
Arts-Based Leadership Development at the IEDC-Bled School of Management

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Abstract

Much of creative capacity, inner will and strengths are needed to transform the world into a better place. A need for creative, passionate, responsible leaders has always been present in a human society and it is in fact a call to educational institutions to assist effectively in developing such leaders.

Art and leadership have much in common. Art is a process of creating something novel and aspirational, which has capacity to touch our senses and emotions. Art stimulates our thoughts and ideas. Art challenges our beliefs and assumptions. Art connects us in a profound level, puts us in touch with our creative selves and others. Similarly, leadership is a process of connecting people to make something new and better happen to others. That contributes to business, organisations as well as societies at large. The paper seeks to show that the creative processes which underlie novel and inspirational artistic products and experiences have much in common with management development and innovative leadership.

In this article we give the background to arts and leadership development at the IEDC-Bled School of Management. We begin by situating the philosophy behind arts and leadership – that engagement with the arts provides invigorating, inspirational and reflective spaces for participants to step inside innovative creative spaces, times and activities to explore and experience leadership and its practice in action. Next we give a brief background history of arts and leadership courses at IEDC-Bled followed by grounded examples of participants' experiences of a 2009 choral conducting workshop led by Peter Hanke.

Why Arts-Based Leadership Development and Practice?

The myriad issues and problems facing leaders in the 21st century are daunting, complex, interconnected and constantly changing. The challenges of today and tomorrow require innovative approaches, new visions – creative leadership. To transform the world for the better requires creative capacity, inner will and strengths of innovative vision. There is a need for leadership which is creative, passionate, compassionate and responsible to the world around us and all that inhabit it.

As leaders struggle amidst the pressures of a globalised world it has become clear that traditional leadership and management training does not adequately prepare individuals for the dynamic challenges they face¹. Traditional forms of leadership and management

education may be obstacles to contemporary leaders as they do not cultivate holistic, socially responsible views of the world in which leaders operate.

Contemporary contexts of leadership are characterized by flux and ambiguity in which many of the taken for granted assumptions and ideologies of Western societies are changing dramatically². Serious issues such as global climate change³, peak oil and energy consumption⁴, globalisation and multi-culturalism⁵, and the exponential nature of technological growth and change⁶ all effect the climates of living and leading in the 21st century. To rise to these challenges – to develop responsible views of systems of problems⁷ which go beyond the individual, institution, region, etc. – leaders must develop new ways of seeing and acting. As Woodward and Funk have recently written, the challenge for leaders today is to re-imagine the complex realities they face and re-envision how to approach them⁸. To achieve this requires innovative thinking – creativity – and the development of creative approaches to leadership development and practice. Enter the world of the creative arts.

Processes of re-imagining and re-envisioning are driven by reflexive thinking and informed action. At the IEDC-Bled School of Management engagement with the creative arts (widely defined from the plastic to the performative) are used as key resources for leaders in creating unique places, times and structures for reflection which challenge and enliven world-views, shaping knowledge of self and others and affording new visions of leadership.

The creative processes which underlie novel and inspirational artistic products and experiences have much in common with leadership. Engagement with art has the capacity to stimulate novel thoughts and ideas, challenge our beliefs and assumptions, and connect us with the social and material worlds around us in profound ways. These artistic aspirations lie at the heart of IEDC-Bled's vision of leadership development. Leaders need to be stimulating and inspiring, they need to challenge beliefs and assumptions, they need to lead responsibly creating connections between people and the world in which they live.

Art and Leadership Development at IEDC-Bled School of Management

The IEDC-Bled School of Management began in 1986 as the first management school in Central and Eastern Europe. From the beginning the school's vision has been an aesthetic one. The school's campus, near beautiful Lake Bled in Alpine Slovenia, is designed to be an aesthetically inspiring place to work, study and reflect. The modern buildings are designed as much as art galleries as a state-of-the art educational institution. The open spaces filled with original art work and views to the surrounding town and lake are themselves inspirational. From the beginning the school incorporated cultural artistic events into the fabric of the school's professional activities. At first these events were complementary to the professional workshops and seminars with concerts, art expositions, theatre, etc. for the participants to experience and enjoy. These activities have always been seen as ways to encourage reflection in the belief that, as Edgar Schein has put it, "art and artists stimulate us to see more, hear more, and experience more of what is going on within us and around us"⁹.

Over the years IEDC-Bled came to see the arts as not just complementary to the MBA and professional development programmes of the school but as essential components. Beginning in the 1990s and continuing today internationally recognised musicians such as Miha Pogačnik (Slovenian violinist and cultural ambassador), Marko Letonja (Slovenian conductor), Peter Hanke (Danish conductor), Paul Robertson (British violinist), and a host of different vocal and instrumental ensembles have enriched the leadership development experience of IEDC participants. They have led innovative workshops on deep listening, music and team work, embodied forms of leadership, etc. Along with seminars incorporating the visual arts (recently led by Arnold Walravens) and film studies (with Haris Pašovič) participants are challenged, inspired and stimulated to develop innovative toolkits of leadership resources through aesthetic processes and awareness.

At IEDC-Bled School of Management the engagement of participants through a myriad of creative, aesthetic experiences touches them deeply. These are experiences whose comparisons and parallels to the business world, and whose reflective, provocative and inspirational outcomes, stand out and remain active in participant's minds long after the activities finish. The arts experiences of participants live on in their work lives as reflective spaces, means of self organization and metaphors for leadership styles and practices. Time and again participants in the various arts and leadership courses express the indelible marks upon their development left by these experiences. One such course is a leadership workshop on choral conducting led by Peter Hanke (Centre for Art and Leadership, Denmark).

Exceptional Contexts for Leadership Exploration: The Choral Conductor

Unforgettable experiences

In reflective papers completed by students in IEDC-Bled arts and leadership courses one finds a plethora of comments such as¹⁰:

“A course that I'll never forget is the art and leadership class...I realised how through music you can improve and maybe even become a better person.”

“All together, I'm truly grateful to be able to experience this 'Arts & Leadership' day with my colleagues, as it was a unique experience we will not forget.”

“I will never forget it and will try to implement it in my everyday life.”

What is it about arts and leadership development that has such an impact on participants? Is it the expert leadership of workshop planners and designers? Is it the unique, aesthetic surroundings of the IEDC-Bled school? Is it the time away from everyday routines to experience something different? Is it the creative art making and experiencing that participants engage with? The answer to each of these questions is 'yes'. At IEDC-Bled all these elements come together to create *exceptional* places, times and structures for participants to have creative, innovative experiences.

Key to IEDC's exceptional contexts for leadership development through the arts is the uniqueness of arts-based activities themselves. By engaging participants in activities involving artistic/creative events, activities and projects we are moving them outside the usual or normative methods of learning. As one participant said:

"It put us into a completely different situation than we normally were at school."

During arts and leadership courses, participants are engaged in situations which place them outside the habitual, outside their comfort zones – they are exceptional circumstances. Students typically view activities such as Peter Hanke's choral conducting workshop as challenging:

"I should openly admit that it was quite difficult for me to step in front of the audience and the choir."

Yet these challenges result in successful leadership development:

"It was very interesting and challenging to take the role of a conductor for a few minutes. It turned out to be a very interesting exercise, quite suitable to 'test' personal leadership style."

One of the central benefits of leadership development through the arts, such as choral conducting, is the immediacy of the experience for the participants.

Immediacy of experience

In the everyday work environment, leaders often do not experience how effective their leadership practice is in real time. However, as an exceptional context for leadership development, aesthetic experiences like choral conducting do provide immediate visible and audible feedback between leaders and followers:

"It was a great experience to feel in practice the energetic connection between the leader and the 'followers'."

"[the choir's] voices extended and lowered only by the slight movement of my hands and it was extraordinary...I could feel them depend on me."

As participants stood in front of the choir, experiencing a challenging leadership situation in the moment, they were able to see, hear and *feel* themselves leading and with the help of Peter Hanke, to evaluate the effectiveness of this practice.

Another central benefit of arts-based leadership development is how creative processes open new windows on leadership practice. The arts foster alternative ways of leading.

Alternative ways of leading

Leadership practice is dynamic, requiring a wide range of styles and actions. For example, conducting a musical ensemble, choral or otherwise, is a leadership practice reliant on non-verbal forms of communication – it is an embodied practice. Conductors avoid using verbal communication focusing rather on physical gestures, body language, forms of vocalising such as singing or humming, and various means of rhythmic communication (clapping, tapping, etc.). Many of those experiencing choral conducting for the first time extol the benefits of practicing such ‘new’ ways of leading:

“What was for me the most amazing was how people can follow you only by your contact with them via movements, energy and appearance. It was a great experience to feel how I led others.”

“The most surprising discovery for my part...was how much information can be received and transmitted through body language...reading facial expressions and giving directive signals by eye contact was as good as verbal instructions.”

These reflections echo what most participants discover, a realization that leading people happens not just through words but through embodied action. These experiences open up new ideas on communication, that leading is a dynamic communicative process involving many forms of subtle communication including words, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, etc. Participants discover for themselves that leadership is an embodied practice.

Perhaps the most powerful outcomes of leadership development through the arts are the moments of positive leadership transformation where individuals cultivate holistic, socially responsible views of leadership practice.

Leadership transformation

In addition to immediate feedback and response to leadership practice and experiencing alternate ways of leading, learning leadership through the arts opens participants’ minds and hearts to the less tangible aspects of human experience. In activities such as choral conducting participants ‘feel’ the interpersonal nature of leadership practice:

“It is a practical lesson on the invisible strings between human beings.”

Aesthetic experiences of IEDC-Bled’s arts and leadership students often lead to transformations in the very basis of their leadership approaches, approaches sensitive not just to project goals or profit margins, but to the well-being of all involved:

“I came to understand that in life and in leading people it is important to understand what people’s needs are...how important it is to give them the chance to let their voices out... Conducting made me understand leading a team is not only leading a

group of people but leading and understanding that each and every person is part of that team... you have to show them your heart, your enthusiasm, your emotion and they will follow you.”

These revelations indicate how out of arts-based leadership development emerges awareness of the subtleties of team development and leading, that leaders are not leading abstract collectives but are leading human beings who deserve respect, trust and compassion. Moreover, it places the onus on the leader to know and understand the needs of team members and to encourage and inspire fellowship through passion and enthusiasm.

Going beyond the well being of the team, these experiences bring more holistic views of self and the wider world into focus:

“For me now the purpose of leadership is to make a difference for the better – to make changes that bring results and in general to do good. This is in my opinion a very important issue for leadership especially nowadays in crisis situations. It brings up ethical and moral issues of leadership.”

This is the kind of thinking leadership development needs to be fostering. The desire for leaders to rise to their potential as responsible, self-aware, reflective human beings for whom leadership practice is, at a base level, holistic, and focused on the general good of teams, organisations and the wider world.

Closing thoughts

The value of arts-based leadership development is in the re-envisioning and re-imagining of what leadership is and how/why it is accomplished. IEDC-Bled’s continued commitment to innovative, aesthetic approaches to developing future leaders fosters reflective leadership practice to improve leadership skills and to encourage holistic leadership views which are creative and adaptive to the constantly changing challenges of the 21st century globalised world.

Arts-based approaches to leadership development are uniquely motivating and inspiring. Participants experience them as eminently memorable. They are events which are both meaningful at the time and meaningful in the future. Aesthetic experiences provide exceptional places and times for participants to do leadership work. As the reflections of the choral conducting participants show, individuals benefit from the immediacy of these experiences where they can explore alternative ways of leading, *feel* the connections between individuals, and experience in real time and space the relationships between leading and following. Such experiences can also facilitate transformative visions of leadership to seeing the higher goals and aspirations of leading people with a greater good in mind, of the social responsibility and responsiveness we need in the leaders of today and tomorrow.

Online Discussion Questions

1. Are there any other examples of innovative teaching methods for leadership development in business schools?
2. How effective are they in developing leadership skills and competencies?

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- ¹⁰ All quotes come from reflective papers submitted by students of a choral workshop led by Peter Hanke in October 2009.