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Teaching & Learning

Creativity forums: learning from the lives of extraordinary leaders

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Abstract

This paper proposes a tested design for a *Creativity Forum* project underpinned by research findings that show studying extraordinary lives enables ordinary people to better embrace their own creative talents. The paper begins with background on the links between creativity and contemporary leadership. It then describes the project design, explores creative variations, discusses student learning, and ends with instructor caveats and advocacy for the development of a leadership pedagogy of imagination.

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artistry



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Introduction

We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. Albert Einstein

We have schools ... that do not do enough to teach creativity, precisely at a time when global competition demands it of us. David Edwards

Cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner has been on the forefront of creativity studies throughout his career – from his early focus on the role of the arts in human development (Gardner, 1973a, b, 1980, 1982, 1983) to his landmark theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993a, 1999) and current work on the essential links between creativity and leadership effectiveness (Gardner, 1993b, 1997, 2007). His research demystifies the creative process and firmly roots it in the everyday choices of people whose motivation, passion, commitment, and openness to possibility allow them to make extraordinary contributions. There is nothing mystical about creativity, according to Gardner: the potential for significant discovery, originality, and imagination is an innate human capacity, available to anyone fully engaged in a purposive life. When viewed from the outside creativity always looks simpler and more tied to unattainable genius than it ever really is. The lives of creative luminaries – Leonard Bernstein (Briggs, 1961; Bernstein, 1982), Twyla Tharp (Tharp, 2003), Albert Einstein (Isaacson, 2007), Charles Darwin (Wallace and Gruber, 1992), Martha Graham (Graham, 1992), and others – illustrate the power of openness, discipline, curiosity, persistence, and finding deep joy in the work over any shortcomings in talent or intellect. Individuals who



understand and accept that reality can learn to bring innovation and real artistry to their own lives and work.

The implications of this finding for leadership development and the management classroom are powerful. They are especially relevant for management educators seeking to prepare their students for a world fueled by the rising importance of creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial thinking for 21st century business success (Lewis, 2001; Canton, 2007) – and by growing beliefs that organizational effectiveness and growth will require contemporary leaders who can think and engage as if they are artists (Zander and Zander, 2000; Austin and Devin, 2003; Seifert, 2004; Pink, 2005; Adler, 2006; Edwards, 2008).

This paper proposes a design for a *Creativity Forum* project that asks students to stretch their own creative expression while exploring the lives of creative others. It is built on Howard Gardner's fundamental conclusion (1993b, 1997, 2007) that studying extraordinary lives enables ordinary people to better embrace their own creative talents and potential. On a simple level, hope and encouragement for developing professionals flow from recognizing that even great minds must overcome everyday challenges, roadblocks, and human frailties to develop and sustain their competitive edge. On a deeper level, parsing extraordinary lives provides opportunities to deconstruct an abstract process like creativity and to understand it as a series of concrete actions, purposes, and outcomes. It also reveals a consistent set of personal traits associated with ground-breaking leadership and achievement across fields: an unshakeable faith in one's capacity for invention and contribution, a hunger for exploration and deep enjoyment of the process, and the motivation and courage to just keep going. Contemporary management education has been criticized for its under-attention to the more human sides of enterprise and to the messier aspects of organizational life, leadership, and judgment (e.g., Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; March and Weil, 2005; Khurana and Nohria, 2008; Holland, 2009). This activity offers educators an activity to address that gap.

The paper begins with a reminder of the growing importance of creativity and artistry for contemporary leaders and organizations and of the predisposition of academe to continue to march to its own, established beat. The piece then describes the *Creativity Forum* project design, explores a number of creative variations, and discusses student learning.

It ends with instructor caveats and advocacy for the development of a leadership pedagogy of imagination and possibility.

Background and rationale

The idea of a *Creativity Forum* as a leadership development activity in my graduate-level leadership and administrative capstone courses grew from recognition of the widening gap between the needs of the world of practice and the response from the research world of the academy. Scholars of practice and the business press regularly endorse three common sense propositions:

1. leadership, as distinct from management, is about innovation and change (e.g., Kotter, 1990, 1996, 2002; Bennis *et al.*, 2001; Bennis, 2002; Bennis and Nanus, 2003);
2. creativity and innovation are the only sustainable competitive advantage (e.g., Montgomery and Porter, 1990; Hagel and Brown, 2005);
3. the quality of an organization's leadership is critical to its ability to stay ahead of the competition (e.g., Bianco, 2000).

The propositions reflect the rapidly changing nature of global commerce and society – and of the contemporary leadership skills and understandings needed to respond to it. Market pressures and players are changing and so are consumer needs and interests.

Continuous turnover, for example, in the production and consumption of goods in an expanding, global marketplace – and the need for new ways to market, produce, and deliver those goods in today's struggling economic climate – has increased the scope and pace of change, the need for capable leaders to initiate and manage it, and the pressures to innovate. In such an environment, continuous improvement – the 20th century business strategy of incrementally advancing existing products, services, choices, and processes – may be admirable; but it is also grossly insufficient. One need only look at the struggling U.S. auto industry to illustrate why that is so; contrast the continuing troubles in Detroit and the need for a government bailout with the resurrection of once-struggling Apple and its new product/new applications-focus to underscore the power of the example. Inventing the next “new new thing” (Lewis, 2001); new, new way; or new, new market need will drive success for a growing number of large and small organizations – or failure if the innovation comes from a competitor. Organizational success – and survival,

as we see so clearly in the current economic crisis – will require flexible leaders at all levels who are willing and able to see new possibilities and who are rewarded for their capacity to stay open to them despite established industry thinking, conservative organizational cultures, and traditional managerial models that suggest otherwise.

In addition, advances in technology, increasing relative global prosperity, and the proliferation of affordable goods and services have altered social, cultural, and economic life around the world in ways and in scope never seen before (Pink, 2005; Prahalad, 2006). The result is a radical shift from lifestyles largely focused on survival to ones involving expanded consumer choices that are increasingly driven by Western standards of affluence and by intangibles like novelty, convenience, social appeal, and emotional “added value.” In this kind of a market – and with growing attempts from China and India to capture a larger share of it – the importance of aesthetics, originality, and design have grown exponentially relative to function and across products and services.

When we decide how next to spend our time or money, considering what we already have and the costs and benefits of various alternatives, “look and feel” is likely to top our list. We don’t want more food or even more restaurant meals – we’re already maxed out. Instead, we want tastier, more interesting food in an appealing environment. It’s a move from physical quantity to intangible, emotional quality. (Postrel, 2007)

Creativity and artistry matter in new ways in this kind of world. Apple’s business success, for example, lies in the company’s “obsession” with design; and analysts attribute a lion’s share of the company’s growth to the creative artistry of Steve Jobs and to his abilities to make consumer products deeply desirable (Kahney, 2008). iPhones sell, despite their high price and less-than-perfect touch-screen keyboards, because they are cool and “sexy” (Javalobby, 2009).

The bottom-line here is clear. In the contemporary world of practice, creativity, innovation, and artistry matter – and corporate heads roll when leaders fail to do their part to launch, foster, and sustain that. Leaders too often limit their own creative responses with untested assumptions and frames of experience that block access to a universe of possibilities. Zander and Zander (2000) offer an illustration.

A shoe factory sends two marketing scouts to a region of Africa to study the prospects for expanding business. One sends back a telegram saying, SITUATION HOPELESS STOP NO ONE

WEARS SHOES. The other writes back triumphantly, OPPORTUNITIES STOP THEY HAVE NO SHOES. To the marketing expert who sees no shoes, all evidence points to hopelessness. To his colleague, the same conditions point to abundance and possibility. Each scout comes to the scene with his own perspective; each returns telling a different tale. Indeed, all of life comes to us in narrative form; it’s a story we tell. (p. 9)

What training and education enable contemporary leaders to form appropriate narratives of possibility that respond to the changing world? The links between creative leadership and story-telling suggest a pedagogical partnership with the arts. A session on global competitiveness at the 2004 Davos World Economic Forum framed well the benefit: if creativity is highly valued in business and there are no easy ways to teach it, then “how can the use of artistic competencies and communication forms contribute to organizational change and new product development?” Quite simply, what can business and organizational leaders learn from artists?¹

Artists and students of the organizational sciences may seem like strange bedfellows; however, the complementary approaches to truth and understanding – scientists embrace the proven and peer-reviewed, artists seek the original and untried – hold potential for deep “crossover learning” (Edwards, 2008). Leading has long been described as an art in the management literature (e.g., Vaill, 1989; Townsend and Gebhardt, 1997; De Pree, 2004; Senge, 2006); however, few have taken its study as such seriously. *Art* has largely been used to mean *not science*: if the complex social nature of leading makes it hard to define and enact as a normal science (Kuhn, 1996), then it must be an art. The practice world, however, has taken the *art* in the art of leading more seriously.

An increasing number of organizations, for example, have turned to artists and artistic practices to assist them in gaining a competitive edge. The result is a growing number of arts-based corporate education programs, experiential-based training activities, and ongoing partnerships with poets, designers, architects, dancers, musicians, theater professionals, and visual artists. The 2005 special edition on business and the arts in the *Journal of Business Strategy* provides numerous examples from organizations like McGraw-Hill, Unilever, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), Lucent, Procter and Gamble, and more – and others pepper the academic and popular press literatures (e.g., Darso, 2001, 2004, 2005; Adler, 2006; Gallos,



2009). “The master of fine arts is the new MBA,” the *Harvard Business Review* claimed in its “Break-through Ideas for 2004”; and it lauded Daniel Pink’s (2005) requirements for contemporary leadership effectiveness. The list includes skills and activities historically associated with artists:

1. *Design* – how to wed function with strong aesthetics.
2. *Storytelling* – how to influence through compelling narrative.
3. *Creating symphony* – how to combine distinctive elements into an innovative whole.
4. *Empathy* – how to inform action with deep understanding of human nature, needs, and interests.
5. *Play* – how to embrace humor, lightheartedness, and the creative potential in joyful experimentation.
6. *Meaning making* – how to look beyond the acquisition of things and facts for significance, contribution, and fulfillment.

Surprising then in light of the shifts and trends in the practice world is the lack of attention to the important nexus among leadership, creativity, artistry, and innovation in the academic press. A review of these prestigious Academy of Management journals (*Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, and *Academy of Management Executive*) and its peer-reviewed conference proceedings from 1971 to 2007, for example, found 209 publications on innovation and creativity. The majority explore linkages between innovation and technology (42%). Topics like innovation and organizational structure and strategy (e.g., Pil and Cohen, 2006; Yang, 2007), innovation and knowledge management (e.g., Anand *et al.*, 2007; Miller *et al.*, 2007), and new product and venture processes (e.g., Song and Swink, 2002) account for the largest percentage of the remaining pieces. Important to this paper is the fact that only two published papers explicitly examine leadership and innovation² (Elenkov and Manev, 2005; Hoegl and Muethel, 2007): we know that what a field studies, promotes, and rewards is closely correlated to what it teaches.

A review of leadership studies based on analysis of two principal journals in the field (*Leadership Quarterly* and the *Journal of Leadership Studies*) offers two important clues to this research–practice discrepancy (Howe, 1996) – and to why it might continue. First, academic research on leadership remains highly discipline-bound, resulting in

institutionalized beliefs and practices that are tightly embedded in discipline-based models of leading. A leader, for example, is an institutional architect, a servant, an everyday politician, a maximizer of utility and bottom-line profits, or a creator of organizational culture depending on a scholar’s training and disciplinary allegiance to sociology, psychology, political science, economics, or social anthropology; and each discipline-driven view suggest a different prescription for effective action. Compounding the issues is the logical-rational paradigm (Nissley, 2002) at the epistemological and ontological core of leadership studies and of the theories that we teach and the ways we teach them. Rational positivism may have fit the 20th century manufacturing age; it is too limited for today’s information age (Drucker, 2003) and tomorrow’s age of ideas (Pink, 2005; Canton, 2007).

An interdisciplinary, “artscience” (Edwards, 2008) approach to the development of creative leaders “breaks-frame” (Weick and Quinn, 1999) with mainstream leadership studies – and acknowledges what the world of practice already knows. Contemporary leaders are most helpful to their organizations when they are open, experimental, and flexible; and they need ways to acquire the understandings and skills necessary to do that. Studying extraordinary, creative minds is a useful step toward moving leadership studies and pedagogy squarely into the 21st century. It is also a non-threatening way to encourage leaders to think broadly about the process of creative discovery – and about how they may limit their own creative talents and their opportunity to see the range of options and alternatives available to them.

Creativity forums: design details

The *Creativity Forum* project provides opportunities for individuals to study and explore the lives of creative individuals in order to understand the broad meaning of creativity across fields and of the conditions that foster it. In brief, small groups are created to research and to probe the life of an individual acknowledged for ground-breaking accomplishments. Groups are asked to approach their study in a way that enables them to:

1. understand their assigned individual’s take on artistry and the creative process and why his/her outcomes have had universal appeal or sustained attention over time;

2. explore the features, factors, and conditions that have contributed to and supported the development of that artistry; and
3. cull the lessons that ordinary leaders can take from the experiences of their extraordinary individual.

Groups share their learning through a 20 min class presentation. In developing the presentation, they are instructed to use creative technologies (e.g., PowerPoint, internet links, etc.); employ relevant artistic media (e.g., film clips, music, photographs, and so on); and include language, products, and quotations from primary sources as a way to introduce the class to their exemplar's particular gifts, craft, and impact. The group presentations can be done back-to-back in one class period or over a number of classes, depending on available time and course needs. When all have been completed, the class examines themes across the different cases through a series of debriefings and discussions. (A step-by-step guide to the activity is provided below. This guide can be distributed to students at the start of the project.)

In preparation for launching the small research groups, the entire class is assigned Howard Gardner's 1997 book, *Extraordinary Minds: Portraits of 4 Exceptional Individuals and an Examination of our Own Extraordinariness*. All students are expected to read the book in its entirety. It is short (150 pages), easy to read, and the most accessible of Gardner's work on the topic. (Gardner is a cognitive/neuropsychologist at Harvard and winner of a MacArthur genius award grant – and often writes as such.) *Extraordinary Minds* introduces a conceptual model outlining four types of creative genius and offers a chapter-length case of an exemplar to illustrate each: Mozart as the *Master*, Freud as the *Maker*, Virginia Woolf as the *Introspector*, and Gandhi as the *Influencer*. Gardner's typology orients students to the concept of multiple forms of creativity and innovative contribution and offers opportunity for instructors to introduce Gardner's seminal concept of multiple forms of intelligence (1993a). Students enter the activity easily appreciating that Mozart and Woolf are creative artists in their chosen medium. They are less sure about Freud and Gandhi, yet energized by the opportunity to examine the creative leadership and accomplishment of both men through an artistry lens. One outcome from this work is appreciation that creativity and artistry have a place in every field and that even those without training, talent, or

interests in the creative, visual or performing arts have opportunities for artistry and for inventive contributions that make a real difference. For the non-artistic, linear students, this is particularly powerful and an important step in embracing a more expansive definition of creative leadership.

While a wide number of creative geniuses are candidates for study, I use the four illustrated in *Extraordinary Minds* for the activity: Mozart, Freud, Woolf, and Gandhi. Everyone begins the activity knowing something about the four exemplars being studied. This sustains class interest during the presentations and enriches class discussion. As written, the chapter on each also primes research teams to look and think broadly about the intrapersonal, interpersonal, situational, historical, and cultural influences on creativity. Groups are expected, however, to go beyond the chapter in their research work.

Through a class process that honors "the passionate interests of classmates first," students self-select into the Mozart group, the Freud group, the Woolf group, or the Gandhi group. I cap the number of students in each to create equal-size work teams, and the process of self-selection works well. Some students have clear preferences; others are content to fill in where needed. In situations where there are more "passionate interests" than available group spots, students have the opportunity to make their case to the class; the class then votes based on the quality of argument presented and demonstrated strength of interest. Choice – and the guarantee that at least a few group members are deeply excited about studying their assigned exemplar – encourages the natural evolution of group leadership and sustains motivation. To foster group development and identity, I also periodically use the Mozart, Freud, Woolf, and Gandhi groupings for other in-class activities and small group discussions during the term. Groups of 5–6 are perfect. The activity also works with groups as large as 8 or as small as 3.

In large-sized classes, instructors can form multiple teams for each of the four exemplars. The contrast between different presentations on the same individual allows for interesting discussion of sensemaking and framing (Gallos, 2008). Three or more presentations on an individual, however, are tedious. An alternative then is to expand the exemplar list. Gardner has also studied Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, T.S. Eliot, and Martha Graham; and chapters on each of these can be found in his 1993 book, *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity*.



Chapters from that book on any of those individuals can be put on reserve. They would also need to be assigned as required reading to the full class: it is important that the entire class has some knowledge of a team's assigned exemplar to facilitate depth of discussion. The chapters in *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity* are a denser read than those in *Extraordinary Minds*. As compensation, however, they offer greater detail and deeper insights into artistry.

I provide study questions for the required Gardner readings on the syllabus, and the entire class is asked to reflect on the study questions after they have completed their reading and in anticipation of the first presentation. Instructors who believe their students would benefit from writing out the answers to the questions may encourage them to make notes for themselves or to write a more formal assignment to be turned in for a grade. Sample study questions are offered below; however, instructors will want to tailor the questions to reflect their purpose in using the *Creativity Forum* activity and the student learning they hope to encourage.

Study questions have multiple purposes. They prepare students for class participation and guide their reading of Gardner. The questions can be adjusted to serve as the basis for a short debriefing at the end of each presentation: What surprised you about this exemplar? What is his or her real artistry? His or her impact? What does this individual teach us about (the issues listed in question 3)? The study

Study questions to prepare for the Creativity Forum

1. What surprised you most in reading about the four exemplars?
 2. In what ways do Masters, Makers, Introspectors, and Influencers differ in their artistry? In their impact? What similarities do they share?
 3. What do extraordinary people teach ordinary leaders about
 - human nature and enduring differences?
 - the link between passion and success?
 - the role of introspection, mindfulness, and self-knowledge?
 - the impact of time, place, culture, and external support systems?
 - the meaning of creativity and artistic contribution?
 - the road to extraordinary contribution for ordinary people?
 4. If creativity is essential for 21st century leadership, how do we become more creative thinkers – and foster it in others? How will you?
-

questions can also be used in comparing and contrasting the lives of the different exemplars. If presentations span across multiple classes, instructors might consider a brief written assignment using suggested questions 2 and 3 to improve recall, quality of cross-case analysis, and integration of learning. An alternative is to use questions 3 and 4 as the basis for a final course paper.

Design options

Depending on the purpose and direction of the course and the student learning goals for the activity, the *Creativity Forum* project can be expanded or condensed. I have, for example, given groups as little as three weeks to do their outside research and get their class presentations together, with presentations and cross-case processing all done in one, 3-h class. That one class was labeled *Creativity Forum* on the syllabus – hence, the origin of the project's name. In that situation, I was using the project in a capstone course after a unit on self-diagnosis of professional strengths to explore the requirements for contemporary leadership and the importance of making one's passions (and idiosyncrasies) a springboard for creative leadership. The *Creativity Forum* was followed by a course segment exploring leadership character and moral purpose through fiction.

Alternatively, the project works as a semester-length activity. It can, for example, anchor sub-themes of creativity and artistry in leadership, entrepreneurship, or organizational change courses: the *Creativity Forum* can be a culminating event in a series of different activities and lessons aimed at fostering creative thinking skills. Additional readings like Daniel Pink's *A Whole New Mind* (2006) encourage students to explore the links among creativity, artistry, and the changing world for leaders. The book is easy for undergraduates and solid for graduate-level students. Pink offers experiential activities for strengthening contemporary leadership skills at the end of many chapters. Students enjoy these, and instructors can use them to stretch their repertoire of experiential teaching tools. Students have also found viewing segments of Thomas Friedman's Discovery Channel program, "The Other Side of Outsourcing,"³ powerful. The program documents Friedman's trip to India while researching his best-selling book, *The World is Flat* Friedman (2007). The video puts a face on an abstract concept like globalization and brings the full implications of world-wide economic and social changes to life. Space permitting in the

syllabus, students can read all or part of Friedman's book, as well.

Instructors can also deepen learning by assigning a short sample of each exemplar's work in addition to the Gardner reading and, in the process, expand student experiences in management learning through more non-traditional course materials. Public access to the classics is available through online sources like Project Gutenberg and others. Students, for example, can read Virginia Woolf's classic, *A Room of One's Own*.⁴ Its themes of equity, systemic sources of power, and diversity provide opportunity to explore issues like organizational justice, shifting social norms, and new models of leadership for today's diverse work world. And Mozart's *Symphony in G Minor* is a must. For some students, this may be their first exposure to a full length piece of classical music. In addition, a short excerpt from Freud's classic *Dream Psychology*⁵ enables students to appreciate the unique nature of his narrative and his lingering impact – Freud's language and ideas permeate popular culture in ways that are not obvious to many current students. Alternatively, a piece from *Totem and Taboo*⁶ allows students to understand Gardner's (1997) emphasis on Freud's iconoclasm and courage as a *Maker*. The Hartwick Institute has a case (with instructor teaching notes) on Gandhi that includes excerpts from his biography and explores Gandhi as a post-modern leader whose artistic use of language and symbolic expression is purposeful, evocative, and expressive (Hartwick, 2008). Gandhi's speeches – or long quotations from them – are also accessible from multiple internet sources. A one or two page reflection paper that asks students to identify a central learning from each of these primary source materials – or their response to it – can further enhance learning.

Student learning

Student learning occurs on multiple levels in the *Creativity Forum* project. Students understand creativity in a new way: a result of personal agency and commitment, and something within their grasp. They gain confidence and enhance their capacities to see themselves as leaders. The activity also expands what it means to learn from experience – one's own and others – and how using art as a lens for exploring leadership expands appreciation of both. Asking students to examine, explain, and illustrate the artistry of their exemplars gets students learning with and through the arts; and research tells us this engenders an openness

to and an engagement in the learning process that facilitate deep cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral growth (Solomon, 1979, 1983; Marx and Frost, 1998; Champoux, 1999; Gallos, 2009). This rings true for students in the *Forum* project.

The focus on creativity and artistry for leadership raises student curiosity – what are we going to learn from this? – and attention – this is a different kind of assignment with different presentation expectations, so let's move off automatic pilot to think about how we will do this. As a result, students approach the project playfully and intentionally – and they are surprised by what they learn. Many may be studying the arts and humanities for the first time since required high school or college courses, and the opportunity to create actionable knowledge for managerial effectiveness is eye-opening. Students can see the benefits of reflecting on a range of experiences – historical, contemporary, fictional, their own – to better understand themselves and their world.

David Edwards (2008) advocates the importance of this kind of interdisciplinary learning for creative leadership and for the passion and freedom needed to sustain it. Real innovation, concludes Edwards (2008), is catalyzed by the capacity of individuals to step outside their usual ways of seeing and responding to the world and by crossing the conventional lines so firmly drawn between the expressive world of art and the structured, rational world of science. The *Creativity Forum* project plants the seeds for this kind of cross-over. It also nudges students to think about more creative and engaging ways to share information and to influence others, an increasingly important leadership skill according to the Club of Rome,⁷ a global think-tank and catalyst for change. The world's most crucial leadership challenges – *world problematiques* like nuclear holocaust, species extinction, destruction of natural resources, mass famine, genocide – demand leaders at all levels and in all sectors who can communicate, engage, and learn from and with each other.

Finally, students learn something important about the shared nature of the human experience. They begin the project wondering what they have in common with people like Mozart or Gandhi. They find, however, that many of the challenges faced by the exemplars are similar to those faced by everyday leaders like themselves. Equally important, the exemplars' choices and successful coping strategies are options available to us all.



(A sample list of exemplar challenges and strategies is provided below.)

All of the exemplars' stories – case examples across fields, historical times, nations, gender, ethnicity, religion, and social class – are as much about hard work and persistence as they are about innate genius. Clearly, the individuals had great talents; however, they worked hard to identify those talents, hone their gifts, and find ways to best use them in light of situational opportunities and constraints. Each also had significant limitations and potentially devastating flat sides – weaknesses, blinders, poor health, relationship difficulties, past failures, and other challenges that could have derailed them. Instead, the exemplars accepted their flat sides and failures. They reflected on them and found insights and renewed energy in learning from them; they devoted their energies to developing the talents they had and to exploring ways to leverage their unique strengths into a competitive advantage. In the same way that *appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider and Sekerka, 2006) releases energy and creativity by building on the “positive core” of organizational life, the exemplars reached creative heights by finding, valuing, and honoring their gifts.

The capacity to approach all experience as grist for the learning mill takes courage, focus, and choice. All four of the exemplars, for example, were outsiders for different reasons: Mozart as a child prodigy, Freud for his religion and limitations as a traditional scientist, Woolf as a woman, and Gandhi for his values and positions. Each chose to use that marginal status to see and do things differently from those around them. The capacity to find the silver lining in rain clouds and to leverage alienation into ground-breaking contributions – and not into lingering bitterness, anger, frustration, or hopelessness – takes discipline and spiritual maturity. Their rewards included a greater sense of agency and control over the inevitable twists and turns of their lives (Gardner, 1997), an important lesson for students about the role of choice in their responses to setbacks and disappointment. For creative leadership, spiritual maturity matters (Delbecq, 2008).

Finally, two over-arching learnings from the project resonate strongly with students: recognizing that (1) leaders lead best when they are authentic (George, 2004), and (2) leadership takes many forms. Leadership studies for many students have focused on the public and social nature of organizational leadership. The exemplars' lives

illustrate that one can also lead quietly like Virginia Woolf, through networking and writing like Freud, through innovative products like Mozart, or through a life of visible principle and virtue like Gandhi. Students in my classes have spoken about the liberation in recognizing that they did not have to “correct” all their gaps and weaknesses before setting out to lead. Finding and growing their strengths, doing what they love, and doing that well will set them on a path toward their extraordinary contribution.

Exemplars' challenges faced by everyday leaders

- Identify your talents and find ways to use them
- Use life experiences and events to strengthen craft and soul
- Identify opportunities and open niches – and find ways to capitalize on them
- Understand your context and environment
- Accept personal limitations and failures – and learn from them
- Reframe real or imagined marginality as fresh perspective
- Focus in the face of challenges, distractions, and other options for your talents
- Stay strong in the face of critics and opposition – use negative feedback to reenergize and develop
- Balance work and family
- Create support networks and relationships with like-minded folks from whom to learn

Exemplars' strategies and choices available to all leaders

- Know thyself: strengths and flat side, interests and passions
 - Be realistic: accept who you are – and aren't
 - Claim your uniqueness – don't hide it or let it diminish confidence or effort
 - Emphasize your strengths – develop them, build on them, leverage them, lead from them
 - Focus!!! – have clarity about what's important
 - Work hard – persistence matters as much as talent
 - Learn from all experiences: positive or negative, praise and criticism, success or failure
 - Create a supportive, learning-filled environment – whatever that looks like to you
-

Instructor caveats

The *Creativity Forum* project encourages leadership confidence and multi-level learning, and it can work well with different student audiences. A few reminders, however, are in order.

Manage the perceived dichotomy between enjoyment and learning. Creative teaching methods and assignments can be fun, but students steeped in experience with traditional pedagogies may require some help to learn how to learn from fun. Research

tells us enjoyment undermines cognitive discipline (Solomon, 1983; Cennamo, 1993). To address this, instructors will want to pay close attention to how they introduce and frame the *Forum* project. Students learn best when instructors provide clear rationale for the project (i.e., why are we doing this?), set it in perspective (i.e., why is this important? And important now?), and provide guidelines and questions that orient students to the areas of intended learning (Hooper and Hannafin, 1991). Simple instructions, for example, to search for certain concepts or theories in a film led to greater mental effort and higher assessment scores when compared to students instructed to watch the same film for fun (Solomon and Leigh, 1984). The *background and rationale* section of this paper offer instructors a case for the growing importance of creativity and artistic leadership. Study questions and other guidelines are provided. Instructors will need to develop their own learning goals from the activity. Linking all this to student experiences helps, too. Undergraduate engineering or accounting students, for example, may need a different orientation to the project than those in a graduate-level arts administration course.

Anticipate and manage developmental differences.

Younger students or those developmentally anchored in concrete thinking (Gallos, 1993) may conceptualize the *Forum* project as a simple report of historical and biographical facts, and remain legitimately confused in understanding how it could be more. The job of deconstructing creativity, for example, may sound fun and important, but it can be cognitively overwhelming for some. Instructors can assist students developmentally by guiding them through the steps needed to move from simple recall to creative synthesis and application of their insights to their own leadership behaviors. Bloom's classic taxonomy of learning, the six-tiered model for classifying levels of complexity in thinking and knowing, is helpful; it reminds instructors that students require a foundation in the lower level basics of knowing first. Anderson & Krathwohl (2001: 67–68) lay out a helpful adaptation of Bloom's work.

Level 1: Remembering: recalling relevant knowledge

Level 2: Understanding: grasping the meaning from oral, written, and visual information

Level 3: Applying: using information in new or concrete situations to solve problems or complete tasks

Level 4: Analyzing: breaking down material into parts, determining how the parts relate to one another and to an overall whole

Level 5: Evaluating: making judgments, comparisons, and critiques using criteria and standards

Level 6: Creating: putting parts and elements together to form a coherent whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through planning or producing.

Instructors can guide students with probes and questions that encourage them to think in more complex ways about their exemplar and about the larger implication for understanding creativity and contemporary leadership. It will enable them to see the larger possibilities for their own leadership development – and encourage student developmental growth along the way.

Closing thoughts: toward a leadership pedagogy of imagination and possibility

Contemporary organizations need creative leaders to respond to the increasing challenges and opportunities of our time. None would argue otherwise. The world is changing fast and not always in ways we can understand or would wish. In the face of the change and uncertainty, we look to our leaders – call for more leaders, better leaders, innovative leaders who can see themselves and the world through fresh eyes and with a “consciousness of beginnings rather than closures” (Greene, 2007: 2). Those willing to rise to the leadership challenge look to management educators – to our teaching, models, mentoring, and scholarship – for clues and guidance on how to garner the skills and the mindsets needed to face the tough work ahead. We serve developing leaders best when we respond with a leadership pedagogy of imagination and possibility: learning experiences that wed the free-thinking of art and expression with the results-focus of science, that encourage students to move beyond current capacities and comfort zones, that offer engaging opportunities to think and see in new ways, and that show leaders-in-training that they have the right stuff for creative contribution. When we do, we help give students a unique opportunity to discover their own talents and artistry and to use both for their own groundbreaking achievements. In fact, our students expect nothing less.



Students tell us that they need and want educational experiences that engender deep and personal learning. They share a common dream, Richard Light (2001, 2004) found in his multi-year research study of students at 25 colleges through the Harvard Assessment Project. "The most common hope students express is that each class, by its end, will help them to become a slightly different person in some way" (2001: 47). Projects, like the *Creativity Forum*, are a route to that kind of developmental growth. Models, theories, formulas, and figures are "dead and repellent things" until the human imagination engages them in its search for new understandings of how the world works and of how to navigate successfully through it, asserts Maxine Greene,⁸ William F. Russell Professor in the Foundations of Education *emerita* at Columbia University, founder and former director of the Center for Social Imagination at Teachers College, and long-term philosopher-in-residence at the Lincoln Center Institute for the Arts in Education. The arts fire that imagination.

Engaged in this search, many of us turn to the several arts, not because Goya or Virginia Woolf or Toni Morrison or Mozart or Michelangelo holds solutions the sciences and the social sciences do not, but an encounter with an art form demands a particular kind of interchange or transaction between a live human consciousness and a painting, say, or a novel, or a sonata And to grasp it may mean a transformation of a sort – a changed perspective, a new mode of understanding. (Greene, 2007: 2)

For that reason, Greene advocates that the arts and humanities must be integrated into any curriculum. But bringing them into the organizational classroom is especially important for learning how to lead in a world where yesterday's certainties have given way to "endless ambiguities" (Greene, 2007: 2) – and human imagination and agency are the only source of promise and creative action.

Creativity Forum: a step-by-step overview

Overall purpose: to deconstruct the meaning of creativity and break-through achievements as a way (a) to appreciate the creative artistry needed for contemporary leadership and (b) to strengthen personal capacities for innovative leadership.

Learning outcomes: (1) new ways to understand the creative process and the requirements for creative contribution; (2) increased understanding of the links among artistry, creativity, and leadership; (3) enhanced confidence in one's potential for innovative leadership; and (4) greater appreciation of the benefits in learning to think and act more like an artist.

Deliverables: (1) completion and reflection on assigned project-related readings; (2) research on the life of an assigned individual acknowledged for his/her ground-breaking, creative accomplishments; (3) a group presentation (20 min) based on the research.

Research parameters: Groups are expected to go beyond assigned class readings in their research. Research happens outside the regularly scheduled class time. This project asks for more than a biographical report. Groups should approach their study in a way that enables them to: (1) understand the individual's take on artistry and on the creative process and why his/her contributions have had universal appeal or sustained attention; (2) explore the features, factors, and conditions that have contributed to and supported the development of the individual's creativity and artistry; and (3) cull lessons that ordinary leaders can take from the experiences of an extraordinary individual. The project requires deep thinking, analysis, and synthesis. This takes time, and groups will want to plan their work schedules accordingly.

Presentation parameters: Presentations will be 20 min long and shared with the full class at an assigned time. Groups should: (1) use creative technologies (e.g., PowerPoint, internet links, etc.); (2) employ relevant artistic media (e.g., film clips, music, photographs, etc.); and (3) include language, products, quotations, etc. from primary sources as a way to introduce the class to their exemplar's particular gifts, craft, and impact. Groups will want to test technologies in the classroom before their presentation day to assure everything works as planned. Presentations are followed by a full class discussion of the exemplar, and group members should be prepared to answer any questions from the class or instructor.

Required readings: Every student will read all of the following book (and any additional chapters or readings assigned by the instructor): Howard Gardner (1997). *Extraordinary minds: Portraits of exceptional individuals and an examination of our own extraordinariness*. New York: Basic Books. Reading must be completed by the first group presentation, and study questions are provided to guide reflection and preparation. Required readings serve three purposes: they (1) offer a framework for understanding creativity and artistry; (2) provide groups with a first reading on their assigned individual; and (3) provide class members with basic information on all exemplars as a way to strengthen class discussion and learning.

Project sequence: (1) Instructor discusses the purposes, learning goals, and timetable for the *Creativity Forum* project. Required readings are assigned; study questions are distributed; and all deliverables are discussed. The exemplars for study and presentation dates are announced. (2) Students self-select into groups of instructor-announced size. Group choice is based on exemplar preference. Groups must be of equal size. If too many students want the same exemplar, each will verbally present to the total class a rationale for their preference. The class will vote based on clarity and compelling nature of the request. (3) Groups plan and launch their research and preparation of their multi-media presentation. Work is done outside of regular class time. (4) Each presentation is followed by a short, full class discussion of the exemplar and his/her contribution to better understanding creativity and creative leadership. (5) At the completion of all presentations, the full class will discuss key learnings across exemplars using the study questions provided.

Assessment criteria for presentations: (1) quality of research as demonstrated by depth of understanding of exemplar and his/her artistry; (2) organization and clarity of presentation content; (3) artistic impact of presentation which includes creative use of technology, relevant artistic and primary source materials to illustrate exemplar's contribution, and overall aesthetic appeal; (4) contribution to class learning on larger issues of understanding

the exemplar's take on artistry and on the creative process, the universal appeal of his/her contributions, factors that contributed to/supported the exemplar's creativity and artistry, and lessons for ordinary leaders.

Notes

¹From the Forum session program description for "If An Artist Ran Your Business," January 22, 2004 led by Lotte Darso, Research Manager for the Creative Alliance Learning Lab in Denmark. Panelists: photographer Yann Arthus-Bertrand; film director Shekhar Kapur; Hermitage Museum director Mikhail Piotrovsky; and actor Chris Tucker.

²"Explicitly examine" means articles in which the study of leadership was the initiating or driving purpose for the research or writing.

³Available on DVD through major distributors and on *You Tube* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQaHrcwKsoc>

⁴Available online at <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/w/woolf/virginia/w91r>.

⁵Available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/15489>.

⁶Excerpts available online at <http://www.mdx.ac.uk/www/study/xfre1913.htm>.

⁷See <http://www.clubofrome.org/> and Botkin *et al.* (1979).

⁸Publications and speeches from Greene's prolific career are available online through the Maxine Greene Foundation Library at <http://www.maxinegreene.org/>.

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