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Artists Help Empower Corporate America

By Harvey Seifter

In recent years, there has been a remarkable growth in the use of arts programs by corporations to meet a wide range of employee training and organizational development needs. Practically every day, industrial manufacturers hire poets to empower their employees to engage and express their creativity through their work; global financial institutions study the inner workings of musical ensembles to improve their performance; and law firms engage theater artists to strengthen the presentational skills and improvisational abilities that are critical to courtroom success.

In the U. S. alone, dozens of Fortune 500 corporations and countless smaller firms employ arts-based learning in participatory workshops, skill-based training programs, hands-on consultancies with business units, individual and team coaching, case studies-in-action, and lecture/demonstrations at leadership conferences. Events that combine learning with entertainment are also growing rapidly in popularity. Companies use these various programs to foster creative thinking, promote the development of new leadership models, and strengthen employee skills in critical areas such as collaboration, conflict resolution, change management, presentation/public performance, and intercultural communication. Clearly, many business leaders have concluded that there are valuable lessons to be learned from the experiences and insights of artists – lessons that can help their companies to stay profitable in these challenging times. And, despite generally sluggish economic conditions, there is considerable evidence to suggest that this trend is growing.

This represents a dramatic shift in the boundaries that traditionally defined experiences relevant to the business world – a shift triggered by profound technological and social changes that have transformed the culture of business over the past decade.

From the age of Adam Smith through the dawn of the global marketplace, corporations built the vast majority of their successes on firm foundations of predictability. The men

and women who ran these companies thought of their organizations as supremely rational enterprises best guided by relying on the orderly application of cause-and-effect logic. However, with the advent of information technology and globalization in the 1990s, and especially in the post-9/11 world, the economy has moved into a new era. Today, speed, complexity, social interconnectivity and the multiplicity of interactions generated by the global marketplace have combined to create a business environment of radical unpredictability.

In our chaotic 21st century business environment, traditional cause-and-effect links are undermined by simultaneous and contradictory actions that collide with each other, even as they interact with a vast array of overlapping forces and conflicting players. These conditions are proving particularly hard on organizations that are locked into multi-year planning models, rigid decision-making hierarchies, and monolithic approaches to the marketplace. On the other hand, companies inventive enough to find their own ways forward, flexible enough to respond quickly (and competently) to the unexpected, and spontaneous enough to lead change effectively, are discovering that well-adapted organizational culture can confer significant competitive advantage.

Recent surveys consistently identify imagination, inspiration, inventiveness, improvisational ability, collaborative and inter-cultural skills, spontaneity, adaptability, and presentation as among the most sought-after attributes of business leadership. These qualities are frequently summed up in a single word—creativity—and all over the world, corporations are focused on acquiring the skills and tools they need to tap into the creativity of their workers and unleash the creative potential of their organizations. Inevitably, this quest is leading a growing number of companies to artists for their organizational learning.

Artists have profound insights into the creative process, gained from years of hands-on experience, backed by specialized training and fostered by carefully honed achievement-enhancing skills. Their knowledge represents a formidable resource, waiting to be tapped by companies in search of creative solutions and managers striving to enable, empower and engage their employees' imaginative and inventive powers.

Harvey Seifter is the President of Seifter Associates, a full-service international consulting firm based in New York, with an affiliated office in Berlin. He has enjoyed a distinguished career at the helm of cultural institutions, and currently serves as Executive and Artistic Director of Flushing Town Hall, a New York City-owned landmark center for the visual and performing arts. As Executive Director of Orpheus, the world's only conductorless orchestra, Mr. Seifter launched new commercial partnerships in North America, Europe and Japan, and increased global touring revenues by 125%. Mr. Seifter is the author of [Leadership Ensemble: Lessons in Collaborative Management from the World's Only Conductorless Orchestra](#), published in North America by Holt/Times Books in 2001. He is a member of the Board of Directors of Arts & Business Council Inc., and team leader Creativity Connection, the Council's arts-based corporate training/organizational learning initiative.

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