

# Leadership as art: Variations on a theme

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The terms pertinent to it are ‘feeling’, ‘judgement’, ‘sense’, ‘proportion’, ‘balance’, ‘appropriateness’. It is a matter of art rather than science, and is aesthetic rather than logical.  
(Barnard, 1938: 235)

From Max Depree’s *Leadership is an Art* (1989) to Michael Jones’ *Artful Leadership* (2006) to Oba T’Shaka’s two volumes of *The Art of Leadership* (1990–1991), the rhetoric that leadership is an art is alive and well. However, with a few exceptions such as Keith Grint’s *The Arts of Leadership* (2001), the moniker ‘leadership as art’ is used rather indiscriminately, indicative of everything from ‘skillful practice’ to ‘trendy title for a book’. In this special issue we offer six articles that each work with the idea of leadership as art, not as a loose rhetorical turn, but as a starting point for some rigorous and interesting thinking.

Our impetus for generating this issue was curiosity about the consequence of taking the notion of ‘leadership as art’ seriously. How might doing so inform what we recognize as leadership? What consequences would result for the ways in which we understand the role of followers or context in leadership’s enactment? What would it imply about the ways in which leaders might be developed? Why might conceptualizing ‘leadership as art’ be important?

The six articles presented here create a surprisingly consistent argument in answer to this final question. In short, we live in a complex world, which cannot be fully understood solely by reference to scientific forms of logic and sense-making. The arts, and arts-based practices, provide different ways of both describing and relating to that complexity, thereby offering novel ways of responding to it. This possibility has been noted by a number of organizational theorists in recent years, for instance Karl Weick writes:

Consider the tools of traditional logic and rationality. Those tools presume that the world is stable, knowable, and predictable. To set aside those tools is not to give up on finding a workable way to keep moving. It is only to give up one means of direction finding that is ill-suited to the unstable, the unknowable, and the unpredictable. To drop the tools of rationality is to gain access to lightness in the form of intuitions, feelings, stories, improvisation, experience, imagination, active listening, awareness in the moment, novel words, and empathy. All of

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these nonlogical activities enable people to solve problems and enact their potential. (Weick, 2007: 15)

Writing in a similar vein, Edgar Schein encourages organizational consultants to attend to the aesthetic dimension of the systems within which they work, as well as their own aesthetic judgements of them, when he suggests:

They [consultants] need to trust their own *artistic impulse* in deciding what kind of intervention to make in a human system. There will always be more data than they can absorb, there will always be surprises, and there will never be enough predictability to determine a 'correct' course of action. Just as the artist interacts with his or her blank canvas, so the practitioner must interact with his or her client system and rely on artistic instinct to decide how to proceed. (Schein, 2005: 299)

The ideas offered in this special issue suggest that Schein's argument is as apt for 'leaders' as it is for organizational consultants. It is a perspective that makes it clear that 'leadership as art' refers to 'adaptive' rather than 'technical' leadership (Heifetz, 1994). That is to say, 'leadership as art' connotes leadership which has the purpose of taking us to places we haven't been before (Barry and Meisiek, this issue), places that inductive and deductive thinking based on 'yesterday's sense-making' (Springborg, this issue) is ill-equipped to handle. In such contexts, the leader is well advised to look to the artist, whose purpose throughout the ages has been to navigate uncharted territories and reveal the difficulties as well as the glories lurking within them.

The six articles offered here address the question of what it might mean to take the notion of 'leadership as art' seriously in distinctive and diverse ways. Taken together, however, we perceive recurring 'riffs' – 'motifs', if you will, which examined from slightly different perspectives create a rich account of the possibilities of 'leadership as art'. We introduce them here in order to signpost some of the ways in which we hope this issue can renew appreciation for leadership and the purpose it serves in our organizations and communities.

## **Motifs**

Although we trust that you will identify many more patterns and themes which interweave through the six articles, here we highlight three which seem particularly potent for their implications, not just for 'leadership as art', but for reconceptualizing 'leadership' itself more generally. They are: 'embodiment', 'holding contradictions', and 'artistic sensibilities'.

### ***Embodiment***

A motif which is apparent in all six of the articles is the importance of the embodied nature of leadership when conceptualized as 'art'. Leadership happens through the engagement and interactions of human bodies. In this way it is analogous to art itself, which even in its conceptual forms 'concretizes' (Bathurst et al., this issue) experience in a way that become material. Both art and leadership are 'experienced' through the processes by which they are created, as well as through the artefacts that they leave behind, and which can be reflected upon.

The embodied aspect of both art-making and 'leadership making' is central to the ideas Claus Springborg introduces in his piece: 'Leadership as art – Leaders coming to their senses'. Springborg highlights the importance of leaders 'staying with their senses', that is, their embodied responses and reactions to the world, rather than immediately

jumping to 'ideas' of what is happening. He distinguishes between 'sense-making' and 'description-making', and argues that in order to gain the greatest benefit from the data the world provides us, we must stay with our senses longer, the way that artists do.

Drawing upon his experience as a musician, Springborg suggests that the essence of the practice of art is in how one experiences and makes sense of the world. Artists do this in an embodied way by lingering with the perceptions received through their senses, rather than collecting data and cognitively analyzing it. Sense-making based in habitual modes of analysis tends to get fixated, returning continually to old ways of understanding the world. According to Springborg, leadership is an art when the leader avoids that fixation by continually coming back to the evidence of his or her physical senses and making sense in ways congruent with this emergent data. Furthermore, leaders as artists encourage followers to do likewise, and provide opportunities for their organizations and communities to 'stay with their senses'.

Approaching the 'embodiment' motif from a slightly different angle, Patricia Gaya Wicks and Ann Rippin's piece highlights the embodied reaction students have to creating leadership dolls in their piece: 'Art as experience: An inquiry into art and leadership using dolls and doll making'. Through the physical activity of making a doll, which represents their experience of leadership, students are able to access additional (and sometimes disturbing) aspects of leading and leadership. The concretization of their experience, which the doll-making enables, further assists students to integrate both 'light' and 'shadow' aspects of leading. In interviews conducted after the learning event, students reflect on the ways in which making the dolls enabled them to represent their experience of leading in a 'warts and all' manner that revealed the uncomfortable, uncanny aspects of leadership, along with its more heroic ones.

The ways in which creating dolls enabled their makers to represent and reflect upon both 'light' and 'shadow' leadership aspects leads to the second motif present in this collection: how both 'art' and 'leadership' require the ability to hold and work with contradictions inherent in the contexts within which artists and leaders work.

### *Holding contradictions*

Whereas Gaya Wicks and Rippin highlight the ways in which arts-based inquiry allowed participants to reflect on the inherent tensions and ambiguities of leadership, Brigitte Biehl-Missal engages with a similar theme somewhat differently in her article: 'Hero takes a fall: A lesson from theatre for leadership'. Drawing from her background in theatre studies, she re-examines the often taken-for-granted assumption that dramatic characters, such as Shakespeare's Henry V or Sophocles' Antigone, provide idealized versions of 'leaders' that more ordinary mortals might emulate. Instead, she shows how these characters are, in fact, as flawed as the rest of us, and like us are influenced by currents and histories beyond our control (or sometimes even beyond our knowing).

The extent that theatre can bring to the fore the intrinsic contradictions within which organizational and community leaders are often required to perform (such as not showing emotion at times when any normal human being would) are particularly highlighted in her examination of post-modern theatrical practices, which confront audiences with the reality of the fantasy of the 'play'. The links she draws between these approaches and the contradictions inherent within enacting leadership are challenging and unsettling, and pose the question: 'What would it take to be able to contain such paradoxes effectively?'

Containing and working with contradictions and paradox is indeed central to most artistic endeavours. Artists must develop their ability to work with both light and shadow elements of their chosen form. Doing so is a crucial capability in artistic processes, and this and other such abilities are explored through the third motif, 'developing artistic sensibilities'.

### *Developing artistic sensibilities*

Explicitly or implicitly, each of the articles assumes that art can inform leadership through helping leaders to develop and incorporate capabilities more usually associated with art or art making in their practices. The remaining three articles in the special issue do so in an especially overt manner.

For instance, writing from the perspective of leadership development at the Banff Centre, Brian Woodward and Colin Funk focus on the ways in which both artists and leaders are centrally engaged in 'meaning making' for their audiences or followers. In their article, 'Developing the artist leader', they reiterate the 'embodiment' motif by suggesting that artful leadership must be based in sensory knowing, but they extend this idea by introducing the notion that this knowing must then be formed into plausible, original narratives. They describe their hermeneutic, arts-based approach to creating generative spaces, where leaders can engage in aesthetic encounters that parallel a hero's journey.

Drawing from the musical tradition, Ralph Bathhurst, Brad Jackson, and Matt Statler focus on capacities core to the musician's practice which might helpfully be incorporated in 'artful leadership'. In their paper 'Leading aesthetically in uncertain times', they draw from the work of phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, to highlight that musicians work with presencing and concretization to read significant aspects of a context, and make wise choices about where they should concentrate attention. Another skill central to both musicians and those listening to music is the ability to hold what has been heard in the past, in order to anticipate the future and understand the present. Such 'backward reflexivity', they suggest, could be an important source of leadership sense-making. They show us how paying attention to these constructs in the way that an artist does could have produced more artful leadership in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Finally, in their article, 'The art of leadership and its fine art shadow', Daved Barry and Stefan Meisiek distinguish between the notions of 'craft' and 'fine art' to delineate the aesthetic processes aligned with each. It is not that 'fine art' leadership should supersede leadership as 'craft', they argue, but that being aware of the differences between the two, and the capacities that each requires, can help inform choices leaders make about what kinds of interventions might be most effective at certain points in time. By suggesting that craft applies a systemic skill with the end results in mind, while art aims to reach the audiences' imagination through their senses and experience; they conclude that craft is about arrivals, and art is about departures. Focusing in on this idea of art, they offer refreshing ideas about how leadership as a fine art might be expressed. A key example they use encapsulates all three of our 'motifs': Henrik Schrat's creation of a mobile is accomplished through a deeply embodied appreciation of the artist's relationship with the project, his ability to hold conflicting tensions in a way which tantalizes and unsettles assumptions, and his skill of incorporating discernment, inner listening, and holding a vision which unfolds even as it guides.

## Development

How might these ideas be developed further? In particular, what are their implications for leadership scholars, developers, or would-be leaders themselves? Firstly, the articles offered here challenge leadership scholars to attend to those aspects of leadership and leading which are not easily measured, or even defined. Rather than conducting more studies into correlations based on dubious proxies for invisible variables, 'leadership as art' suggests that leadership scholars should engage in critique more akin to art criticism, rather than relying heavily on the tools of logical positivism to analyse leadership practice. Doing so means attending to the historical context within which leadership enactments are located. It necessitates making qualitative judgements about the affective nature of leaderly interventions; as well as examining the qualitative judgements those within the leadership enactment are making. Most importantly, it would require the researchers to take account of their own aesthetic response to the aspects of leadership they are studying.

Similarly, taking the notion of 'leadership as art' seriously requires leadership developers to extend their repertoire beyond tried and tested 'toolkit' formulae, to re-imagine how they might prepare leaders to take up roles as meaning-makers and conceptual artists in their organizations and communities. It calls on them to invent learning interventions which enable leaders to 'stay with their senses', especially when they are under pressure to act or decide. They are challenged to fashion learning events that foster the capacity to hold contradictions rather than collapsing into them, to explore the shadow sides of situations for the depth they bring, and to engage with the disturbing emotions which arise when navigating uncertain territories. Probably most of all, leadership developers who want to work from an idea of 'leadership as art' must nourish and develop their own aesthetic sensibilities in order to guide their charges in ways of doing the same.

Finally, what does this all have to say to those who would take up the leader role in their organizations and communities – whether from formally sanctioned positions or in response to fleeting moments when they recognize they are the one best suited to lead the way forward? First and foremost, the articles presented here suggest that 'leadership as art' requires courage on the part of those who would lead. Truly inspirational artists always take risks in creating art which disturbs, soothes, or challenges. Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* challenged its first audience to such an extent that it was greeted with boos and hisses and the composer himself was pelted with rotting vegetables. As history shows, many artists are not recognized for their clarity of vision and power until after they have died. Perhaps these reflections provide little comfort to the leader who aspires to enact leadership artfully; however, they do point to the difficulties associated with embodying such an aspiration.

## Recapitulation and finale

In concluding, let us return to one of the key questions posed at the beginning of this editorial, 'Why is the notion of 'leadership as art' important?' Today's leaders are tasked with guiding their organizations and communities through contexts rife with complexity, ambiguity, and unknowns. There is very little that can be definitely concluded about what the optimal ways of operating might be, or indeed how we might best relate with one another and with the planet upon which our continued existence depends. The difficulties and dilemmas of our times call for answers drawn from sources beyond our technological

ones. They call for the exercise of judgement (something the arts have a lot to say about), the ability to hold conflicting priorities and difficult emotional responses (something artists have practiced throughout time), and they require the ability to connect in a meaningful way with people who are often dispersed across geographical distances and cultural milieus (without such connectivity, art's purpose is lost). Perhaps most importantly, the arts constantly reveal to us what it is to be human, in all our messiness, confusion and glory. We suggest that leaders who can similarly embrace both their own contradictions as well as that of those they would lead, are best poised to discover apt responses to the challenges of our times.

Looking across the six articles, we see a conception of what 'leadership as art' is. It is about creating new ways of understanding the world that embraces its inherent complexity. This includes the capacity to hold paradoxes, tensions and outright contradictions at the same time. It includes both the pleasant and unpleasant. It is grounded in direct sensory knowing and requires a highly developed aesthetic judgement. In this way it requires the capacity to enact balance, discernment, and sensitivity, both to the call of the future and to the needs of the present. It calls for the capacity to follow one's inner vision even when it may not be palatable to significant numbers of followers. It means drawing from both light and shadow aspects of the self and of situations, to bring depth to visions and communicate whole-heartedly with those who might follow. It is both an art in that it is about creating a departure and a craft in that it requires a discipline and skill to get to an outcome that is aesthetically pleasing.

In the end, 'leadership as art' is at once an unattainable ideal, and a guiding talisman. However, we offer it here as a vision for a form of leadership which might just rise to the challenges of being human in today's world.

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