Leadership in the Eye of the Beholder

**Abstract:**

Teaching leadership is always an interesting challenge as there are a lot of intangibles and complex interrelated concepts. We are always looking for creative ways to enhance our teaching of leadership concepts. Our session will present an experiential exercise aimed at converging the worlds of art appreciation and leadership. We will discuss debriefing ideas and further assignments. The exercise has been successfully run in a leadership class face to face but it lends itself to online classes easily. We will share the images we have collected and we will ask the audience for suggestions to build up the collection.

Keywords: Leadership, Art, Experiential Exercise

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**Introduction**

The topic of leadership is interwoven into many of the classes we teach. Be it organizational behavior (OB), management or, of course, leadership, the challenge lies in presenting a complex concept where there are few agreed upon ideas. A key element when discussing leadership, we believe, should be the complexity of being a leader finding a style that matches with our abilities, the context and the nature of our followers, and having that style be moldable to changes in those conditions.

When designing a leadership class or session, the best results happen when the class is highly practical and experiential (Doh, 2003). We are always looking for exciting new exercises that can help the students process the ideas around leadership.

We have combined our love for art and leadership into an exercise that will stimulate our student’s imaginations and will help solidify the ideas around leadership. We think this exercise is best used at the beginning of class to determine the students’ mental models about leadership, at the end of the class as an integrating exercise or entire semester to understand different leadership theories. The more expertise the observer has, the more rewarding the aesthetic experience (Leder, Belke, Oeberst & Augustin, 2004). Having an active debrief session is the key to the exercise where the students have the opportunity to hear /read what others have to say and create more complete pictures of leadership.

Art inspires, spurs the imagination, makes us think beyond what is in front of us. Can then art help us understand leadership? We think so and we have put together a collection of artworks that we ask the students to relate to leadership. We followed Stout’s (1997) advice that the selection should be based on the potential to generate ideas and the capacity to tap into people’s experiences and to elicit the context. The artworks are sometimes overtly, sometimes more subtly, related to leadership. Students see different things in them and relate to the artwork in different ways. That is the conversation we want to elicit. Art allows us to contain the contradictions, imperfections, the contingent nature of leadership.

Art-based pedagogies offer opportunities to move from hyper-rational approaches to ones that better integrate complexity (Sutherland & Jelinek, 2015). Aesthetics communicate the essentials (Schein, 2006). De Ciantis (1995) points out that art allows the participants to experience both themselves and others in unexpected ways.

We will share our set of images as a good start and we would like to draw from the “wisdom of the crowd” of participants in our session to grow and expand it. We like that this exercise can also help professors learn more about leadership and develop artistic sensibilities.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Art can move us in ways other content cannot. Art presents unique perspectives to the chaos that is around us (Adler, 2015). Art is able to present complex content, including values, interests, realities that invite analysis (Stout, 1997). It speaks beyond words, leading to an understanding elicited by integration rather than separation (Adler & Delbecq, 2018) which is what science tends to do. As leadership gets more complex (Woodward & Funk, 2010), the need for integration and managing complexity becomes more relevant (Heifetz & Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Art provides us with a window to do this.

Our exercise involves looking at art pieces (visual art: paintings, illustrations, photographs) and relating the concepts learned about leadership to the works. This produces three main benefits: the opportunity to create meaning, the opportunity to bring up assumptions; and improving the ability to see which in turn assists in managing complexity better.

The process of viewing art and analyzing it, art appreciation, evokes a series of cognitive and emotional processes. Sutherland and Jalinek (2015) describe it as an aesthetic experience that creates a certain openness where feelings interact and lead to new knowledge. The context helps support the meaning that is going to be derived from the artwork (Woodward & Funk, 2010 Bullot & Reber, 2013). Having this activity take place within a class on leadership helps us mold the insights that will result even if the artist did not intend it. A picture can embody the matter that is being considered (Tung, 2006). Leder, Belke, Oeberst and Augustin’s (2004) model of aesthetic experiences shows how, while we look at an artwork, we use our experiences, our knowledge to create meaning. This cognitive mastering includes a process of self-related interpretation. This is the process we want to elicit during our exercise. We want the students to explore what the artwork tells them about leadership. The process of art appreciation then leads to evaluation of what we are looking at, that interacts in a cyclical manner with the cognitive mastering, implying that looking at the artwork for long periods will result in even more meaning-making, there is an interaction of perception, emotion and cognition that takes time (Leder & Nadal, 2014). We want to elicit connections and assumptions on the subject matter and the more we ask students to elaborate on what they see and to build around what others have said the stronger the insight on leadership and its complexity. The opportunity to listen to different perspectives on the same artwork, can lead students to realize how complex leadership is as the same input produces very different outputs. We aim to explore the implicit leadership theories that the students hold as suggested by Latham (2014). Beyond the meaning-making on the topic of leadership that the exercise elicits, we also aim to improve the students’ ability to see, in the sense of appreciating the complexity of the world they inhabit through the complexity inherent in artworks.

Current conditions set a new level of demands on leaders; the world does not easily separate into pieces and leaders must operate in an environment of uncertainty and complexity and find ways to be effective (Adler, 2006; Woodward & Funk, 2010). Leaders must pay attention in a more intense way than before. It is a suitable time to leverage the arts (Adler, 2006). Art and artists stimulate us to see more, to broaden our perceptions and to see reality in a different way (Schein, 2013). They can capture more of the world and with that help us see some of our own assumptions and the opportunities in the way ahead. This requires “seeing” in a way that helps us capture the whole and the details that are relevant. This can be achieved by developing an aesthetic sensibility, something as simple as looking at art can have a profound impact. Dolev, Friedlaender & Braverman (2001) share the significant effect for medical students of having an art appreciation experience; it led them to become better diagnosticians. Pellico, Friedlaender & Fennie (2009) show a similar effect on nurses. The authors’ conclusion is that learning to pay attention to the details in artworks and looking for meaning enhances their observational abilities in their profession, making them better able to diagnose and notice indicators of disease in patients. Teaching our students to “see” through art can them lead them to better diagnose their situation and the leadership actions that need to be taken. Seeing in this manner can help students move from their usual mental models (Bartunek & Carboni, 2006).

**Learning Objectives**

* To understand the mental models that students hold about leadership
* To deepen students’ understanding of how they and others view leadership
* To challenge what student believe they know about leadership
* To increase students ability to “see”, to perceive the complexities inherent in leadership

**Exercise Overview**

The exercise can be used in a wide variety of classes: OB, management, leadership, etc. Online and face to face classes lend themselves easily to the exercise. The time needs are varied; we have used a 50-minute class session using the whole set of artworks, but more time can be used by adding more slides, less time using less images.

The only materials needed is the slideshow with the artworks. The exercise consists of showing each image and then asking the students how it relates to leadership. The professor can then ask specific questions to further the ideas expressed or take them in directions they have not explored. It is important to also notice the negative space, those things that are left out or concealed from a first glance (Adler, 2015). Each artwork should be looked at for an adequate period of time, at least 3 minutes, because the more you look at it the more you take from it, therefore deeper meaning can be achieved as well as better awareness of interrelations (Adler & Delbecq, 2018; Stout, 1997; Woodward and Funk, 2010). Initial emotions will be transformed with the exposure (Leder & Nadal, 2014).

It is important that the instructor examines their own frame of reference (Stout, 1997) as it might influence their understanding of the artwork and stay open to new avenues of sensemaking coming from the students.

The process requires vulnerability (Sutherland & Jalinek, 2015), from both the instructor and the students. All need to be willing to listen to different points of view and different insights. For example, one of the images we use is an engraving of John Hancock signing the declaration of independence. His is the first signature and it was big. We asked the students how that relates to what they think leadership is? The students surprised us by talking about how self-centered Hancock was to take up all the space. Then we brought up the point, what if the others were afraid of signing and his doing it help spur the rest? This then changed the discussion and the same action was seen very differently. We then highlighted the importance of context to understand leadership.

The slideshow contains a wide variety of art but mainly paintings, some more direct or indirect in relationship to leadership.

The exercise can be enhanced further with additional assignments. For example, the students might be asked to provide additional examples of artwork with a write-up of how it relates to leadership. Another assignment can be modeled after Peterson, Peterson, Olek, Peterson, Crusz, Bollinger, & Koch (2016) asking the students to create a work of art. Another option is described by Adler and Delbecq (2018) as a series of questions that can be used as a reflection assignment as well: “What in your life deserves the quality of attention you just gave to the painting? What in your leadership deserves the quality of attention you gave to the painting? What in the world deserves the quality of attention you gave to the painting?” (p. 124). A further assignment would involve using the art being used throughout the semester as different leadership theories such as trait theory, transformational leadership, servant leadership, and authentic leadership, and adaptive leadership just to name a few. Different pieces of art might speak to students as the different theories are explored.

An interesting opportunity to use this exercise for executive education comes from Bartunek & Carboni (2006) who point out that looking at art might give the opportunity to evoke the feel of an organization. The exercise can then be given the added context for the participants to not just connect the artwork to leadership in the abstract but also in the embodied experience in their organization.

**Session Description**

We are requesting a 90 minute session.

The following is the timeline for the session:

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| Timing | Topic |
| 10minutes | Welcome and Greeting (ask what participants hope to get out of the session) |
| 15 minutes | Why art? (Provide some context for why we developed this exercise, describe using art to study leadership) |
| 30 minutes | Experience the art as leadership (Describe the exercise then show some of the slides so that participants can experience the activity) |
| 20 minutes | Discussion of the exercise and additional art ideas (Encourage participants to suggest other artwork and address any questions or concerns that participants might have) |
| 15 Minutes | Discussion & Wrap Up |

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