

What Does Drawing My Hand Have To Do with Leadership? A Look at the Process of Leaders Becoming Artists

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What if imagination and art are not frosting at all but the fountainhead of human experience?

—Rollo May

Introduction: Leader as Artist

Many people writing about leadership today use the metaphor of the leader as artist. Abraham Zaleznik, professor emeritus of Harvard Business School, believes that “business leaders have much more in common with artists, scientists and other creative thinkers than they do with managers.”¹ Peter Vaill, Professor of human systems at George Washington University’s School of Government and Business Administration, images leadership for the future as a “performing art.”² Herman Miller Company CEO emeritus Max De Pree writes that “Leadership is an art, something to be learned over time, not simply by reading books. Leadership is more tribal than scientific, more a weaving of relationships than an amassing of detail....”³ Powerful and provocative images, but what does the leader-as-artist look like in practice? How can leaders *experience* themselves as artists in ways that can contribute to their effectiveness in a turbulent environment?

A growing number of people in management practice and leadership development have begun experimenting with different ways of bringing art into leadership development--not from the standpoint of appreciation of art but from direct involvement with it. The artist discovers a whole world through the *process* of making art, which the

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artist practices as a mode of inquiry. The leader can do the same thing. By doing it, he or she enlarges his or her perceptual universe and competency to live and create within a complex and constantly changing world system. According to Suzanne Merritt, founder of Polaroid's Creativity Lab and co-designer of the Center for Creative Leadership's *Leading Creatively* program, "Arts and aesthetics gain further validation of their contribution to society as a vehicle for rekindling the human imagination, and business becomes a place where the whole individual comes to work, with their senses and imagination intact, not just their intellect."⁴

The increasing complexity of challenges placed on leaders has led to new thinking about leadership. In an age of "permanent white water" in organizational and social life, Peter Vaill believes leaders are required who will engage the talents, imagination, and commitment of their constituents.⁵ Margaret Wheatley points out that organizations will thrive on "chaos" only to the extent of their ability to create a coherent fabric of identity through shared sense of purpose.⁶ Wilfred Drath and Charles Palus of the Center for Creative Leadership have recently suggested thinking of leadership as "meaning making in a community of practice."⁷ In other words, like art, leadership can be seen as a process, not an activity or set of practices. And, like art, in its creation of shared meaning it is inherently social. It is the aspect of leaders querying, perceiving, learning and communicating through the artist's practice, both in a program setting and at work, in both its individual and community implications, that I would like to address in this paper.

Leadership and the Art Process

In program activities at the Center for Creative Leadership, Polaroid's Creativity Lab and an increasing number of other settings, people who have not considered themselves to be "artists" nevertheless discover underdeveloped, often unsuspected capacities in themselves for engaging in artmaking as a way of connecting with the world around them and with the work they do in organizations. As a working and exhibiting artist, I have been continually delighted and amazed in several years of working with adults in organizations to find that every one of them has a capacity for creating artistically and seeing meaning

in their creations that speaks to them about their sense of purpose as leaders.

The Touchstone Exercise

In 1990, the Center for Creative Leadership launched a leadership development program called LeaderLab. In writing about the key issues that led to its design, two of its creators, Bob Burnside and Victoria Guthrie,⁸ pointed out that “being in a management position develops one’s ability to intellectualize and verbalize, but the use of other methods of expression is neglected.” To engage the “heart” (acknowledging emotions) and “feet” (taking action) along with the “head” (analytic abilities) in the learning experience, they saw a need to incorporate a number of holistic activities that had not been traditionally utilized in leadership development.

One of the art techniques developed for LeaderLab is called *the touchstone exercise*.⁹ The touchstone is a three-dimensional artwork created by the participant out of provided “found” materials; it represents her or his sense of purpose. Works created by participants have included such diverse forms as shells or rocks simply arranged on a base, elegantly composed constructions using many different materials, and exuberant kinetic wire mobiles studded with colorful gems. An unstructured, nonjudgmental environment is created wherein participants are free to employ their artistic sensibilities freely in creating their very personal touchstone. Once they have created it, they capture its meaning in their learning journal, and if they wish, verbally share its “story” with the whole participant group. They then take it home and put it in a place where, in the midst of the chaos of normal daily life, they will see it and be reminded of what is most important to them.

To illustrate how participants in this program have experienced the making of an art object and derived meaning from both the experience and the object itself, I will tell the story of one LeaderLab participant, whom I will refer to as Maury.

One Leader’s Artistic Experience

Maury is head of a business unit within a global finance institution, and at thirty-one, was the youngest person in the program which he attended. He was on a fast track in his career, a high performer whose single major problem area was interpersonal dynamics. While he was

aware of this from feedback he had received, he had never succeeded in his attempts to change his behavior.

On the day of the touchstone exercise, participants in Maury's group gathered at a large table in the center of an exercise room, which was heaped with a profusion of mostly natural, some manmade materials: twigs, bark, dried leaves, acorns, sweetgum pods, polished stones, shells, shiny papers, moss, ribbons, tree ears, small stumps, dried vines, rocks, driftwood, colored glass, sheet copper. On paper-covered worktables against the wall were glue guns, glass cutters, wire, tape, string, pliers, wire snips, scissors. Participants began to pick things from the pile—digging, reaching, discarding, exchanging, poking around.

Maury stood at the table for a long time, looking thoughtful. "Pick up anything that speaks to you about your sense of purpose in your leadership," I told him. He chose a piece of plywood in the shape of an irregular rectangle as a base for his touchstone. The rectangle was right-angled at one end, but the corners have been cut off the other end. After some more thought he picked up two clam shells. At the work table, Maury glued the two clam shells side-by-side at the right-angled end of the base. One was a medium-sized half of a shell, placed inner side up. "Open," he said, "it represents my analytic side." The other was a small, whole clam shell, only slightly open. He used a small stick to pry open it just a little further. "This is my emotional side." He returned to the table and selected a dried leaf, which he took back to the worktable and placed it so that it almost completely covered the smaller shell. "My emotional side is covered up," he said. He returned again to the table and looked intently until he found two more clam shells, of nearly equal size. These he placed side-by-side at the irregular end of the base, inner side up, saying "this is my analytic side and my emotional side, more in balance. This is where I'm coming from, all right angles and analytic, and this is where I want to go—away from all the right angles." He looked at me and added, "but there's something missing—how do I get there?" I said, "Is there a path from here to there? If so, what might it look like?"

Maury went to the table, and quickly this time, selected two more objects: a twisted piece of dried woodvine, which he broke to a selected length and a smooth, straight finger-sized twig with the bark removed. He placed the smooth twig so that it touched the side-by-side shells at the right-angled end of the base and pointed at the shells at the

opposite end. Its shortness did not permit it to touch the shells at the other end. The twisted vine he placed next to the twig on the base, and the other end reached to the shells at the other end of the base. I asked, "Does it need anything else, or are you finished now?" He responded, "It's all I can deal with emotionally right now."

When all participants had finished creating their individual touchstones, the group was reconvened. I asked if anyone was willing to share their touchstone story with the group.

After two others told their stories, Maury shared his. "This piece of plywood is me. See, it's right-angled at one end—that's where I'm coming from, very analytic and hard-edged. This big, open shell is my analytic side. No problem with that, it's well-developed and I rely on it a lot. But here, next to it is my emotional side. It's a lot smaller, only open a little way, and it's pretty well covered up. The other end of the base is not right-angled, it's irregular. These other two shells here at this end are more equal in size. They represent my analytic side and my emotional side, more in balance. That's where I want to go. But how am I going to get from here to there? There's a straight path here at the right-angled end. It's fast and smooth, but if you notice, it doesn't get me all the way to the other end. This other path, the twisty, turning one, does go all the way. It'll take me longer. It's winding and rough, but it will get me there."

That day, Maury and I sat together at the lunch table. "You know," he said, "when the staff introduced themselves the first day and here was this 'artist' who was going to be working with us—I sat there and thought, 'Geez, I need *this* garbage?' Now I think it might have been the most powerful part of the whole program for me." He later wrote to say he added to his touchstone, placing a series of pebbles along the path symbolizing the obstacles he recognizes he will meet along the path of his ongoing development.

Maury's program experience is described in a case study in Jay Conger's *Learning to Learn*. Conger interviewed Maury together with his process advisor [an executive coach who helps the participant through the six-month program period] following the program. In the session with his process advisor in the program's first week, Maury indeed experienced dramatically emotional personal insights. In a journal entry following the meeting, Maury wrote: "Using your whole self—complete with the emotional side—appears to be what I need. Why am I in a hurry?" Following the program, Conger notes, "The

danger, then, was that he would give in to feeling pressured again and revert to old behaviors. But he resisted this in several ways. In meetings at work, he was deliberately modest and low-key, which was very different for him. He delegated more. He asked people their opinions. When you're known for being fast and having the answers, that is very difficult to do."¹⁰

Behavioral change is not a simple process. The artistic experience cannot be credited with Maury's changed behavior at work, but the touchstone he created did serve to keep the insights he gained from the program experience before him. Maury has reported anecdotally that he kept his touchstone at home in a place where he could see it. His wife put it in a closet. He took it out, she returned it to the closet, he took it out again in order to keep it in his field of vision.

Evaluative comments from other participants show that many have found the touchstone helpful in assimilating program learnings and working towards their leadership goals. "My personal plan was to stop being such a lawyer. It [the touchstone] helped me be more emotional and more open, less analytical." "The touchstone was great. It helped me clarify my vision in ways that thinking, writing and verbalizing couldn't do." "The touchstone will be the most useful for me because it involves emotions as well as thought and will be a lasting, practical reminder of how to move forward and a check on where I'm going." According to Center researcher Dianne Young and Nancy M. Dixon of George Washington University, "The way the [LeaderLab] program is able to deeply personalize the action planning and artistic activities may be the key to their impact. Finding a way to connect to some deep personal meaning through the artwork and then carry that into the action planning may increase commitment and help integrate the participants' own vision with their leadership situation at work."¹¹

Leading Creatively: Engaging Aesthetic Competencies for Leadership

A practical acquaintance with the principles of artistic form and the ways of conveying meaning by way of these principles contribute therefore directly to the training of productive thinking in any field.

—Rudolf Arnheim¹²

The lessons learned from conducting the touchstone exercise, along with many other kinds of aesthetic activities, over a number of years with people with organizational roles and responsibilities made it possible to undertake with confidence a new approach to leadership and creativity in a program called *Leading Creatively*, piloted by the Center in 1995. In this program, participants spend the larger proportion of their time engaged in aesthetic activity: collage-making, drawing, music making, creative writing, dreamworking, and metaphor creation, and then relating insights derived from these activities to workplace issues. Through these activities participants engage what we have termed *aesthetic competencies*. A provisional list of these competencies includes: noticing, subtle representation, fluid perspective, using “R-mode,” personalizing work, skeptical inquiry, using the star model, serious play, portraying paradoxes, conflicts and the unknown, and facility with metaphor. Please see Palus & Horth [in this issue] for a general discussion of them. In the remainder of this paper I would like to discuss three of these competencies in terms of how LeaderLab and *Leading Creatively* participants have experienced them.

Using R-mode

In adapting methods such as Betty Edwards’ *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*¹³ for people in organizations, Suzanne Merritt recognized the potential of re-engaging the often neglected, integrative “R-mode” for helping leaders broaden their leadership competencies beyond analytic, “L-mode.” Edwards uses these designations to distinguish the differences between the modes of human left and right brain-hemisphere function, first described by Nobel Prize winning psychologist Roger W. Sperry in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Edwards characterizes R-mode as non-verbal, spatial, holistic and concrete.¹⁴ An example of R-mode skill is the ability to draw realistically. Realistic drawing involves the ability to see beyond a symbolic designation. For example, L-mode understands, and is effectively able to categorize, “apple” as round and red, with a stem at the top. R-mode is concerned with the concrete details which compose an individual object at a given moment in time: its unique shape, individual details such as a slight bruise on the skin or a pattern of dappled marks, the play of light and shadow occurring as a result of a particular set of lighting conditions, and so forth. When attempting to

draw an apple realistically, it is necessary to shift from the categorizing L-mode to the concrete, purely perceptual “R-mode.”

While every human being’s R-mode capacity is innate, it has tended to be underdeveloped in Western culture and education. When an executive draws his or her hand in a workshop for the first time prior to instruction, the drawing often reveals the age at which his or her art education stopped, often in early childhood. When given practice in the Five Perceptual Skills, identified by Edwards,¹⁵ of edges, negative space, relationships and perspective, light and shadow and the gestalt of all these taken together, his or her drawing dramatically improves in realistic quality.

Some participants incorporate drawing into their personal creative practices. One woman framed her hand drawing to hang in her office “just to remind myself I can do it,” while another participant began drawing his orchids at home in the evening during the program week and brought them to show to fellow participants, members of the same work group. Drawing his beloved flowers became another way for him to experience them, as well as a family sharing time during which he, his wife (also a participant and a member of the same company) and daughter sat together to draw. These people experienced drawing as relaxing and enhancing their quality of life.

While some participants find it relatively easy to shift to R-mode, others initially find it much more difficult. How they experienced the shift between L-mode and R-mode while drawing may bring insights into their habits of cognition as leaders. One woman said of her experience that she realized she had been fighting it, and thus made it much harder for herself. She also acknowledged the importance of this insight and what it had to teach her about her ability to “think outside the box” as a leader. Another participant asked what her hand drawing could tell her about her leadership style. Already able to draw, she had employed a confident, unhesitating line to outline her hand, but had stopped short of spending sufficient time discerning patterns of light and shadow to make it more “real.” She recognized in this her tendency to stick with methods she was comfortable with in her leadership, and to stop short of spending the necessary time to gather vital information from her organizational constituents that would help her to carry out a needed structural change in a way that could be expected to assure success over the long run. Both of these women’s insights were dependent upon widening their perceptual lens, through

the act of drawing, beyond preconceptions or habits of thought to perceptions from which they were able to derive meaning and potential direction for efforts to become more effective as leaders.

Facility with Metaphor

A key aesthetic competency for leadership is *facility with metaphor*, which Charles Palus and David Horth identify as “crucial to the construction of meaning”¹⁶ and which may be the broadest and most recognizable avenue by which meaning is transmitted from the act of artmaking to other life domains such as leading.

The touchstone exercise involves the creation, through active engagement in artistic practice and process in the laboratory setting, of new and personally meaningful metaphors that are unique to each participant’s situation. A participant in a recent LeaderLab program worked with his process advisor to create a metaphor to guide him in changing adverse behaviors he had been alerted to by feedback from people in his workplace. To express his goal of remaining calm and staying in his chair long enough to listen to subordinates rather than leaping into action and trampling all opposition, he pictured the seated figure in the Lincoln Memorial. When he created a touchstone, he used a penny to remind him of this image of calm, listening, accepting repose. He reported later that his touchstone, which he kept on his desk, was very important to him in focusing his change efforts and that this metaphor of calm guided him on a daily basis.

As described in the section above, some participants made sense of their experience of learning to realistically draw their hand by relating it to themes of “making it harder on myself” or “stopping too soon,” and drawing connections to their behavior as leaders. A participant of the Leading Creatively program reported three months after the program she attended that she used the principle of negative space,¹⁷ which she had practiced in drawings, in a *metaphorical* way which helped her to recognize the “things that were *not* happening” in her work group. As people were leaving the group, a sense of collegiality was missing, as was the open sharing of information. The same participant, metaphorically adapting another principle learned in drawing, used her journal for “proportion,” i.e., to measure her own level of “energy in dealing with organizational problems over time.”

Myths About Art and Leadership: Individual vs Collective

When the artist claims to be solitary, the artist lulls himself into a perhaps fruitful illusion, but the privilege he grants himself is not real. When he thinks he is expressing himself spontaneously, creating an original work, he is answering other past or present, actual or potential creators. Whether one knows it or not, one never walks alone along the path of creativity.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss¹⁸

I would like to say here that a prejudice has existed in our culture in this century that art must remain on a neutral high ground, not seeking to speak to community values. Artist and cultural critic Suzi Gablik challenges the arts community to recognize the implications of the cultural mythos whereby “Most artists still see art as an arena in which to pursue individual freedom and expression....The emerging new paradigm reflects a will to *participate* socially: a central aspect of new paradigm thinking involves a significant shift from *objects* to *relationships*.”¹⁹ In order for artmaking to contribute to the process of leadership as shared meaning making, not only artists but non-artists must abandon the myth of “individual expression” as being the only aim of art. Both artists and leaders are beginning to ask new questions about their relationship to the community at large, and are coming to realizations of the kind which emerged for a participant attending the Leading Creatively program, who recognized “I cannot bring a shared sense of purpose to the executive team from without. I must find a way for them to find themselves.”

The “Star Model”

Both of the programs mentioned above were designed to maximize the learning participants receive from *each other*. In LeaderLab, the touchstone storytelling becomes an opportunity for learning from a qualitatively, often startlingly, different kind of discourse from the usage that is the daily norm for most of us. Participants often share more personally than they have experienced from one another previously in the program. In the Leading Creatively program, participants share collages, drawings, stories and dreams with each other to gain what psychoanalyst Montague Ullman calls the “discovery factor.” Ullman has developed a democratic and non-

threatening approach to working with dreams in a group setting, which have been adapted (as the “Star Model”)²⁰ to working not only with dreams, but with creative products such as collages, drawings, and stories. This process emphasizes two factors: *safety* (necessary because the dreamer [or artist] “is exposing a most personal and vulnerable side of himself”) and *discovery* (the dreamer [or artist] has “to be helped to make discoveries about himself that are difficult to make alone”).²¹ Thus, the value of the product, or object of art is enhanced through its embeddedness in a shared process of meaning making. Two dreams shared in a workgroup comprising members of a chemical engineering and manufacturing team yielded images from which team members recognized potential connections with technical processes and human factors previously unconsidered in attempting to solve a product variability problem of fifteen years’ standing.²²

Conclusion

Art therapist and educator Peter London points out that, due to the impoverishment of our education in visual expression, “there are some disabling myths about what art is, how to do it, what is good art, and what art is for, that have gagged generations, depriving them of a significant and natural means of expression.”²³ Yet, the relative ease with which hundreds of participants in a leadership development “laboratory” have created objects with deeply and unexpectedly meaningful stories suggests that, like a fountainhead, artistic expression is close to the source of human experience and can be regarded as an innate capacity which has been underdeveloped and underutilized by most people in our society.

Artmaking is a process of exploration and inquiry which has the power to connect us with what is most deeply held within each of us. Not only does it connect us to ourselves, but it connects us to our environment, and to *each other* in ways that can reveal fresh insights and perspectives as well as inner touchstones that hold value over time and remain unshaken by chaotic events. Experiencing self and the world through artmaking need not be something which belongs to the domain of the trained artist alone, but may inhere in a democratization of expression through which we all come to own the artist’s practice as a human birthright.

Participants ask: "What does drawing my hand have to do with leadership?" In a rapidly changing and chaotic world, leaders must develop capacities which enable them to exceed the natural limitations of linear, analytic thinking and conceptualizing. If, as Rollo May suggests, "...imagination and art are not frosting at all, but the fountainhead of human experience,"²⁴ the experience of artmaking, because it is rooted in process, the common ground between art and leadership, can help leaders respond to turbulence with creativity.

NOTES

- ¹ Abraham Zaleznik, "Managers And Leaders: Are They Different?" *Harvard Business Review*, 70, no. 2, (1992): p.p.126-35.
- ² Peter Vaill, *Managing As A Performing Art: New Ideas For A World Of Chaotic Change*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989), p. 2.
- ³ Max De Pree, *Leadership Is An Art*. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 3.
- ⁴ Suzanne Merritt, *Ins And Outs Of Imagery* (Cambridge, MA: Polaroid Corporation, internal paper, 1994).
- ⁵ Vaill, *Managing As A Performing Art*.
- ⁶ Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992), pp. 132-37.
- ⁷ W.H. Drath & C.J. Palus, *Making Common Sense: Leadership As Meaning-Making In A Community Of Practice* (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership Report No. 156, 1994).
- ⁸ R. Burnside and V.A. Guthrie, *Training For Action: A New Approach To Executive Development* (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, Report no. 153, 1992).
- ⁹ This exercise and its impact on participants is described in Cheryl De Ciantis, *Using an Art Technique to Facilitate Leadership Development*, (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership, Report No. 166, 1995).
- ¹⁰ Jay Conger, *Learning To Lead: The Art Of Transforming Managers Into Leaders*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), p.p. 181-86.
- ¹¹ Dianne Young and Nancy Dixon, "Extending Leadership Development beyond the Classroom: Looking at Processes and Outcomes," in *Academy of Management Resource Development 1995 Conference Proceedings*, ed. E. F. Holton (Austin, Tex.: Academy of Human Resource Development, 1995).
- ¹² Rudolf Arnheim, *Thoughts On Art Education*, (Malibu, CA: The Getty Center for Education in the Arts, Occasional Paper 2, 1989).
- ¹³ B. Edwards. *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, (New York, G.P Putnam's Sons, 1989).

- ¹⁴ Ibid, p.40.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, chaps. 6, 7, 8, and 10.
- ¹⁶ See Palus & Horth, this issue.
- ¹⁷ See Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, chap. 7.
- ¹⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*, cited by Guy Davenport in *Every Force Evolves a Form*, (Berkeley, Calif.: North Point Press, 1987) p. 68.
- ¹⁹ Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment Of Art*, (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 7.
- ²⁰ Jeremy Taylor, *Dream Workshop*, Boston, 1992. For a complete discussion of practical principles for use in coaching creative activities see also Doug Lipman, *The Storytelling Coach: How To Listen, Praise, And Bring Out People's Best* (Little Rock, Ark.: August House, 1995).
- ²¹ Montague Ullman, "The Experimental Dream Group," in *The Varieties Of Dream Experience*, ed. M. Ullman & C. Limmer (New York: Continuum, 1987).
- ²² See discussion of "ABC" company, in Palus & Horth, this issue.
- ²³ Peter London, *No More Secondhand Art: Awakening The Artist Within*, (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1989).
- ²⁴ Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*, quoted in London, *No More Secondhand Art*.