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THE ART OF BUSINESS

Ralph Kerle looks for creativity in business, and finds a course that teaches business people how to think like artists.

In March 2006, the Business Council of Australia released a paper entitled "New Concepts in Innovation" that contained several important insights for the development of business in Australia, the prime one being that business recognised innovation activity occurred across all parts of business at all levels and through a wide variety of functions, not primarily in the science and technology area.

The report found Australian businesses view innovation as being transformational rather than inventive or technologically-driven and human capital is crucial to the facilitation of this continual transformation.

Therefore, a vital priority for Australia, the report suggested, is the training of a highly skilled workforce, a motivated and well-educated management and the development of a strong corporate leadership devoted to delivering a culture of creativity and innovation.

Education and training systems need to focus on not only the development of strong technical and applied capabilities but employability skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, ongoing learning, cultural understanding and leadership – in other words "creative thinking skills".

Based on research completed in 2005, there are only three Australian business management schools offering any form of graduate study in creativity and innovation. Indeed, a professor at one business school was heard to remark, "We take these rich creative young talents and in three or four years have squeezed every bit of creativity out of them." Off-handed as this sentiment was at the time, it contains more than an element of truth.

Compare this to the US where all top-ten business universities in the US include formal courses in studies of applied creativity and innovation. It is now harder to get into the graduate program at the UCLA Department of Fine Art than into Harvard Business School and 61% of McKinsey's new hires are MFA as opposed to MBA. US corporations now see business degrees as second in importance to arts degrees.

Two years ago Copenhagen Business School appointed an artistic director and has a Centre for Arts and Leadership and the Business School at Harvard University will be offering its first senior executive open program exploring arts-based processes and their application to business in February 2007.

Why this current interest in creativity in business?

Senior executives and managers operate daily in a complex and chaotic ecology where their very survival and personal identity is tied up in using their imagination to create future directions or in improvising knowledgeable answers to current problems.

The creative improvisational and problem solving skills used to deal with these concerns have almost without exception to date been developed through the iterative processes of organisational life or in the case of independent consultants on the job experience rather than in any academic or formal training environment.

In this sense, a senior executive, manager or consultant is operating in the domain of the artist.

Executives use their tacit knowledge unknowingly in the same way artists do knowingly.

WORK PRACTICE OF AN ARTIST

The artist asks himself every day he turns up to work in front of a blank canvas, a blank sheet of paper, or rehearsal room: What is the problem to be solved? How can I solve this problem? And he works at it until the immediate problem is defined and solved. He then reflects on the overall value and quality of his work before proceeding to the next stage, and so on. It is an endlessly reflective process. This is why art and philosophy are closely linked.

Artists generally commence their training by exploring the methods of the masters in their field of endeavour - whether playwrights, visual or multi-media artists, musicians or whatever - and develop their own practical improvisations on their peers' methods to inform their own imagination and practice, very much like an apprenticeship system.

The artist's value is built on creative experience, his ability to be able to make sense of what he is producing through improvisation, iteration, implementation, dialogues, collaborations, reflections, and pattern-seeking while never having full control of his working output.

And yet, paradoxically, the artist invariably knows at what point the work is completed and how to speak about the value of this work—that is, its meaning and purpose.

In the business setting, the CEO and the team are presented daily with a set of problems in a complex and chaotic environ-

ment; they seek advice in whatever manner they feel is appropriate. They seek and assess to the best of their ability and knowledge solutions using techniques that reflect in content, application and meaning the world of the artist - although with different nomenclatures such as research, planning, visualising, report writing, work shopping and scenario planning - and make a decision to act.

The important understanding here is that executives and managers use their tacit knowledge unknowingly in most instances in exactly the same way artists do knowingly.

And there is an emerging body of work internationally that recognises the importance and acceptance of arts-based processes and creative thinking skills training that enables the surfacing of this way of thinking about working for senior executives and managers, not only in businesses but in all forms of organisations.

ART IN BANFF

I recently spent some time as innovation coach in the Banff Centre of the Arts, Canada's leadership development program, currently considered the world's leader in the development and design of executive residential programs based around these methodologies. I was able to interact with senior executives from some of North America's major corporations while they explored new ways of thinking about specific business opportunities and problems through immersing themselves in an action-based learning environment dominated by creative facilitators drawn entirely from the arts community.

Delegates on "Leading Change Through Innovation", one of the nine arts-based leadership development programs offered by the Banff Centre, were asked as preparation to bring specific business issues they wished to find solutions to with their fellow delegates and the artist facilitators. The business problems they brought were powerful and substantial.

The president of the National Library Association of Canada wished to redefine the role and value of libraries in contemporary society. The director of emergency services of one of the largest energy producers in the world needed to establish a national prioritisation system for the production of energy in Western Canada in the event of a catastrophe. Two senior executives from one of Canada's major freight institutions needed to find new ways of dealing with a small group of intransigent unions inside their distribution system who were severely hampering their ability to compete in a deregulated market. And in a conflict between ancient and modern civilisations, the general manager of one of Canada's largest diamond mining companies, an indigenous Canadian, was being confronted by land-rights issues that involved his own tribe and was being forced to negotiate with his Council of Elders led by his father, who was demanding more royalties or no mining.

The program was five days in length and had two leaders: a

facilitator who is an experienced corporate psychologist who provides behavioural theory and supporting case studies of the successful application of creativity and innovation in organisations, and an innovation coach whose role is to mentor each participant as they gain insights or epiphanies during the week and to guide and reflect these epiphanies back into the participant's own lives or work place. The value of both a psychologist and innovation coach is that they offer a safe and secure place for this exposing and unpredictable journey.

The content is divided into daily themes that have a logical sequence in providing a theoretical explanation of how creativity and innovation work hand in hand. Day one is devoted to

creating restorative space through uncluttering the mind; day two - invoking the imagination; day three - testing and championing ideas; day four - evaluating and implementing ideas and bringing them to life. Day five has the participants make presentations using arts based processes and methodologies on the solutions they have reached to their real life work problems.

The week begins with an outdoor theatre experience, an adaptation of Michael Gelb's book "How to Think Like Leonardo Da Vinci" in which Leonardo Da Vinci introduces the audience to his guiding principles for the development of creative capabilities: "Curiosita" - an insatiably curious approach to life and an unrelenting quest for continuous learning; "Dimostrazione" - a commitment to test



knowledge through experience, persistence and a willingness to learn; "Sensazione" - a continual refinement of the senses, especially sight, as the means to enliven experience; "Sfumato" (literally "going up in smoke") - a willingness to embrace ambiguity, paradox and uncertainty; "Arte/Scienza" - the development of the balance between science and art, logic and imagination (whole brain thinking); "Corporalita" - the cultivation of grace, ambidexterity, fitness and poise; and last but by no means least "Connessione" - a recognition and appreciation for the interconnectedness of all things phenomena, or systems thinking.

The direction of the performances in this play is not about actors giving sterling virtuoso performances - although some do - but about the need to engage the audience in the text and its meaning. The intended effect is to provide the delegates with a human link to the senses they will be exploring in the coming five days.

The facilitator completes the introductory event by inviting the delegates to choose one of the guiding principles that they have an interest in and to engage in a reflective dialogue with the actor that played that particular principle. The actors discourse on the personal experiences they had in researching the sense they played and in so doing bring delegates' own reactions to those senses to the surface. When was the last time you had a learning conversation around senses and emotions is the question that is being posed.

Daily content is structured around the whole brain thinking paradigm.

Each day's program commences with "mind gym", a playful workshop that operates on the theory that the brain is a muscle that requires regular daily exercise like any other muscle. The workshops are made up of a series of 30 minute exercises that use theatrical improvisational and simple creativity tools to explore mental energy and focus, imagination and thinking in the moment.

The morning content concentrates on the rational through a series of traditional PowerPoint presentations, accompanied by video case studies and behavioural measuring instruments that are used to assist delegates understand their style and behaviour in regard to creativity.

Reflective dialogue is a vital part of the program's learning experience and the skill of the facilitator is to keep this reflective dialogue alive and flowing during the exploration of the content. What is it you have learnt or are experiencing that is unfamiliar is the question being asked continually.

It is through this questioning in these sessions that the delegates' own voice rather than the voice of the corporation emerges. This freeing voice paradoxically creates uncertainty. Executives in the work place are generally not used to or confident in sharing tacit knowledge for fear of failure. Experimentation, doubt and failure are all part of the artist's domain and here these options are freely explored.

The afternoon content presented by creative facilitators drawn from arts disciplines such as ceramics, visual arts, music and theatre offers the right brain perspective. The fundamentals of the processes of the art forms are quickly explained to the delegates who through a series of very simple exercises are encouraged to work with them.

With ceramics, the delegates commence by playing with clay and shaping animals. This moves quickly into shaping a problem they are experiencing within the workplace. Delegates, now in teams of three, comment on the design of each other's shapes. These conversations, observations and associations provide indirect education on their work problems.

A grand piano on the stage of a 1000 seat theatre is the backdrop for a music exploration entitled "the eight keys of the artistry of leadership". The pianist plays three pieces that are his own compositions and asks delegates to share firstly the images they visualised, the emotions they felt and then the combination of the two. A facilitated conversation around emotions softly starts to unravel and finishes with a gush of tears and smiles of shared moments and epiphanies.

A creative writing component shows delegates how they can be freed from the shackles of traditional report writing to surface new ideas and insights. A question surrounding a business issue is raised followed by a series of three 10-minute writing rushes where the only rules are that there must be no punctuation or capitals used and the hand must not leave the paper.

An ecologist takes the delegates on a three hour walk through the beautiful Lake Louise deep in the Jasper National Park narrating as the delegates walk the story of the complex systems of the ecology of nature and its direct correlation with that of the ecology of capital.

I run a three hour theatrical improvisation workshop that explores status and how it can affect either positively or negatively any transaction in the work place. The participants first improvise around a four line script to "feel" status and then participate in role plays around real life problems.

The evening brings the right and left brain thinking together as delegates work in teams exploring a business challenge using both the theory and practice they have been exposed to in the previous sessions.

APPLIED TO WORK

So how are these processes applied in the workplace and what if any is their value – or is this just another management fad?

In an immediate post-program evaluation, the most common comments highlighted the value of personal insight and epiphanies in thinking processes. Delegates stated they had rarely if ever been exposed to arts-based processes and creative thinking skills and the power these new thinking paradigms offered them were rich in new associations and new ways of looking at old problems.

A senior telecommunications executive was able to draw an analogy between the execution of the tasks carried out by a theatrical stage manager managing a play to an on-line engineer launching and installing a new communications network in a new suburb. Both had a role to oversee and support live action and to be able to improvise quickly should anything untoward occur. The processes and tools used by a theatrical stage manager enabled the executive to rethink how on-line engineers might be trained to operate far more effectively.

A senior project manager in the electronics industry, through the use of visualisation techniques, had been able to show a decrease in delivery and installation times of the end product to clients from 18 months to nine months and a subsequent saving of around \$3 million. He had recognised the value of graphic visualisation to surface and solve problems collectively rapidly.

He had established a "visualisation room" around four walls of whiteboards, old fashioned colour markers and a wireless communication system and staffed it with a cross disciplinary team who captured problems as they occurred in the logistics and supply channels. As problems occurred, the team visualised them on the spot rather than have them remain lost in a morass of emails, came to a conclusion as to how the problem might be solved – most often graphically – and then applied the solution.

Aside from the financial savings the cross disciplinary team and

New thinking paradigms were rich in new ways of looking at old problems.

the visualisation process achieved, the unknowable emergent outcome was the movement of the culture within the organisation from one of a functional problem-solving operation that existed in silos to an organisation that now viewed a singular problem holistically, that moved all its expertise and resources together to design a solution that all components of the organisation could support exactly the same way a theatrical set designer adapts his creative effort to support the entire theatrical production!

The most interesting response was from a senior engineering executive who had attended five leadership development programs over the last five years and had had a rapid rise in one of Canada's major industrial corporations. When asked what he had learnt in this course, his response was a firm "nothing." When asked to elaborate, he stated simply he had now learnt to think like "us" – like an artist. The reason why he came back was because he needed, like all good artists, to continue to evolve creatively! ■

Ralph Kerle is a "creative strategist" and CEO of the Creative Leadership Forum.