4 Great Leadership Lessons from the Arts

Math and science are noble endeavors, but real leadership is taught in the arts. Here are four powerful lessons taught best by artists.

The Tony Awards for Broadway Theater are Sunday night, showcasing artists across America. As much as people spend money for movies, television, theater and music, why do business experts continue to ignore the incredible leadership teachings that come from the arts?

Several years ago, I published a journal article called Entrepreneurs: The Artists of the Business World, after discovering through an anecdotal survey that more than 15 percent of the Entrepreneurs' Organization membership had arts backgrounds, compared to less than 5 percent who studied business. (As a member and theater arts grad I figured I couldn't be the only one.) Since this elite organization requires applicants to show $1,000,000-plus revenue, its members must be doing something right. Below are four leadership lessons taught regularly in the arts.

1. **Lead a Project from Start to Finish**

Many B-school programs culminate study with the writing of business plans that rarely lead to funding or success. Meanwhile, performing arts students must create a concept from scratch, refine it so they can articulate a compelling vision, recruit skilled labor, and manage everyone to completion on time and on budget, since moving opening night is never an option. They also get to sell their product and collect immediate customer response in the form of ticket sales and applause. This process is completed America's fastest growers by state, industry, metro, and much more.

2. **Emilia Clarke and Cory Michael Smith attend 'Breakfast At Tiffany's' Broadway Opening Night Curtain Call**

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People like to describe artists as eccentric and strange, and many are. So imagine trying to manage an entire company of these weirdos. And yet somehow, unlike your company, these people happily and consistently deliver highly creative and effective product, even with strict time and resource constraints. And the work they deliver almost always considers a powerful customer experience as the primary objective. Most artists are drilled repeatedly on how to lead their artistic colleagues in a collaborative manner to achieve an effective experience. And despite the frequent presence of professional egos that would crush a Goldman Sachs exec, they learn how to bring all people forward together, or no art would ever be created.

Let’s say you are a stagehand in a simple community production of Hamlet. And you are given the job of placing the skull for the famous Yorick scene. The first time you forget, everyone in the production will chastise you. The second time you will be fired. And you will forever be known as the guy who screwed up the scene, or the violinist who went flat in Beethoven’s Ninth, or the dancer who fell in the Nutcracker. Artists live and die by their dependability—yet non-artists consider them flaky and irresponsible! Artists develop in an environment where the production is only as good as its weakest participant. Individual performers with both big and small parts are inherently motivated to bring up the entire company rather than showboating personal performance like the sports players business people love to exalt. Even most stars in the arts know they shine best against a rich and unified background.

From the day you take a role in a production, art project or film, you immediately understand that you are part of something much bigger than yourself. The size of your contribution only matters as far as it contributes to the quality and impact of the whole. Artists willingly accept this approach as the entire success of output is dependent upon the merit of what they can deliver. Nepotism, longevity and cronyism may provide opportunity, but only true connection with the customer creates longevity. That forces all successful artists to submit their often-large egos to the service of the overall experience. Those who lead others collaboratively to do the same are rewarded with continued opportunity and success. Those who are selfish or stuck in their own vision are doomed to poverty and dissatisfaction.

You can gain these same lessons by engaging in the arts. Community theater, orchestras, galleries and dance companies are all amazing laboratories for creativity, communication and yes, leadership. People in the arts have these leadership concepts ingrained into them through repetitive, practical application. So if your engineers, sales people and managers are coming up short in these leadership areas, perhaps you should consider hiring a few theater, dance, art or music graduates to show them how it’s done.

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