
Book Review

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Leadership Insight

by Nancy J. Adler

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To understand this beautifully unusual book by Nancy Adler, it must be placed in context. The past decade has seen an increasing number of organisations experimenting with artistic interventions. Even *The Economist* (2011) has noted that managers in organisations of all sizes and in all sectors are bringing in people, practices and products from the world of the arts for a few hours, days, or months to learn from them. They hope or assume that artistic interventions can help develop skills (such as leadership, creativity, and communication) and lead to new ideas for products, services and strategies. Artistic interventions should, therefore, enhance organisational performance. Artists have engaged in artistic interventions in organisations for several reasons: some have discovered organisations as stimulating contexts in which to create their work; others want to help employees develop their potential in organisations, sometimes also hoping thereby to have an impact on the organisational culture; others see interventions in organisations as a source of income and possibly as a source of inspiration for the art they continue to create in the art world.

One of the defining characteristics of the phenomenon is that the artists and members of the organisations hosting them see each other as coming from different worlds, with different codes, norms, practices, and values. Their cultural differences are considered the primary resource for learning, because the confrontation with other ways of seeing and doing things can bring what is taken for granted in a culture to light and make it discussable; the friction between different views and approaches can also generate new possibilities to choose between or build upon. The stakeholders want to learn by crossing the boundary between their worlds temporarily, but they also need to maintain the boundaries for their own identity. Intermediaries have emerged to help in this process: they build bridges between the world of the arts and the world of organisations to enable them to meet on their own terms.

Members of yet another world are getting involved in the field of artistic interventions: management scholars have noticed this multifaceted phenomenon and have responded in various ways. Some have brought arts-based methods into their management courses and executive education programmes (Taylor and Ladkin, 2009; Anderson et al., 2011). A few have gained access to organisations that have introduced

artistic interventions in order to start filling the gap with empirical research findings (for overviews see: Darsø, 2004; Berthoin Antal, 2009; Berthoin Antal et al., 2011; Biehl-Missal, 2011; Schiuma, 2011).

Nancy Adler has done something different. She has taken the courageous step of blurring the boundaries by combining her work as a management scholar and consultant with her work as an artist, instead of standing clearly in one of the worlds to observe how the other two are connecting. In addition to writing about the potential of artistic interventions in organisations, she is bringing her art into them. Her engagement with the visual arts started as a sideline with evening painting classes, which later led to invitations to The Banff Centre and the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design as an artist in residence. Her artist perspectives recently started overflowing into her speeches on global leadership (for example at the 2010 Academy of Management Meetings in Montreal) and into her writing (Adler, 2006, 2010, 2011; Adler and Hansen, 2012), where she is calling on others to join her in “moving beyond the dehydrated language of management” (2010). She cares deeply about enhancing the capacity of organisations to contribute to solving the problems facing societies today and sees the engagement with the arts as a particularly powerful way forward. Now she has published a book with 182 pages, of which just a few are text-filled. The remaining pages offer the reader a selection of her paintings, the wisdom of world leaders over the ages, and lots of blank pages – wide open space inviting the reader to reflect and respond personally to their own and society’s twenty-first century challenges.

Led by senior business editor John Szilagyi, the respected publishing house Routledge has taken the daring step of bringing this unusual book to the market, producing it as a collaboration between their art and business divisions. How will ‘readers’ respond to this new kind of ‘book’ from a leading management academic who is also an artist? It is an artistic intervention that leaders at all levels should experiment with. As a researcher, I would love to study organisations in which Adler’s *Leadership Insight* journal is used. Will conversations, ideas, decisions and behaviours change under the influence of the introductory text, the paintings, and the quotations in this beautifully made ‘artistic management instrument’? Together these three elements are designed to stimulate individual reflection about leadership towards meaningful action.

What will the academic world learn from this artistic intervention in its own culture? I am particularly curious to see how management scholars will respond to this attempt by a senior colleague to blur the boundaries between worlds. Artists I have interviewed about their artistic interventions report often having to deal with harsh criticism from their peers who see such boundary crossing as unclean. Although academics are good at defining the conditions for learning, such as ‘moving out of the comfort zone’, and ‘making boundaries permeable’, how does our system respond when a scholar actually dares to become a dual national in the world of the arts and the world of management scholarship?¹ We could play it safe, apply standard academic criteria and relegate Adler’s *Leadership Insight* journal into the corner of oddities. We could use this case to prove the point that it is essential to maintain an identity in a single world and visit the other only temporarily, if at all. What if, instead, we had the courage to try out significantly new ways of posing questions and presenting our ideas?

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Note

- 1 At the 2010 Montreal Academy of Management meetings, when Nancy hosted an art exhibition with 50 of her paintings, focused on leadership issues, and Routledge simultaneously launched the *Leadership Insight*, she overheard a group of scholars who had known her for years expressing their assessment that "Nancy used to be a very good scholar, but now she is doing 'this stuff'". She admits that she enjoyed watching their confusion when, on exactly the same date, her art exhibition opened and her academic paper with management scholar Anne-Wil Harzing (Adler and Harzing, 2009) won the Academy of Management Learning and Education journal's Outstanding Paper of the Year award. Is Nancy an artist or is she a management scholar? Perhaps the only answer is 'yes'.