

What Artists Know About Leadership

by Sharon Daloz Parks

The phrase "the art of leadership" is certainly well worn. But consciously recognizing the practice of leadership as artistry has received little attention. For now, I simply suggest that art, artist, and artistry be given a more prominent place within the lexicon of leadership theory and practice.

Affirmation and resistance

The image of artist, cast as a metaphor for those who provide acts of leadership, immediately evokes two primary responses—affirmation and resistance. Those who think of themselves as artists in the conventional sense of the word—for example, painters, sculptors, musicians, writers, architects, photographers, and some athletes and gardeners—may pick up the metaphor with ready enthusiasm, recognizing that incorporating their artist-self into their practice of leadership opens into a horizon of powerful possibilities. But those who suffered through their last required art project in school, or who hold the stereotype of an artist as non-rational, asocial, marginal, or soft—may cast a more jaundiced eye upon this metaphor.

It is highly likely, however, that the jaundiced eye belongs to someone who in some aspect of his or her professional or personal life exemplifies the power and qualities of an artist: the ability to work on an edge, in an interdependent relationship with the medium, with a capacity for creative improvisation. (Entrepreneurs and some politicians, physicians, and educators, for example, are akin to artists, seeking to bring into being what has not yet taken form.)

Working on an edge

Within any profession or sector, one of the primary characteristics of the artistry of leadership is the willingness to work on an edge—the edge between the familiar and the emergent. Harvard University professor Ronald A. Heifetz honours this edge when he speaks of the capacity to lead with only good questions in hand—and that acts of leadership require the ability to walk the razor's edge without getting your feet too cut up—working that edge place between known problems and unknown solutions, between popularity and anxious hostility. Artistic leadership is able to remain curious and creative in the complexity and chaos of swamp issues, often against the odds. As we have seen, those who practice adaptive leadership must confront, disappoint, and dismantle and at the same time energize, inspire, and empower. The creativity that emerges from working on this paradoxical edge is integral to adaptive work, building out of what has come before, yet stirring into being something new and unprecedented—the character of leadership that is needed at this threshold time in human history.

Interdependence with the medium

Artists work within a set of relationships that they cannot fully control. In regard to the practice of leadership, one of the most potent features of thinking like an artist is that the artist necessarily works in a profoundly interdependent relationship with the medium—paint, stone, clay, a musical instrument, an orchestra, a tennis court, a slalom run, or food. Artists learn "everything they can about the medium(s) with which they work . . . what they can expect from it and where it will fall short." A potter, for example, must learn that clay has its own life, its own potential and limits, its own integrity. The potter develops a relationship with clay, spending time with it, learning to know its properties, how it will interact with water, discovering that if you work it too hard, it will collapse, and if you work with it, it will teach you its strength, your limits, and the possibilities of co-creation. "Even in drawing," notes an architect, "though we think of the artist as imposing something arbitrary on the page, when you draw even a single line on the page, it begins to speak back to you. The kind of pencil you use and the tooth of the paper will affect the message. The design emerges in the dynamic interaction of the relationships among architect, pencil, paper, client, site, building materials, budget, and contractor."

The practice of adaptive leadership requires the same awareness of working within a dynamic field of relationships in which the effect of any single action is not entirely controllable because in a systemic, interdependent reality, every action affects the whole. On the other hand, if one learns to understand the nature of the system that needs to be mobilized (the underlying structure and patterns of motion), he or she can become artfully adept at intervening in ways that are more rather than less likely to have a positive affect in helping the group to move to a new place, creating a new reality.

Those who practice adaptive leadership must confront, disappoint, and dismantle and at the same time energize, inspire, and empower.

Linda St. Clair, who served as a highly successful personnel manager for manufacturing in a major technology firm, is keenly aware of how her earlier experience as an artist-director of theatre productions informed her practice of leadership within a corporate context. "When I was at my best in the corporation," St. Clair tells us, "I helped the people who reported to me get what they needed to be effectively creative. Over time I got to help select a talented team, but it remained my responsibility to be clear about what we were supposed to be doing as an organization and enable every person within the system to know how the work of each one contributes to the whole!"

Heifetz and his colleagues regard giving the work back to the group as a hallmark of adaptive leadership, and recalling her experience in the theatre, St. Clair confirms the same: "More even than a captain of a team or the conductor of an orchestra, in a theatre production at some point the director has to let go and

know that the cast will make critical decisions." But the director isn't the only one who has to learn how to give the work back. There is a whole constellation of artists who are giving the work back to the group, within a system in which no one is fully in control. The playwright gives the play to the producer, who gives it to the director, and thus, St. Clair contends, the director has a sense of stewarding something. "You are not the playwright, the producer, or the actors. Something came before you and will come after you. It doesn't mean that you don't have a critical contribution to make and gifts to give. The same is true in a corporate context."

"A part of your role," she continues, "is to practice an anticipatory imagination, asking the question: 'What will be needed to get there with comfort?'" Which means, in part, attention to timing—or to what Heifetz refers to as 'pacing the work.' There is a set date for the opening night. "By the time dress rehearsal arrives," says St. Clair, "the director has given the work away, becoming an observer, taking notes, but talking about it later—becoming less 'a director' and more a coach, guide, mentor, companion, ally."

In Heifetz's terms, a director in a theatre production must exercise both the functions of authority—maintaining equilibrium within the social group—and the practice of leadership—mobilizing the social system to create a new reality. "One of the vital tasks of the director," St. Clair continues, "is to comprehend a dynamic complex of interactions." This includes appreciating the artistry of many others: set design, lighting, casting, acting, costuming, makeup, sound engineering. Each and all must create something new. While helping each part to move in a common direction, the director needs to be mindful that every part needs to be as creative as possible, honouring everyone's artistic power—and all the conflict thereof. Tough decisions have to be made, and the director (authority) must be willing to do so—jointly when possible—which means a lot of interaction and process.

In the corporate context, this concept of rehearsal and practice remained central. "Rehearsals can be a dynamic, creative time," she says, "and good directors hold back from making 'world-without-end' decisions early on so that unforeseen possibilities have room to emerge." Good directors dwell in a significant measure of ambiguity—again, that edge between the known and the unknown. "We have to play a bit—practice," says St. Clair.

Later, in the corporate context, this concept of rehearsal and practice remained central. She continually reminded her people, "Try it out. We aren't making decisions yet, we can try out 'what ifs.'" The day came when the sign on the corporate "war room" was changed to "music room." "You have to get the metaphors right," she insists. "We are trying to create something, not destroy something."

Theatre, leadership, and teaching are all communication arts requiring constructive feedback in a demanding, consultative mode. St. Clair sees parallels with jazz. "As you are playing, you are listening to one another, intuitively modulating into new possibilities, a more effective product, and a more successful organization."

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