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### **What Art Offers Leadership: Looking Beneath the Surface**

"If you have the idea that an artist is not a decidedly practical person, get over it"  
Robert Henri (1923, p. 190).

Imagine a meeting in the U.S. president's office. An urgent situation has arisen. The President has called in expert advisers to help assess the situation and figure out how to respond. Clustered in the Oval Office with serious expressions tautening their faces are trusted legal advisers, economic advisers, political advisers, and military advisers. Privately, before the meeting, the President sought religious counsel.

Who is missing from the above scenario?

Artists are missing. The president's team of expert advisers does not include artists. Few leaders turn to artists for advice in responding to situations that arise in their communities and organizations. Society tends to value artists for the objects and entertainment they create; not for the knowledge and experience they have gained through the process of creating art. The practice of art is generally considered irrelevant in solving 'real world' problems and artists are not known for their practicality.

Today humanity is facing life-threatening situations: climate change, pollution, terrorism, economic instability, religious conflict, food insecurity, water shortages. These situations are not entirely amenable to political, economic, and military solutions. They require creative solutions. It seems that artists could be a valuable resource in developing creative solutions.

In 2009, Michael Kaiser, President of the Kennedy Center in New York City, toured the United States speaking with leaders of arts organizations about how to survive the economic crisis and drastically reduced funding for the arts. The thrust of his message was we need to be much clearer about the value of what art offers.

The question is not only how can we get the world to see more clearly the value of what art offers. The question is also how can artists themselves recognize the value and relevance of their knowledge and experience with respect to the challenging situations facing humanity.

### **The Flow Project**

A few years ago three artists were sitting around a kitchen table wondering how they could help resolve the difficult situations facing humanity. The artists wanted to contribute, but they were not sure what they had to offer. How could artists make a meaningful contribution to solving world problems, beyond the traditional role of art in providing humanity with a means of soul-searching and self-reflection?

After several kitchen table conversations, which included experiential thought processes with crayons and pastels, the artists began to sense an emerging possibility. They realized leaders listen to economists who explain the principles of economics and economic forces that shape the world, and leaders listen to political strategists who help them understand the political forces at work in various situations. Leaders would not imagine addressing a complex situation without awareness of the political forces at work. To artists the world of art is just as real as the world of economics or the world of politics. The question that came to the artists is “How can we get leaders to understand the principles of art and the artistic-creative forces that shape the world?” On some level they felt intuitively that leaders need to understand the principles of art and artistic-creative forces to generate creative solutions to the situations we face today. In other words, they felt leaders need to learn to ‘think like artists’.

After sitting with the question for awhile, one of the artists originated a simple plan. Basically, it involves engaging artists in a deep inquiry to identify principles of art and artistic

practices common to the artistic experience across mediums, working with well-positioned allies in the field of leadership education to translate the principles of art into principles of leadership and leadership practices, and presenting the offering to the global community.

The plan was implemented and The Flow Project was established as a non-profit corporation in 2008. The Flow Project mission is to give leaders access to knowledge and experience that artists possess and give artists recognition for the value of their knowledge and experience. The Flow Project is centered in Bellingham, Washington, USA, but artists and leadership educators beyond Bellingham are participating.

While the inspiration for The Flow Project originated in the arts community, the justification comes from within the field of leadership. In his foreword to Otto Scharmer's *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*, Peter Senge suggests "the key to addressing the multiple unfolding crises of our time" lies in learning how to access "knowledge deeply imbedded in the creative arts" and artistic mastery (2007, p. xi). The World Commission on Culture and Development report "Our Creative Diversity", issued by UNESCO, states, "The notion of creativity can no longer be restricted to the arts. It must be applied across the full spectrum of human problem-solving" ([www.unesco.org/culture-and\\_development/ocd/intro.html](http://www.unesco.org/culture-and_development/ocd/intro.html), 1995). In "Social Creativity as an Heroic Path in World Crisis", Michael Ray notes, "The world is in crisis—filled with danger and opportunity. The danger is the end of our existence. The opportunity is for a new kind of creativity, a co-creation based on a new level of consciousness. We have to get into the flow of the process of the world as it is transformed" (1999, p. 296).

The name for The Flow Project was chosen on the basis of multiple meanings. In geology, *flow* refers to the ability to transform under pressure without breaking apart. In art, *flow*

means the work has smooth continuity; it flows. *Flow* also refers to the state artists are in when they are creating works of art, sometimes described as being in the “zone” or “groove”. In leadership and organizational development, the flow state is generally called “alignment” and it occurs when the members of a group are working with a sense of common purpose and shared vision. In *Synchronicity: The inner path of leadership*, Joseph Jaworski observes that alignment “happens when people in a group actually start to function as a whole” (1998, p. 6). In *The managerial moment of truth*, Bruce Bodaken and Robert Fritz explain, “Alignment is a requisite for the organization. Without it, managers pull in different directions. With it, managers have an overall organizing principle that motivates them to pull together” (2006, p. 147). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has produced the most thorough analysis of the flow state. He notes the flow state occurs when “everyone is investing psychic energy in a joint goal” (1997, p. 112). Further, Csikszentmihalyi observes “It is the full involvement of flow, rather than happiness, that makes for excellence in life” (p. 32).

Underlying The Flow Project is the idea that artists have knowledge and experience which can be applied in creating organizations and communities that operate in the flow mode. Resolving the life-threatening situations humanity faces in the world today requires concerted action undertaken with a sense of common purpose and shared vision. The Flow Project offers theory and practical techniques that can be used to attain alignment in organizations, institutions, systems, and the global community.

The work of The Flow Project has attracted strong supporters, including board members, volunteer staff, dozens of artists who are engaged in the artist inquiry, well-positioned allies in the field of leadership education, university students doing related research, and international advisers on different continents. The Flow Project is scalable; meaning from a small beginning in

Bellingham the artist inquiry can continue to expand to other locations as interest grows. In addition, the principles and practices of art that have been identified and applied are proving useful in producing the flow state in large scale organizations as well as small scale operations. The work began locally but it is attracting interest nationally and internationally.

### **Principles of Art that Apply to Leadership**

“One can explain the development of human culture only by understanding the process of creating a work of art” (Lewis Mumford, 1956, p. 13).

Changes in global culture, developments in the world of ideas, and the transformation of consciousness are forcing leaders to redefine their roles, learn new skills, and develop new capacities.

Globalization and the internet have transformed global culture, producing a global community with economic ties and a communication ‘grapevine’ that provides immediate feedback and information sharing worldwide. With the increasing interconnectedness and the sense of living in ‘closer quarters’, we are becoming increasingly sensitive to our religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity. The wider and deeper exposure to our common humanity and the growing familiarity are forcing leaders to learn to act in the common interest while simultaneously advancing the interests of their separate organizations and communities. Leaders must learn how to foster the identities of their separate nations, organizations, and groups while simultaneously fostering and supporting the emergence of a global identity. Understanding the principles of art may give leaders such know-how.

In the world of ideas, the advent of systems thinking—thinking in terms of the whole system—and the idea of self-organization undermine the hierarchical notion that leaders must remain ‘in control’ and ‘on top’ of situations. Margaret Wheatley observes, “Self-organizing

systems have the capacity to create for themselves the aspects of organization that we thought leaders had to provide” (2005, p. 26). Today leaders are asking: If organizations, communities, and the dynamic of culture are *self-organizing* what is the role of leaders? Further, if leaders let-go of the idea of ‘being in control’, how do we get past the fear of ‘losing control’ of situations and the fear of people being ‘out of control’. Leaders need insight into how to lead humanity into a world beyond fear, which the experience of art may provide.

The global transformation of consciousness, from the consciousness of isolation and separation to the consciousness of transpersonal interconnectedness and interrelatedness, has created a problem for leadership. Becoming conscious of the ways in which our actions affect the whole system has brought home the realization that we must collectively change our ways, and leaders are at the forefront in figuring out how to accomplish the necessary adjustments. Further, the systemic structures (organizations, institutions, governments) that support the activity of the global community are still geared to the old mentality of separation. The systemic structures need to be re-structured to accommodate the new mode of operation based on the consciousness of connection. Here, The Flow Project participants believe art-based leadership practices and strategies can greatly assist with leadership for transformation.

Specific things that art offers leadership include:

**Seeing new possibilities.** Robin Pogrebin of *The New York Times* quotes Jim Leach, Director of the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities, “Our culture is shaped by the arts and humanities often more than it is by politics. And in difficult times the arts, sciences, and humanities vastly increase in significance. And this is one of those times” (Pogrebin, 2009). Theater director Anne Bogart adds, “The arts are most indispensable in the midst of cultural, political, and scientific paradigm shifts. It is at these moments that risk, innovation, expression,

and dramatic leaps of imagination are critical and necessary” (2007, p. 112). Poet T.S. Eliot observes, “Art serves us best precisely at that point where it can shift our sense of what is possible (quoted in Bogart, 2007, p. 121). The thinking of Leach, Bogart, and Eliot is linked to what Sharon Daloz Parks, a leadership educator and ally of The Flow Project, holds as a major contribution of artists: artists can “assist us in seeing the connections among things and in building a systemic awareness—a larger consciousness that helps the group to find the room in which to move to a new place” (2005, p. 224).

**Feeling comfortable letting-go.** Leaders are sensing the need to cease being controlling. Joseph Jaworski observes “if we are to participate in the unfolding process of the universe, we must let life *flow* through us, rather than attempt to *control* life” (1998, p. 44). Artists can help leaders understand how to let-go and find the ‘right balance’. Novelist Madeline L’Engle observes, “In the act of creativity, the artist lets go of self-control which he normally clings to, and is open to riding the wind” (cited in Matanovic, 1985, p. 91). Bogart adds, “If your work is too controlled, it has no life. If it is too chaotic, no one can see or hear it” (2001, p. 132).

**Developing a sense of common purpose and shared meaning.** Leaders realize a sense of common purpose is crucial for organizational vitality and community cohesion. Jon Hawkes explains, “a shared sense of meaning and purpose is the single attitude most strongly associated with community well being” (2004, p. 13) and a “society makes (or discovers) meaning through its arts” (p. 24). Kouzes and Posner observe that leaders enunciate “the meaning and significance of the organization’s work so that people understand their own important role in creating it” and transformational leadership requires a “communion of purpose” (2002, p. 152-153). John Kotter observes the “biggest payoff” in transforming organizations and making change happen occurs when we “act in concert with others” (2005, p. 134).

**Developing unity without eroding diversity.** Art exemplifies an integrative function. Christopher Alexander explains, “A work of art has life more or less to the extent that *every* single one of its component parts and spaces is whole, well-shaped and positive” (2002, p. 173). Robert Kaupelis observes a drawing or painting “works” when “it’s composed, it has structure; it makes a statement; it’s unified; it’s well-organized; it’s harmonious throughout; it’s well-designed; there’s a total integration of parts; nothing is superfluous; everything holds together” (1980, p. 39).

**Instilling a sense of order in the global community instead of disorder.** Looking through the lens of art can help leaders see the existence of order in the world. Henri notes, “Art is the noting of the existence of order throughout the world” (1923, p. 144). Oscar Kokoschka echoes: the task of the artist is to “organize the chaos of the visible world in patterns from which some meaning can emerge” (cited in Roditi, 1980, p. 86), which relates to Wheatley’s observation that emergent patterns in self-organizing systems reveal the existence of underlying order based on shared meaning and purpose (2005).

**Appreciating the value of resistance.** Leaders often encounter resistance to their initiatives. Artists can help leaders appreciate the creative value of resistance. In art, resistance generates energy that fuels the creative process, and working through resistance serves to deepen the experience of meaning. Bogart observes,

The opposition between a force pushing towards action and another force holding back is translated into visible and feel-able energy in space and time. This struggle with the obstacle in turn induces discord and imbalance. The attempt to restore harmony from this agitated state generates yet more energy. This battle is, in itself, the creative act (2001, p. 148).



McNiff adds, “The difficulties are always the most important ingredients in the total picture of a creative experience” (1998a, p. 13).

**Seeing beneath the surface.** Leaders pay attention to undercurrents in their organizations and they seek hidden opportunities. Artists can help leaders detect the deepest undercurrents in the dynamic of contemporary culture. Stanley Kunitz notes “poetry explores depths of thought and feeling that civilization requires for its survival” (in Moyers, 1999, p. 41).

**Identifying design features required to create a world where human affairs flow.**

From the artist’s perspective, the goal of art is not necessarily the created product. Rather, Henri explains, “The goal back of every work of art is the attainment of a state of being, a state of high functioning, a more than ordinary moment of existence” (1923, p. 159). Abraham Maslow calls the state of being “peak experience” (1970) and Csikszentmihalyi calls it “flow” (1996, 1997). Keith Sawyer, a student of Csikszentmihalyi, identifies ten “conditions” or design features of organizations, teams, and groups that operate in the flow mode: 1) a common goal focuses the group activity, yet the goal must be “open-ended enough” for “creativity to emerge”; 2) there is “deep listening” to what is emerging; 3) the work environment allows the group to concentrate “on the natural progress emerging from members’ work, not on meeting a deadline set by management”; 4) the “participants feel in control” yet are “willing to defer to the emergent flow” of the group process; 5) the group members are able to “submerge their egos to the group mind, to balance their own voices with deep listening”; 6) all participants “play equal roles in the collective creation process”; 7) the participants have developed a level of familiarity and have practice working together; ) 8) there is the opportunity for spontaneous communication and 9) the opportunity to build on what others have created; and 10) every activity is treated as a learning experience (2007, pp. 39-57). Barbara Marx Hubbard adds,

When we are in the flow there is a feeling of being organized by the deeper pattern rather than by having to make things happen by will and linear planning alone. ... There is a sense of effortless although everyone is working very hard” (1998, p. 155).

Noting how some of these features are present and some are missing in the world today, purposefully instituting the features where possible, and recognizing the challenges humanity faces in transitioning to the flow state will give global community leaders guidance in creating systems, organizations, and communities that accommodate the new state of being.

The Flow Project believes artists have knowledge and experience, in these and other areas, which leaders need in order to create organizations and communities that run smoothly. At the very least, we feel the urgent need for creative solutions to the life-threatening situations the global community is facing warrants exploration of the ways that art can inform leadership.

### **Structure of the Flow Inquiry: A Multi-phase Approach to Artists’ Knowing**

“Artists can respond to the issues that confront us culturally and take them to a deeper level of consciousness, where the challenge is not polarized, but is resolved internally. Works that come from such a transmutation do not simply mirror or magnify the challenges, but demonstrate the solution” (Matanovic, 1985, p. 199).

An objective of the Flow Project is that leaders should seek knowledge artists possess. For many artists, the knowledge is second nature and instinctual and has never been articulated. Thus, the process of accessing and verbalizing the knowledge is a process of self-discovery and self-recognition for the artists, as well as for leaders who benefit from the artists’ way of knowing.

In crafting the artist inquiry, the Flow Process Team (persons who have accepted responsibility for the data collection and processing) has developed a systematic approach with enough built-in controls to make the results useful, an approach that meets rigorous standards of

academic excellence while permitting the artists to participate as full partners in shaping and directing the inquiry. Artists are acknowledged as the experts; the success of the inquiry depends on them to help identify and clarify the questions that need to be asked in order to access their knowledge. Further, as the artists need to stay within their comfort zone to feel comfortable sharing their knowledge and experience, they are the arbiters when they feel the inquiry is drifting too far in the direction of lifeless abstraction or reductionism.

The Flow Process Team settled on a methodological structure for the inquiry that allows an emergent line of questioning to develop, rather than pre-determining where the inquiry will lead with preset questions. In *Art-based Research*, Shaun McNiff explains, “Since the fruits of the creative process tend to arrive unexpectedly, it is essential to establish a methodological structure which will define and contain the data within a purposeful context” (1998b, p. 147). The methodological structure of inquiry serves the purpose of The Flow Project by allowing the project to find its own momentum and develop a life of its own, for a fundamental principle of art is the knowledge that a work of art has an autonomous life of its own (McNiff, 1998a).

The Flow Project is designed to accommodate artist inquiries in multiple locations. The data collected from every inquiry session is sent to the Flow Process Team for processing, with the results fed back to the artist inquiry, producing a feedback loop that informs the on-going inquiry. In each location, the team that conducts the inquiry includes a coordinator and/or facilitator, recorder(s), and artists. The Flow Process Team interviews and approves the coordinators and facilitators, who must complete an orientation and agree to operate within the parameters of The Flow Project. The facilitators select the recorders and artists following established criteria. The artists must complete an application and interview process. The inquiry is limited to experienced artists, and the aim is to engage artists who work in different mediums

and who represent diverse cultural backgrounds.

The knowledge from artists is generated, collected, and processed in phases.

During the initial phase of the artist inquiry, an “art-based research” method is used to collect data. Art-based research is “defined by its use of the arts as objects of inquiry as well as modes of investigation” (McNiff, 1998b, p. 15). Artists understand the principles of art through working with their mediums, and the initial inquiry has a strong experiential component.

Otherwise, the artists could be cut-off from the source of their knowledge, which would truncate the inquiry. Recognizing what the practice of art offers leadership is opening artists to a new dimension of the artistic experience. Including an experiential component allows the artists to begin exploring the social relevance of their practice without losing their grounding. The artist’s way of knowing is grounded in the ability to sense the “energy of the subject matter” (Allen, 1995, p. 21), and that sense of the energy can be occluded if the structure of the inquiry does not invite and nourish subjective experience.

The artist inquiry sessions are recorded using a combination of audio and video recording, still photographs, graphic recording, and written notes. In addition to interviews and reflections during artist inquiry, data on the artistic experience is collected from books, articles, blogs, and websites, and other input.

In all locations, the artist inquiry begins at the same starting point. In the first session, the facilitator(s) explains the purpose of The Flow Project and the inquiry structure and methodology. The artists are then asked to respond to a set of three questions: “Given the purpose, what is one thing you would like to see in the artist’s inquiry? Why is this important to you? Why is this important to the communal work?” The responses are recorded and sent to the Flow Process Team in Bellingham. The Process Team processes the data using the grounded

theory method, supported by a computer program, and returns the results to the facilitator in the form of a narrative report. The report identifies and prioritizes themes that emerged from the responses, and the most salient theme becomes the basis of the next inquiry session.

The Flow Process Team uses the grounded theory method to process the data collected from the artist inquiry. Grounded theory is a research method developed by Straus and Corbin (1990), which formulates theory from the ground-up rather than from the top-down. Rather than beginning with a theory or hypothesis that one sets out to prove or disprove, grounded theory begins with accumulating data about an experience, through interviews and other sources. The theory emerges through a systematic process of sorting the data, seeing emerging themes, and analyzing patterns to identify basic principles. Often, the final theory is presented in the form of a narrative.

After the initial artist inquiry has identified themes and basic principles and the artists are accustomed to thinking in terms of the social relevance of their practice, the narrative reports from all the sessions are consolidated and sent to the leadership educators allied with The Flow Project. The leadership educators examine the findings and develop a refined set of questions to present to master artist forums. The artists for the master artist forums are selected from the artists who participated in the initial inquiry, based on the acuity of their reflection on the artistic experience, their ability to communicate, and their understanding of and commitment to The Flow Project objectives. Each forum consists of artists who work in different mediums and who represent diverse cultural backgrounds.

The master artist forums consider the questions developed by the leadership educators in a facilitated dialogue, which does not include an experiential component. Again, the responses are recorded and sent to the Flow Process Team for processing. After the Process Team has

processed the data and produced the narrative report, the report is returned to the artists for review. After the artist review, the Process Team makes adjustments, and then relays the report to the leadership educators. When the final report from the artist inquiry is ready to present to the leadership educators, the artists and leadership educators convene in a face-to-face meeting to share and exchange ideas, experiences, and observations. After the meeting, the leadership educators translate the principles and practices of art into principles and practices of leadership and disseminate the learning through their teaching, publications, and leadership practices, attributing The Flow Project.

The dates for the master artist forums and the face-to-face meeting have not yet been set. The Flow Project is still developing momentum and it has a life of its own. The artist inquiry is an emergent process, which is expanding to new locations as interest in the project grows. The ultimate aim of the artist inquiry and artist forums is *theoretical saturation*, meaning the inquiry has reached the point where it is no longer turning up any new data. Due to the organic nature of the inquiry, it is impossible to predict when the goal of theoretical saturation will be achieved.

## **Closing**

Art is a way of knowing. An artist does not know ahead of time what the work will reveal. A work of art that is truly alive captures the spirit of something in the snare of eternity, and part of the beauty in art is the sense of vulnerability evoked by the fragile contrast between the temporal medium and the timeless essence the work embodies.

The Flow Project is a communal work. Many people are contributing in diverse ways to the life of the work, helping the project grow and giving form to the vision. As long as people continue to bring forward new pieces, new aspects of the work will be revealed. It is too early to

say exactly where the work will lead or what it will ultimately reveal. The one thing that can be said with certainty is the people involved in The Flow Project sense they are ‘onto something’ and they are willing to invest their time and energy in The Project because it seems the artists’ way of knowing may give leaders the ability to see another dimension of the creative challenges humanity faces in the world today, which may enhance our chances of transforming the creative challenges into creative opportunities.

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