires attentiveness, openness to new perspectives, and the ability to draw connections among disparate elements. Rather than assuming that they understand people, leaders should learn to question their understanding and actively seek the help of those who are speaking to make sure

that what is being said is being accurately heard. This must be done in a sensitive way that makes it clear you are learning about and not criticizing others' thinking. Listening with intention increases the capacity for emotional intelligence. It engages both the intellectual and the emotional components of a person and integrates the heart, head, and soul of leadership.

It is a good idea to avoid typing on your laptop or tapping on your Blackberry and to put your telephone on forward when having a dialogue with someone. Remind yourself that being accessible is not synonymous

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with being available and that people want leaders who are available in the moment.

Facilitate solutions by asking the right questions rather than dictating the right answers. Leaders sometimes believe they must have all the answers. However, asking good questions and listening perceptively to others' questions creates better followership—and better solutions—than dictating answers.

There are four fundamental questions involved in running organiza-

tions: *What? What if? How? and Why?* Leaders typically focus on *What?* and *How?* But leaders must also ask the tougher questions of *What if?* and *Why?* These are questions that create emotional connections, sustainable buy-in, and long-term influence.

Balance action with reflection. "Do and act" is the mantra of many organizations. Action without reflection, however, results in premature decisions, wasted efforts, and mediocre results. Balancing action with reflection ensures individual and organizational learning.

"Continuous partial attention," a phrase coined by former Microsoft vice president Linda Stone when she worked at the company's Virtual Worlds Group, is a malady that afflicts most people's work lives. Consumed by constant action, people tend neither to take the time to reflect on what they do nor to give full, undivided attention to any single person, activity, or decision. Leaders must practice whole-person leadership by balancing action with reflection and exercising fully engaged attention.

Develop the discipline of reflecting on your actions or the actions of your workgroup or team. When leaders do not reflect on their actions, they are unable to act on such reflections and realize organizational learning. Tools for reflection include journaling, participating in conversational dialogue, and constructing collages or mind maps (diagrams used to generate and structure ideas).

Recognize and acknowledge the talents of others. Many leaders fail to engage the talents of others because they neglect the critical first step of recognizing and acknowledging their colleagues' gifts. Just as successful artists maximize their own gifts by playing in concert with other artists, artful leaders tap into and leverage all of the talent in the workplace.

It is my experience that a leader who enlists the collective wisdom

and combined energy of the individuals in an organization will outperform one who relies strictly on his or her own powers. A leader who creates synergy among members of an organization will see an increase in productivity to unprecedented levels.

Increase your observation of the intrinsic motivation and innate creativity of the people you are leading and informally demonstrate your appreciation of their talents, apart from formal performance reviews.

Recognize that a leader who does not practice is like a performing artist who doesn't rehearse—they both lose their audience. Leadership is not a right or an entitlement; it must be consistently demonstrated, refined, and earned. Creating and sustaining meaningful connections reinforces a leader's credibility and integrity with employees, customers, stockholders, board members, and strategic partners.

Focus on practice rather than entitlement as a leadership concept. If you don't listen and practice new skills, you'll lose your audience. Musicians who don't practice lose their facility and grow stale. The same is true of business leaders.

The essence of practice for leaders and performing artists is the same: to constructively provoke thought and evoke emotion in their audiences. Audiences consistently provide cues and feedback on the impact of practice, and it's important to pay attention to these messages.

Understand that leaders inspire people; people motivate themselves. Artists create from deep internal motives. Likewise, individuals in organizations bring intrinsic motivation to their work. Rather than trying to manufacture motivation, a leader should inspire exceptional work by calling on others' innate desire to make a difference. This inspiration inevitably fires people's imaginations, which in turn triggers innovation.

I firmly believe that leadership in the twenty-first century must be based

on the ability to create, sustain, and inspire followership. Leaders inspire others by recognizing and connecting with the heads, hearts, and souls of the people they work with.

USING MUSIC

Performing artists and leaders are constantly working on similar stages of performance and are expected to maintain a repertoire of creative, artistic, and innovative competencies. In my work with leaders, I use music to help them practice the eight keys

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outlined in this article, and any leader can make similar use of music.

For example, members of a newly formed team or task force can introduce themselves through references to their favorite CDs or recording artists. This expands the range of dialogue and the all-important depth of connection among people.

Recognizing differing styles or genres of music helps us to understand differences in perspective, using our sense of hearing to reinforce the importance of frame of reference in the workplace and in relationships.

Another possibility is to conduct an off-site meeting or professional development day at a local performing arts facility, where people can

interact with the performing artists and ask questions about their roles, responsibilities, and challenges. In exchange, performing artists can be invited to the company's facility to interact with leaders and explore the parallels between leaders and performing artists.

One of my favorite uses of music for practicing and integrating the eight keys is to place tuned percussion tubes, called Boomwhackers, into the hands of leaders, allowing them to step instantly into the role of performing artist. The brightly colored tubes produce the eight tones of the C major scale when they are gently struck together. Teams of employees become musical ensembles as they discover and practice the components of effective musicianship as a parallel to effective leadership.

In this exercise, participants can use and expand their abilities to listen, observe, and synthesize communication through the language of music. I translate the musical elements of melody, harmony, and rhythm into the work environment and engage the participants in conversational dialogue to apply their insights and learning about musicianship to their roles as leaders. The lively and interactive experience with the percussion tubes culminates in a concert of original compositions by the participants.

Finally, music and the performing arts are not the only metaphors for effective leadership. I believe that any of the arts can be effective in helping leaders develop the skills essential for inspired leadership in the twenty-first century.

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