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The Business School Beat

## **Teaching Business Leadership As Fine Art**

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**Seeing the company as blank canvas, and the executive as would-be creative genius.**



Matt Symonds



Nancy Adler

Thirty years ago top business schools had a simple philosophy about how to teach students good business leadership. All you had to do was examine how the people who ran successful companies went about dealing with problems and opportunities, and then follow their examples.

After a while, however, that became a little dull, and some enterprising academics decided to spice things up by using people from other fields as role models. After all, they argued, isn't

leading an army or building a political empire a bit like guiding a company through the cut and thrust of modern business? Couldn't we also learn something from politicians, philosophers and social scientists? And if from them, why not from artists?

Historically business people have often seen artists as dreamers you would only take seriously once you'd made your pile and needed something for the boardroom or the Hamptons mansion. But no less than Warren Buffett has commented, "I am not a businessman, I am an artist." Now the work of painters, musicians and actors is coming under the microscope at major business schools around the globe.

IEDC Bled School of Management in Slovenia, reckoned by Peter Drucker to be the best management school in the world, has perhaps the greatest current commitment to artistic processes as a part of its executive and M.B.A. curricula, including a full week of arts-based leadership education in its executive M.B.A. program.

In the M.B.A. program at Warwick Business School in England, students learn to express themselves more effectively by taking a theater course that involves the nearby Royal Shakespeare Company. And in Germany the Berlin-based ESMT school uses the career of the conductor Daniel Barenboim to teach unconventional leadership styles.

However, perhaps the most imaginative advocate of the use of art in developing future business leaders is Nancy Adler, on the Desautels faculty of McGill University in Canada. By day Dr. Adler teaches M.B.A. students and advises major international corporations on cross-cultural management issues, but she also has been, for decades, one of the country's most highly respected watercolorists. "For quite a while I didn't flag my second career to students or clients, because of the longstanding antipathy between art and commerce," she admits. "Artists view business people as Philistines, and they in turn think of artists as a bit flaky. But if you look at the two sides objectively you will realize that creating a great work or a creating great business call for very similar qualities."

Adler's latest exhibition, "Reality in Translation," has been made a cornerstone of the Academy of Management's 2010 conference. It invites visitors to capture on canvas an image of what it is to lead beautifully. "With only five to 10 minutes to draw, business executives and students alike quickly untangle their brains and just get going," she explains. "By going beyond the dehydrated language of management, you tap into far more creative expression and diversity." Not that Adler is advocating that a company's next quarterly call to analysts be done with crayons. Perhaps creative accounting has already done enough.

She believes, though, that 21st-century leadership should be based more on hope, aspiration, innovation and beauty than on the replication of historical patterns. "For the first time in history," she contends, "leaders can work backward from their aspirations and

imagination rather than forward from the past. The gap between what people can imagine and what they can accomplish has never been smaller."

McGill-Desautels is already home to the "Reflective Process," an integral component of the school's executive training and M.B.A. programs inspired by the learning philosophy of Desautels professor Henry Mintzberg. Weekly sessions encourage students to reflect on their own learning experiences and develop their own perspectives on leadership, using periods of reflection to ensure that their decisions are made mindfully, responsibly and ultimately successfully.

A commitment to artistic creation has generally been more the province of artists than of businessmen, but Adler believes that effective business leaders and successful artists have three skill sets in common: abilities to see reality as it is, to imagine possibilities on the basis of that straight seeing and to inspire others to see both reality and possibility.

She argues that following the example of artists can help inspire commercial leaders to achieve their full potential. "Painters approach a blank canvas with the desire to produce something of high quality, but all too often in the commercial world people will settle for just good enough. I don't see why the artist's focus on achieving the very best can't be replicated in business."

So how does she put this into practice? She gets to work with some of the world's best known companies, thanks to her professional credentials and track record, and she believes that her second career as a painter allows her to use art as a catalyst for more effective thinking among those clients.

She gives the example of a multinational corporation faced with the problem of integrating acquisitions across Asia and the Americas into a global strategy. She encouraged the senior management team there to develop a new approach by taking them to an exhibition of Cubist paintings, a style of art that forces the viewer to look at the world from a very different perspective. "Of course art doesn't serve up answers to specific business problems on a plate," she says. "But what it can do is get you to step back, reflect and come up with your own solutions, solutions that are often beyond the constraints of accepted practice."

Perhaps Peter Drucker, Michael Porter and Tom Peters should be nervously looking over their shoulders. When it comes to the management guru business, the likes of Picasso, Monet and da Vinci could be the faces of the future.

*Matt Symonds is founder of SymondsGSB and a guest lecturer at business schools on inspiring leadership through storytelling. You can follow more of his business education coverage on Twitter and on his blog.*

[http://www.forbes.com/2010/10/22/business-school-fine-arts-leadership-careers-education\\_2.html](http://www.forbes.com/2010/10/22/business-school-fine-arts-leadership-careers-education_2.html) or <http://bit.ly/9tTmJt>