As the economy stumbles, one of the first things to typically get cut in government spending and school curricula is the arts. Such government policies implicitly suggest that the arts are luxuries we can do without in times of economic downturn. But enlightened and strategic thinking business leaders understand the relationship between the arts and innovation, especially in times of economic downturn. So, in these times of economic distress, we should take a lesson from the pages of our history books – economic adversity can inspire extraordinary innovation, if we choose to engage the arts as enablers of business creativity.

Strategic leadership is presently confronted with an eminently practical question: how can we continue to help leaders in our organizations learn to leverage creativity against the economic adversity resultant from the present downturn? It was Albert Einstein who asserted, “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them”. Indeed, our world is shifting beneath our feet, and new thinking will be required to deal with the complexity and solve the more wicked problems that are now confronting us. Arts-inspired creativity has historically played a role and continues to enable innovation – helping leaders realize the upside of the downturn.

Why the arts? Why now?

Arts organizations can teach corporates a variety of skills and processes that are not emphasized in the normal curriculum of the world's top business schools. They are intuitive and qualitative skills. The arts can teach communication and presentation; team building and problem solving; or product and systems innovation. Arts based training can be designed to teach corporates about undefined outcomes, the allowance for failure and risk-taking.

There are well-documented case studies about, and examples of, arts organizations' consultations with corporations to provide these types of skills and processes. A corporate executive gives the same presentation 30-40 times. How does that executive keep it fresh and inspiring? Look to the theatre and dance companies who perform twice a day, every day during a run. Another example: team-building skills are important to the increasingly remote and technologically connected workforce. How does a manager keep his team focused on the same corporate goals? Look to the orchestras and dance companies that must work in concert (no pun intended) for every performance.

Why aren’t arts organizations more pervasive in corporate consulting?

Perhaps it’s because the results can’t be measured immediately, or perhaps it's prejudice or scorn. As long as the modern public corporation is focused on short-term results, the necessary soft skills of intuitive cognition, creativity and innovation will not be readily embraced. The arts develop the imagination, as well as spatial thinking and abstract reasoning. These are essential skills for tomorrow's software designers, scientists, entrepreneurs and engineers, and mandatory for both leaders
and workers to succeed in a rapidly changing global economy.

**Why arts-based learning has emerged as a new pedagogy in management education**

One cannot deny the emergence of arts-based learning in business, or its presence as recognized and highly regarded management pedagogy (teaching method). But many still ask “why”? One commonly heard response is: the arts offer a means for us to make sense of the growing complexity that managers and leaders are confronted with. Art-based activities can provide a new lens for science or business to look through to tackle problems or shift perceptions. Simply talking about pictures rather than data is a new start point for fresh dialogue. If you were to draw a Venn diagram with the two primary circles marked Business and Art, the overlapping centre between the two would be creativity. Both disciplines depend on creativity for survival and progression.

Art-based tools help teams to see beyond the obvious to generate new ideas. Explorations through art give us more transformative experiences where new ideas emerge and our awareness is heightened to see beyond the obvious. Attitudes and influences on our thinking are made visible and our imaginations are stimulated. Art teaches business the ability to conceptualize and to push beyond the established norms and boundaries. Another key factor behind the emergence of arts-based learning is a growing scepticism about the ability of traditional management education and leadership development to fully address the creative challenges facing today’s managers and leaders.

**What is arts-based learning?**

We’re finding the arts in business in some of the following ways:

- **decoration** – the artwork in lobbies/corridors, and the pictures on office walls (e.g. corporate art);
- **entertainment** – bringing the arts/performances into the office space (e.g. giving employees tickets to arts events);
- **as an instrument** – when businesses use the arts as an instrument for management/leadership development (e.g. teambuilding, communication skills development, etc.); and
- **strategic transformation** – when the business integrates the arts into areas such as vision and values, creativity and innovation, branding, and marketing.

Here are some examples of how we are seeing increasing numbers of leaders bringing artists and artistic processes into their organizations, and how arts-based learning is making its presence known to business:

- Work done by poet David Whyte with senior executives at McDonnell-Douglas and Boeing.
- Denmark’s Copenhagen Business School opening the world’s first business-school-based Centre for Art and Leadership.
- Leading business schools worldwide adding arts-based courses to their curriculum.
- Danish managers building three-dimensional representations of their organizational strategy using LEGO bricks.
- US Army leaders looking to cinema to illustrate key ideas about leadership.
Arts-based learning describes a wide range of approaches by which management educators and leadership/organization development practitioners are instrumentally using the arts as a pedagogical means to contribute to the learning and development of individual organization managers and leaders, as well as contributing to organizational learning and development.

**What are the strengths and limitations of arts-based learning?**

There’s a growing sense in business education that leaders in organizations are too often limited in the range of competencies they use – that rational-analytical competencies are obviously valuable, but insufficient by themselves. Some organizational scholars and leadership educators have suggested that creative competencies are under-explored and potentially valuable ways for leaders to perceive, understand, and act on complex challenges in our organizations. They assert that the value of leadership competencies is more closely aligned with artists and found in artistic practice than in the traditional technical sphere of the practices of managing in the workplace.

**Practice makes perfect**

Artists use the process of “practice” to arrive at a new creation, or more specifically, the performing arts practice of “rehearsal”. They try things out – the sculptor makes a maquette, the painter makes sketches, the poet writes draft after draft. In the performing arts, practice is called rehearsal. But businesses rarely rehearse. It's unusual for a business leader to fully rehearse a presentation. Really rehearse, that is – repeat the presentation umpteen times, adding nuance and subtlety, pacing, pauses, emphasis and emotion.

Even rarer is the business that rehearses its own future. What will its stores look like and feel like in five, ten years' time? How will the factory function? What kind of services will its market demand? And how will they cope if disaster strikes? Many businesses talk about these futures but few embody them. Rehearsal is about “embodied learning” – developing and repeating changes until the change fits the person or the body corporate like a glove.

Arts-based learning has the capacity to go beyond mere assistance with “simplification”. It can give clarity to managers approaching the complex problems that characterize today's leadership challenges. One technique is that of “brain calming” to help us change the pace of our attention.

Brain-calming employs slowing down, connecting to breath and body, and focused visualization – a precursor to accessing deep knowing, confidence and courage. Many of us experience the effects of brain-calming as a powerful idea source when we are in the shower, on long drives or walks, or emerging from a dream. For leaders, brain-calming gives us permission and techniques for making the ordinary “extraordinary”. It can assist us in developing deeper contemplation, focus and competency in meta-cognition – all critical for avoiding a leader's blind spots.

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