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What poetry brings to business

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Recent Research of Note

What poetry brings to business

by Clare Morgan with Kirsten Lange and Ted Buswick, University of Michigan Press, 2010

Summarized and interpreted
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As organizations turn more and more to the arts (Adler, 2006) for leadership and management development, the question has shifted from, “does arts-based learning work?” to “how does arts-based learning work?” Some answers have been offered. Lotte Darso (2004) suggests that using the arts takes us down through seeing and sensing into presencing (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers, 2004) where deep change can happen. Donna Ladkin (2009) and I offered a model of four different processes (skills transfer, projective technique, illustration of essence, and making) that arts-based methods use to facilitate learning and development. In *What Poetry Brings to Business*, Clare Morgan tightens the focus and offers an in-depth argument that is illustrated from her experience working on an extended Boston Consulting Group (BCG) project for what managers and leaders can gain from the study of poetry.

In short, Morgan’s argument is that engaging with poetry fosters a different mindset from that which typical analytic business training promotes. She draws upon a distinction from cognitive psychology about how we handle ambiguity and suggests that reading poetry trains us to be sharpeners rather than levelers. Levelers tend to deal with ambiguity by categorizing sensations and emphasizing similarities – for example, I could use the BCG matrix to identify various product lines as cash cows and thus treat them all the same. Sharpeners on the other hand can tolerate ambiguity and seek nuance and difference. The argument is that in today’s complex world, leaders need to be sharpeners. The sharpener mindset is essential for good strategic thinking as well as creativity and ethical action.

Of course, Morgan makes this argument with considerably more nuance than I have captured in this short summary. She also supports the argument by drawing on a wide reaching set of ideas from philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Socrates, poets such as Keats, and scientists, such as the evolutionary anthropologist, Dissanayake. At the same time, she illustrates her argument with examples from her work on poetry with corporate leaders, including a variety of poems that they analyze, as well as including poems for the reader to explore on their own. Morgan holds all of this together with the narrative device of an extended conversation (she provides both voices) in which she is trying to convince a skeptical reader of the benefits of reading poetry.

For me, this is very important work. I fear that the use of the arts in management and leadership development is often just an



enjoyable day away from the office that soon fades into a pleasant memory. I believe that it can be something deeper, something sustained, and potentially even something transformative for organizations. But in order for that to happen, we need to first understand what is going on – *how* does arts-based learning work? Morgan makes an important contribution to the efforts both in terms of her philosophic and conceptual thinking and in terms of her descriptions of the poetry project at the BCG – a multiyear engagement of managers working with poetry.

The illustrations of her experiences working with managers also raise some questions. Morgan constantly presses her case that the managers are learning to think in a different way, which is an example of skills development, one of the four processes of arts-based learning (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009). In this model, skills are construed broadly and include different ways of thinking. I think it might be useful to think in terms of the other three processes as well. For example, there are cases in which the process is a projective technique as managers see different things in the poems that say more about themselves and their own organizations than about the poem. Morgan illustrates this in her discussions of William Stafford's *Traveling Through the Dark*. I see the illustration of essence process when the poem *The Thought Fox* by Ted Hughes is used to explore the nature of creativity. By focusing only on the skills development process, Morgan may be missing other things that poetry can bring to business.

Morgan makes an argument that poetry is well suited to developing leaders and in particular to developing a leader's ability to make strategic decisions. Morgan's hypothesis is:

Poems bridge the gap between knowing and perceiving because they use the highly differentiated, logic-driven structures of language to point to the undifferentiated arenas where emotion holds sway. Poems put down their roots in the no-man's-land between thinking and feeling, the borderland where logic shades into the non-logical, where a world defined and delineated by language gives way to the more diffuse territory of what psychologists sometimes call "the feeling state" (p. 55).

Thus, poetry bridges the gap between rational, logical, data-driven decision making and embodied, gut-feel, intuitive decision making, the importance of which resonates with work on the role of emotions in decision making (e.g., Damasio, 1994). But we should also recognize that this argument seems to be based in an underlying ontology that our

world is constructed through and largely consists of discourse – an ontology that has been well rehearsed by critical management scholars and in which a great deal of useful and important thinking about organizations is based. If we start from a different ontology, for example, if we take leadership as an embodied phenomenon where leadership practices are carried out with bodies performing for/with/to other bodies, then we might argue that rather than working with language we should work with bodies. We should become sharpeners by working with our own and others' physical bodies and the art of theatrical acting would be the most appropriate art form. My point is not that poetry or theater is better suited to developing leaders, but that each has an implicit ontology and view of what leadership is fundamentally about.

Which for me, begs a broader question (which is not raised in the book) – what are the skills for leaders and managers that business can learn from the arts? Morgan focuses on the ability to tolerate ambiguity and be a sharpener rather than a leveler. What about the embodied skills of theater, such as those described in *Leadership Presence* (Halpern and Lubar, 2003)? Or the improvisational skills of the jazz musician (e.g., Barrett, 1998; Hatch, 1998)? Or the artist's ability to stay with the evidence of their senses (Springborg, 2010)? Or the skill of really looking deeply (Edwards, 1979; Dolev, Friedlaender, Krohner and Braverman, 2001) at the world in which we live? Morgan's book seems to beg to be part of a much larger collection about what the arts bring to business.

I also find myself very aware that this book is about what *reading* poetry brings to business. There could very well be another book that is about what *writing* poetry brings to business. Although there is clearly a lot to be gained from engaging with existing works of art, for artists, at the heart of the arts is the process of making art. As Richards (1995: 9, 81, 119) repeatedly says, "as the artist creates the work, the work creates the artist" and something deeply meaningful and personally powerful and rewarding happens in the process of making art. Morgan and BCG are particularly focused on strategy, which is the leadership art that Grint (2001) associates with the fine arts and the artistic process of *making* works of art. Although I find Morgan's argument that reading poetry has something important to offer business compelling, I have to wonder if there might not be something even more important in the practice of writing poetry.

Adler (2006, 2010) tells us that business can learn from the arts how to do things that matter deeply to those doing them, how to engage in activities that are not simply about economic gain, but are filled with meaning and make the world a better place – which is a stronger version of Morgan’s argument that engagement with poetry provides the basis for creativity and ethical action. I wonder if the difference between Adler’s stance and Morgan’s

is more than a matter of linguistic choice, but whether if it is also based in the difference between making art and engaging with existing art works. For me, the idea of acting from a passion to do something meaningful that makes the world a better place is the essence of the artistic process and the potential of what business could become in the 21st century. This is what *I* hope that poetry and the broader world of art can bring to business.

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