

Incorporate Arts-Based Learning in Leadership Development

BY MICHAEL BRENNER
Art-themed activities can help reinforce leadership concepts.

CHECKLIST

Tips for Using Arts-Based Learning Effectively

- Reassure participants that arts-based learning has nothing to do with creating great art, or even good art.
- Combine arts-based learning with more familiar training methods.
- Schedule arts-based learning exercises when energy is highest. For example, in the morning or after a break.
- Determine whether your client will be receptive to arts-based learning methods.
- Allow ample time for participants to process their feelings, gently assisting or guiding when needed.
- Research how practitioners have successfully used arts-based learning in their training programs.
- Don't lose sight of what really matters. Art isn't about perfection; it's about creative expression.

Increasingly more organizations are recognizing the effectiveness of arts-based learning in developing key leadership competencies. These include the ability to intuit, think critically and holistically, see connections, and reframe problems. Although arts-based learning is not necessarily a substitute for more traditional approaches to leadership development, it can—when used skillfully—guide participants to transformative insights about themselves and their interactions with others.

What it is

Arts-based learning is defined as the use of artistic expression—including poetry, drama, dance, film, literature, music, and all forms of visual art—as a catalyst for improving business performance. It can occur in a conventional program or workshop setting, or beyond the walls of the training room (for example, a concert hall, photography studio, or museum).

Arts-based learning typically is used in two ways in the context of leadership development: parallels are drawn between the artistic process itself and leadership, and participants create art or engage with a work of art firsthand. Both can be useful depending on the objective of the initiative.

An example of the former that I've used is a video of a jazz bassist explaining how he sees his function in the full ensemble. His ideas on how the bass supports the other instruments, keeps time, and lays a foundation for the other musicians provide a unique lens through which to examine the role of organizational leaders.

As far as making art, one exercise I have done with hundreds of participants involves drawing a picture of how it feels to be in a conflict. The resulting images—almost all of which are negative—serve as a springboard for dialogue around fear of conflict and the possibility for constructive resolution.

Why it works

The participants in my doctoral research at Columbia University reported that arts-based learning fostered positive changes in their beliefs about leadership, risk taking, ambiguity, collaboration, and self-image. I suggest there are several reasons for these results:

- The arts tap into our emotions in ways that defy rationality, often leading to a heightened sense of self-awareness and introspection.
- Artists and leaders have more in common than one might think, which allows for intriguing and fruitful associations to be made between the two disciplines.
- By altering our perceptions, art can peel away illusion and assumptions to reveal the truth at the heart of an issue or subject.

- Engaging in the creative process of making art can require the application of cognitive, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills that are essential for business success.
- Art can simplify the complex, which leads to previously unseen or unimagined solutions to intractable problems.

Guidelines

Here are five recommendations for implementing and leveraging arts-based learning methods successfully in your training programs. They should be followed regardless of the activity or exercise you choose.

Manage anxiety. Although participants initially may be intrigued by the notion of engaging with art in a leadership development context, actually doing so in a roomful of peers may provoke anxiety. The trainer should emphasize that evaluating the aesthetic merits of participants' art or the validity of their interpretations is antithetical to the spirit and purpose of arts-based learning.

Trainers should acknowledge that discomfort is a normal part of the learning process and help participants work through it. If a participant becomes particularly reticent, however, she should be permitted to refrain from the exercise.

Combine techniques. Using arts-based learning methods as seasoning rather than the main dish is a prudent strategy. Allow ample opportunity for discussion and reflection on participants' engagement with art. Lectures, questionnaires, and writing in a journal also can supplement arts-based exercises.

Watch your timing. Engaging in arts-based learning can be mentally, physically, and even emotionally taxing. Trainers should pay careful

attention to scheduling so that such activities are not left to the end of the day when energy levels are at their lowest.

Assess your client. Although evidence strongly suggests that arts-based learning yields beneficial outcomes, the idea of combining art and leadership development may be viewed by some as frivolous. If you have any doubts, ask before including it in your program design.

Exhibit patience and empathy. Because much of what takes place during an arts-based learning program or exercise is felt, participants may struggle to describe their experience verbally. A brief, quiet period of reflection before a group debrief can be helpful.

Results

How will you know whether employing arts-based learning has promoted and enriched the development of your audience? One way is through participant feedback during the program.

During an exercise with pottery, one respondent said, "In working with raku, I realized that you can start off with the best of intentions and wanting to get this one goal done. You might never achieve that goal, but everything else on the side that you achieve is incredible as well." Another arts-based learning program participant said, "Often people think [leaders] should always know the answers. Part of the learning for me was allowing the process to unfold. It was neat to honor the process and see where it took you."

A second way to gauge the effectiveness of arts-based learning is to schedule a follow-up session three to six months after the program's completion (in person is preferable, but it can be a conference call or Skype session). What matters most is that

RESOURCES

Asbjörnson, K.D., and M.Y. Brenner. 2010. "Leadership is a Performing Art." *Leader to Leader*, 55:18-23.

Nissley, N. 2002. "Arts-based Learning in Management Education." In *Rethinking Management Education for the 21st Century*, edited by C. Wankel and R. DeFilippi, 27-61. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Palus, C.J., and D.M. Horth. 2002. *The Leader's Edge: Six Creative Competencies for Navigating Complex Challenges*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

VanGundy, A.B., and L. Naiman. 2007. *Orchestrating Collaboration at Work: Using Music, Improv, Storytelling, and Other Arts to Improve Teamwork*. Charleston, SC: Book-Surge Publishing.

participants have an opportunity to discuss the application of their learning and share best practices with their colleagues. I have found such follow-up sessions valuable in reinforcing learning and addressing ongoing challenges.

Arts-based learning can be a productive and rewarding approach to leadership development. Don't be afraid to explore the possibilities.

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