

There is Business Like Show Business:

Leadership Lessons from the Theater

LAURA DUNHAM R. EDWARD FREEMAN

Given the complexities of the current market environment, business leaders are increasingly called upon to exercise skills that have not been a traditional part of their mandate. “Command-and-control” models of leadership have given way to approaches that emphasize vision, values, collaboration, and coaching. With these changes has come a need for new sources of insight into and inspiration for this new take on leadership. One such source is the arts.

In this paper, we propose that business leaders can gain practical insights into the new leadership requirements by examining the leadership styles, skills and techniques of “best-in-class” theater directors. We believe that effective theater directors are better than their business counterparts at managing in the way business leaders must manage in the future. Specifically, good theater directors are trained to manage the dichotomous objectives of (1) achieving organizational unity and cohesiveness behind a vision or set of goals, whereas at the same time (2) giving free rein to the multiple, individual and unique talents of the people within their organizations. Call this the Principle of Unity and Multiplicity: pulling together a cohesive whole whereas encouraging an explosion of individual and idiosyncratic activity. It will be a skill that more and more business leaders will be called upon to master as they seek

to build adaptive, faster-moving, and more innovative organizations.

THE BUSINESS LEADER: CURRENT THINKING

It is a recurring theme among management theorists and practitioners that business leaders today face a radically different and more difficult environment than that faced by preceding generations. Not only must today’s leaders respond to intensified, global competition and discontinuous change, they must guide their organizations to become better at competing in such conditions, to become more agile, more creative, more adept at learning. Much has been made of the need for business leaders to empower their employees, to encourage teamwork and collaboration, to free their employees to innovate.

Given this new environment, theorists and practitioners alike are finding themselves forced to reconsider long-held convictions about effective leadership. A raft of new theories has come along in recent years—introducing us to the transformational leader, the charismatic leader, and the visionary leader. With these theories has come an emphasis on a new set of leadership skills needed by today’s executives. The elusive attribute “vision” tops the list of many new leadership theories. The ability to in-



Laura Dunham is a doctoral candidate in management at the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of Virginia, concentrating on entrepreneurship and ethics. Previously, she worked as a management consultant in the strategy division of Renaissance Worldwide, working with such clients as Oracle, IBM, Nortel, and GTE. She is also a former actress and cofounder of Studio Theater of Richmond.

spire, collaborate with, and draw the best from people is also cited as increasingly important. Creativity is appearing with more frequency. According to Vaill, effective leadership today requires passion, creativity, intuition, and a sense of feeling for the organization and the people in it. It requires seeing the corporation as far more than the sum of its economic activities and embracing the view of the corporation as something more complex, more richly human.

We have synthesized these various new demands on the business leader into what we call the Principle of Unity and Multiplicity. According to this principle, the business leader needs to become adept at managing the tension between the need for organizational unity around a coherent vision and the need to encourage the full expression of unique and individual talents. The former has been the subject of much discussion among leadership theorists. The latter is becoming increasingly important as the key to fostering more flexible, creative work forces. However, the two have not been put together yet into any integrated model of business leadership. The Principle of Unity and Multiplicity is a start in that direction.

WHY EXAMINE THE CRAFT OF THE THEATER DIRECTOR?

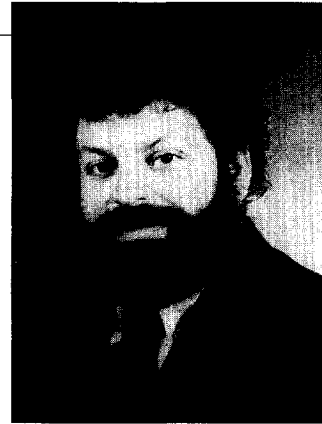
Freeman has argued that we must begin seeing business as a humanity, and we must add learnings and teaching techniques from the humanities into the business school curriculum. He and Donaldson write, "The humanities are relevant to business precisely because . . . they force us to consider the depth and complexity of the people who are responsible for the success of businesses. They ask not to see people as motivated solely by economic goals but to view the problem of motivation as a complex process of how human beings achieve joint ends by working together."

In recent years, academics and practitioners have in fact begun to turn to the arts to uncover new insights about organizational

dynamics. In some cases they use art as a metaphor, as when Drucker suggested that the 21st century leader will become more like an orchestra conductor. More recently, Mintzberg has compared the activities of a symphony conductor to the "covert leadership" style best suited for leading professional organizations. Both Weick and DePree have suggested the jazz band as a model for today's business organization, whereas Vaill likens the effective leader to a performing artist.

Others have begun trying to draw more specific lessons by examining the techniques employed by artists and identifying their usefulness to business practitioners. Crossan et al., have looked at the improvisation techniques used by actors to uncover applications for use in areas of management practice. A recent issue of *Organization Science* was devoted exclusively to exploring learning from the craft of jazz musicians, to see what techniques could aid organizations in supporting ongoing innovation and strategic renewal.

To date, however, no one has examined the work of the theater director to see what insights can be gained with regard to leading in the new business environment. And yet the best-in-class theater director could be considered the quintessential example of a leader trained to create and nurture what have been called "hot groups" by Jean Lipman-Blumen and Harold J. Leavitt, those teams of highly impassioned and dedicated individuals, capable of the kind of focused, disciplined and immensely creative work that galvanizes organizations. Although much has been written about the special attributes of such high-performance teams in business, less has been addressed to the *craft* involved in generating this mysterious alchemy. The best-in-class theater director is thoroughly steeped in such a craft. By examining the director's work, business leaders can gain much insight into creating and sustaining such groups in their own organizations.



R. Edward Freeman joined the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration in 1987 as Elis and Signe Olsson Professor of Business Administration and director of the Olsson Center for Applied Ethics. Freeman is also Professor of Religious Studies. Before coming to The Darden School, he taught at the University of Minnesota and the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. Freeman's areas of interest are business ethics, strategy and leadership, and organizational studies. His most recent books are *Environmentalism and the New Logic of Business: How Firms Can be Profitable and Leave Our Children a Living Plant* (with J. Pearce and R. Dodd), an attempt to show how environmental values can be used to craft sustainable competitive advantage; and *Ethics and Agency Theory* (with N. Bowie), among others. He has written more than fifty articles and is on the editorial boards of *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Business and Society*, and *Research in Corporate Social Performance and Policy*. He is the editor of the Ruffin Series in Business Ethics published by Oxford University Press. He has a Ph.D. from Washington University and a B.A. from Duke University. In 1993, he was chosen for the Outstanding Faculty Award by the Darden student body.

THE BUSINESS LEADER AND THE DIRECTOR—SIMILAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Although they may seem poles apart, the theater director and business leader, in fact, share many similarities regarding roles and responsibilities. Yet the techniques they employ diverge sharply.

Each is responsible for leading a cadre of people in a dynamic, goal-oriented activity occurring under budget, and deadline pressures. Both shape and communicate their group's mission and overarching goals, select their teams, allocate resources, monitor performance, and adjust the various elements to achieve the targeted performance.

Like the business leader, the theater director's job entails analysis, interpretation and planning. Although the theater director might seem to have an advantage—in that her script is handed to her—the task of understanding and bringing that script successfully to life subjects the director to many of the same vagaries that market forces impose upon business leaders. Plays elude understanding just as markets do. In the same way that a business leader can misinterpret the market, a director can fail to grasp the meaning of a play or to develop a cogent interpretation of it, resulting in as misconceived a final product as Ford's doomed Edsel.

Like the business leader, the director must not only develop a valid understanding of the material; he or she must also be able to execute upon that understanding. The director, like the business leader, must articulate a vision and develop a strategy that rests upon that understanding. And just like the business leader, even when the director has a keen understanding of the material, has formed a vision and planned a strategy, he or she can fall far short of goals by failing to effectively marshal the individuals who can execute that strategy successfully. Thus, the director, like the business leader, must spend a good portion of her time working with those she is leading—coaching, cajoling, guiding, collaborating.

Given these similarities, it is particularly

striking that the business leader and the theater director diverge so sharply in terms of the techniques employed. Although the business leader has only in recent years begun appreciating the need for managing the "human factor" in business, the focus of the theater director is unabashedly upon the rich, complex interactions of the people under his direction. This has led to the development of a craft centered on bringing out the best in each individual while working toward the ensemble's goals.

Thus, consider these skills—an example of the Principle of Unity and Multiplicity at work—a core competency of successful directors. Specifically, "best-in-class" theater directors are noted for their ability to articulate a unifying vision that serves the play as a whole and to pull together a group of disparate talents and skills (from performers to designers to technicians) to achieve this vision. At the same time, the best directors allow each individual the autonomy to bring his or her unique and idiosyncratic talents to bear on the role.

The rest of this paper will seek to analyze those aspects of the director's craft that create this core competency and to examine how they could be applied in a business setting by a business leader. Of course, we recognize that there are bad directors who produce bad theater, and even bad directors who fumble their way to remarkably good theater. In this paper, we will focus on the work of directors who can be considered best in class, and who, therefore, exemplify what is best and most noteworthy about the director's craft. We have drawn these initial findings from two sets of sources. First, we have reviewed the leading texts on the director's craft. Second, to gain insight into how best-in-class directors actually use the techniques described in the texts, we have reviewed interviews with various directors who are internationally known for their critically acclaimed work. We will analyze the craft of the best-in-class director in three stages: pre-production, rehearsal, and performance.

LESSONS FROM BEST-IN-CLASS THEATER DIRECTORS

Lessons from Pre-Production— Crafting Vision and Building a Team

Preproduction is the point at which the director is most intensely involved with analysis, interpretation and planning. It is at this stage that the director forms his ideas about the play, develops a vision and begins selecting the team that will bring that vision to life.

Consider this period analogous to those times when a business leader is facing a new challenge—entering a new market, launching a new product, starting a new business—or simply attempting to reevaluate the current situation and examine existing and potential strategies.

Drawing vision from the particulars.

"[Lee Strasberg of the Actors Studio] made me think differently about what a director does as well as about how and why he does it. He made me consider not just the lines of a play but the life of a play. A play, he taught me, is like an iceberg, eight-ninths of which never rises above the surface of the water; but the size and shape of that one-ninth that does rise above the surface are always determined by the eight-ninths that remains below."—Alan Schneider; *Entrances: An American Director's Journey*

"Vision is the art of seeing things invisible."—Jonathan Swift

The development and articulation of a vision seems a mysterious and elusive task, whether it is for a theatrical production or a business unit. Yet, for both, it begins with the prosaic task of extensive analysis. Just as the business leader must examine a myriad of market indicators, consumer research and company performance metrics, the director must analyze many sources of information before she can begin to develop an interpretation of the play and, from that interpretation, craft a directorial vision. Just as with the business leader, the analysis of these "visi-

ble" pieces of information is only the first step. The successful development and articulation of vision requires taking the leap from a grasp of the "visible" information to an understanding the "invisible," from data to intuitive insight.

The difference between the two leaders lies in what types of information they use and how they use it to shape their interpretations of the business environment/play. The business leader historically examines an array of quantitative data, such as market indicators and consumer research, in an attempt to understand an abstract landscape—markets, consumer segments, financial performance. Even when the business leader looks at qualitative data, he uses it to shape perceptions of the abstract entities that are the subject of his analysis. One qualitative data point (such as one consumer's feelings about a product) is valuable only as it helps generalize knowledge to the broad, more abstract entity of the customer segment. The business leader thus works from the abstract to the abstract and, on occasion, from the particular to the abstract.

On the other hand, the director focuses on qualitative information to come to an understanding of the intensely individual and personal. Although the director does consider a variety of abstract information—such as plot structure, setting, themes, language—it is ultimately used to help shape a clearer understanding of the particular. In this case, the director seeks an intense and particular understanding of each and every character in the play. The theater director works from the abstract to the particular.

Louis Catron in his book on *The Director's Vision* states, "Detailed examination of characters is the foundation for accurate directorial vision." For successful directors, this examination is intense and often emotional. As he considers the characters in a play, the director must develop, as Catron puts it, "a concept about the meaning of their motivations, objectives, actions and relationships with each other; and a perception of how their experiences relate to [himself] specifically and humanity more generally. [His]

vision includes emotional response to the characters, perhaps a sympathetic response to one, delight in the foibles and eccentricities of another, fascination with the struggles of another, or respect for the integrity of another. The directorial concept is most frequently based on psychological insight into the characters and sensitivity to the unexpressed motivations for their speeches, silences, and actions."

From this rich understanding of the people in the play springs directorial vision. By focusing on the particular, by immersing herself in an examination of human nature and by getting to know and feel for each of the people in her play, the director better enables herself to make the intuitive leap from knowledge to vision.

The lesson then for the business leader is the need to look to the particular and intensely personal to shape the vision needed to drive organizational cohesiveness. One example of this approach might be that taken by Lou Gerstner in his effort to reinvigorate a floundering IBM. By his own account, he spent some 40% of his time in individual meetings with customers, seeking to understand their businesses and the problems confronting them. It was by immersing himself in the particulars of his client's businesses that he was able to craft a new and more effective vision for IBM. It is through his ongoing commitment to individual customer meetings that he has helped IBM develop a more customer-oriented approach.

Although a business leader cannot be expected to understand each and every customer (or other stakeholder), a deeper and richer understanding of human nature and a better grasp of individual situations can surely feed vision as successfully as it does for the theater artist. Charts, graphs and tables of market trends and customer characteristics are certainly useful to understanding, but when it comes time for understanding to spark intuitive insight and vision, a deeper understanding of individual "motivations, objectives, actions and relationships with each other" can enable the leap from knowledgeable to visionary.

Emphasizing good casting. "Best in-class" directors will attest that casting is the most crucial step they take to assuring the success of a production. Without the "right" people in the "right" roles, the most brilliant of directorial conceptions will fail to make the transition from vision to realized production.

Most business leaders will also agree that the right team is critical. The difference is that few would invest quite the same level of time and energy to "getting the casting right." Business leaders have tended to rely upon the carrot or the stick—incentive pay and other motivational programs, or performance objectives that drive promotion or demotion. Few develop the skills or get the training to understand individual and group dynamics or how each performer is matched to his or her role.

So how do "best-in-class" directors go about assuring that they get the best possible casts? Three tactics seem to apply, each of which has resonance for the business leader:

- Finding "ensemble" players;
- Balancing an understanding of the demands of the role with a respect for the unique qualities the actor brings to it;
- Avoiding typecasting.

Although directors look for the best actors available to them and the ones that seem to best embody the character as the director interprets it, successful directors will often put a greater premium on the ability of the actor to work as part of a team. As critically acclaimed director Peter Brook puts it, "Now the first thing you look for in casting is decent people. A group can't work together if you stupidly, artificially bring into it someone that you don't really trust. . . . So you have to have people who share a wish to do honest work together." Good directors will often forego the "star" talent to select the actor more likely to contribute to the smooth workings of the ensemble.

Good casting also relies upon the director's ability to both thoroughly understand the nature of the role and be open to the unique qualities various actors can bring to the role. The combination of the two is critical. The director must begin the process

with a solid understanding of the role and its demands. But rather than becoming rigid about their vision of the role, best-in-class directors recognize that a fully realized performance is a blend of both directorial vision and the unique contributions of the individual actor. Thus, when casting, although the director starts with a detailed conception of the role, he is willing to embrace a new or unconventional spin on that conception by a talented actor. As Declan Donnellan (Founder and Director, Cheek by Jowl Theater Company; and Associate Director, Royal National Theater, London), puts it, "It's pointless saying, 'That's not Hamlet,' because there are as many different Hamlets as there are actors multiplied by the days of the week. It's seeing how the actor has made the words specific which is moving." This means the director must put as much effort into getting to know the actor, and what makes the actor interesting, as he puts into the initial analysis of the role. He must look beyond resume and qualifications and focus intensely during auditions on getting a feel for the person.

Finally, good directors avoid typecasting. Typecasting is always a temptation when directors come across actors who embody the most obvious traits of the role or who have performed similar roles numerous times before. But it is a "corner-cutting" strategy that ultimately reduces the impact of the production. First, it fails to support the growth of the actor. Typecasting eliminates challenges for the actor and often results in a staler performance. Second, it flattens the dimension that could be brought to the role by a more unconventional choice. Innovative casting requires more thought and effort on the part of the director, but it generally pays off in terms of more exciting and fully realized productions.

The lesson for the business leader is that selecting the right team members drives success more effectively than attempting to influence miscast organizational members through incentives and other control measures. This means not only seeking people with the requisite talents or skills for the task at hand, but also finding people capable of

effective collaboration. This is a secret that has been discovered by other "Great Groups," as Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman call them in *Organizing Genius*. Bennis and Biederman describe the critical role recruitment played in building the group at Xerox Corp.'s Palo Alto Research Center (PARC) that would create the first user-friendly computer. Bob Taylor, head of one of PARC's key divisions, saw recruitment as one of his most important responsibilities. Although he sought the best talent he could find, he was most focused on finding people who could work collaboratively and was "willing to sacrifice the occasional disruptive genius for the good of a group that would enhance each other's work, not hinder it."

Selecting the right person requires having an intense understanding of the requirements of the job whereas remaining open to the unconventional spin a talented manager can bring to the tasks set for her. As with the director, a manager's role must be seen as a blend of the leader's vision and the manager's unique capabilities. This means looking beyond the qualifications listed on the resume and working to gain a deeper understanding of the personalities involved. As a top-performing senior manager at one of the leading ad agencies told us, "I don't care what their previous experience is. I am looking for bright people, eager to work, who I think will fit into my team." And managers must avoid the seductive pull of "typecasting," finding those people who have done the task many times before. Although experience is always helpful, putting people in situations where they are stretched generates greater excitement, creativity, and commitment.

Finally, the importance of casting to success means that business leaders must develop the skills necessary to carry out the recruiting and selection tasks outlined above, and they must invest in training their staff to do the same. Recruiting cannot be the responsibility of a select group of human-resource professionals. It must become a

large part of every manager's job as he or she seeks to build well-cast ensembles.

Lessons from rehearsal—drawing the best from a team.

"To sum it up, the directing of a play is a turn of the hand, a turn of the mind and of the heart, a function of such sensitiveness that everything human can enter into it. No more, and no less."—Louis Jouvet; *Directors on Directing*

The rehearsal is the period in which the director works with cast and crew to actualize his vision. It is here that, in the parlance of a business leader, the director guides execution of his strategy. This is a period of intense involvement with all members of the team. The skills the director brings to bear correspond with those that the business leader needs to nurture teams and draw the best from them.

Approaching the work collaboratively.

"One might say that the director is the author of the theatrical production, except for the fact that in the collaborative art of the theater no one can be more than a crucial collaborator."—Harold Clurman; *Lies Like Truth*

Effective collaboration begins with the understanding that all individuals have the power and authority to shape the enterprise. In business this sentiment has had its most clear expression in the movement toward employee empowerment. Empowerment is crucial in the theater, as it is what gives each actor the freedom to build her character and fully tap her talents. However, empowerment without collaboration can be chaotic at worst, unreliable at best. Thus, in good theater, the notion of "empowerment" is always linked to a strong ethic of collaboration.

Good directors put collaboration at the heart of the work. Although they bring a solid viewpoint—their directorial vision and conception of the play—they actively seek new insights from cast and crew as rehearsals unfold. To ensure effective collaboration, the director relies on several techniques:

- Creating the "scaffolding" within which actors freely perform their craft,
- Addressing fear,
- Encouraging experimentation and failure, and
- Keeping the scale small.

The director's conception of the play serves as the structure within which the company of actors can carry out their own craft of bringing the characters to life. As Declan Donnellan puts it, "On the whole, it's for the actor to make the detail; it's up to me to make sure the actors know what they are doing." Or, in the words of Sir John Gielgud, "There must always be room to adopt to an unforeseen stroke of inventiveness, some spontaneous effect which may occur at a good rehearsal and bring a scene suddenly and unexpected to life. Yet the basic scaffolding must be firm . . ." A well reasoned and clearly articulated directorial vision allows the actor to focus his work, enables each actor to see how his part contributes to the whole and provides a clear set of goals for the company. It is the discipline that frees the actor to explore his creativity.

To successfully free this creativity, the director must address the possible fears that inhibit team members from expressing themselves. Declan Donnellan says, "We spend a lot of time in rehearsal trying to cure fear both by its symptoms and its cause. Its symptoms are division, separation and feeling that you are being judged, which means you start to judge . . . You try to go forward with some sort of spirit of group generosity, and each of us tries to overcome our individual vanities to know that the whole of what we do is greater than the sum of our parts. That's what's so potentially moving and transcendental about theater: that when people gather in a room, something extraordinary can happen which isn't entirely to do with them."

Acknowledging this fear is the first step. Directors then seek to alleviate or overcome the effects of fear with various group exercises that may or may not have any direct relation to the play. Warm-up exercises (both physical and emotional) and improvisations

are two ways that directors attempt to build group trust and individual confidence.

Another way that directors address this fear is through an active encouragement of experimentation and acceptance of the inevitable failures that will greet some experiments. It is only when actors feel safe to fail that they also feel safe to stretch themselves and try new and daring things. The internationally renowned Lev Dodin, artistic director of the Maly Dramatic Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia, says, "Failure . . . leads to quite artistic things, because if you are not afraid of failure you can try, you can experiment, you can search for new ways, whereas when you are afraid of failure, you wouldn't do it, you would do it the way you did it yesterday, only to repeat that success."

Finally, successful directors recognize the value of keeping the scale small to encourage a better sense of teamwork and ensemble. Declan Donnellan says, "One of the great problems with fear is that it tends to replicate more happily in large institutions. It's very important for us that Cheek by Jowl has only fourteen people . . . a certain degree of closeness is often there. You can't rely on it, and if it's not present it's disappointing and the work isn't as good to be perfectly frank. Of course, sometimes you can be very close and the work is completely s____, but at it's very best you are close and you do good work as a result of that. But that's more difficult the larger the group that you have."

The key lesson for the business leader is that empowerment without collaboration means "multiplicity" without "unity." Collaboration is time- and energy consuming, and once again requires great personal investment and sensitivity. The benefits are that the enterprise incorporates the experience and insights of all, whereas remaining focused on a coherent set of goals.

It is a "hands-on" job. The business leader cannot be the one sitting behind the desk reviewing the latest performance metrics and expecting great things from subordinates. She must instead work in close concert with them, shaping the enterprise together by viewing them as collaborators

and encouraging that interaction. She must create the overarching structure of vision and preliminary goals, but then permit organizational members to experiment within that broad framework. Experimentation is inhibited through fear, so effective leaders always seek to alleviate that fear through their words, actions and in team-building exercises. Experimentation also means failure on occasion—good leaders accept this and make sure that organizational members are not penalized when such circumstances arise. Finally, good leaders recognize that it is easier to develop trust among collaborators when the number of collaborators is small. In business, this means keeping working groups, teams, even divisions as small as possible so that members can get to know each other and become accustomed to working together. Although many companies known for innovation have incorporated this idea in their formation of small "skunk-works," where teams work together on new product development, this tactic can and should be used across the organization.

AES Corporation embodies many of these principles. The entire corporation is organized around small teams with full responsibility for their areas. Chairman Roger Sant and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dennis Bakke provide the structure in terms of guiding vision and core values, but local teams make all the decisions, including those on major investments and acquisitions. The company has abolished most functional departments and rotates its workers into different areas to encourage all workers to become well-rounded generalists. This in turn leads to greater collaboration, as team members seek advice and information from each other when they take on new responsibilities. Sant and Bakke encourage experimentation as a way to generate learning and higher performance. One example they cite is the maintenance crew at a Connecticut plant that asked to manage the plant's \$12 million cash reserve. They took on the job and were soon beating the returns being generated by a more experienced team of investors that

managed the company's treasury in the home office.

Embracing complexity—“prismatic thinking”. To bring out the full range of meanings in the play and to animate performances that capture the many facets of the characters, directors seek to explore multiple layers of information and emotion. Although their business counterparts often seek to reduce complex phenomena to two-by-two matrices, a best-in-class director seeks the reverse, attempting to uncover the many levels of complex phenomenon embedded in seemingly simple action. It is not enough to know that a character is angry; the director and actor must uncover the envy, fear, insecurity, and/or other emotions, beliefs, motivations that drive and color that anger. Just as the facets of a prism reflect the multiple hues encompassed in light, the director seeks to reflect the full spectrum of complex phenomenon that color a single action. To do this, the director and actor engage in what we call “prismatic thinking,” eagerly seeking to explore many layers of information, unafraid of confronting the complexities and contradictions that are revealed.

Two techniques are helpful in this process:

- Experimenting with contrary interpretations, and
- Recognizing that there is no “one right way.”

Experimentation involves exploring multiple scenarios, many of which may initially seem completely contrary to the director's initial interpretation. For instance, scenes are considered and rehearsed in a variety of ways, with different underlying meanings and different character motivations, objectives and/or activities. Although some scenarios may seem farfetched and easily dismissed out of hand, exploring them in rehearsal can spark new ideas about the scene that may become extremely useful. Creativity is spurred, new insights are generated, and Gielgud's “unforeseen stroke[s] of inventiveness” become possible. Although only a part of what is generated through this

process is ultimately used in the production, insights yielded through the process become part of Strasberg's eight-ninths of the iceberg. Although invisible to the audience, they shape what is visible, adding texture to performances and enriching the overall production.

To reconcile the many divergent pieces of information that are revealed through such a process, the best-in-class director comes to recognize that there is no one single answer. Just as “there are as many different Hamlets as there are actors multiplied by the days of the week,” there are many different interpretations of a play. Each is capable of revealing its own, and often contradictory truths. Director Harold Clurman tells a story about Russian playwright Maxim Gorky: “In 1935, Gorky's play *Yegor Bulichev* was done at two different theaters in Moscow. At one theater the play was interpreted as the drama of a dying man seeking the truth in a world of liars; at another the play became the drama of a man with an inability to understand a truth which was new and unfamiliar to him. When Gorky was asked which was the true interpretation he answered: ‘Both—and perhaps there are more.’ Gorky knew that a really live play has within it the possibilities of almost as many meanings as there are creative people to find them.”

Such an approach also means that, even within a given interpretation of a piece, a production will continue to grow and evolve. Director and ensemble have become used to incorporating new and difficult information, and thus have built an enterprise capable of continually adapting. As rehearsals proceed, and even during actual performances, new insights gained will continue to feed the group and inform the production.

The lesson for business leaders is that they too need to encourage themselves and their team members to adopt a more open-ended approach to problem-solving by seeking the complex layers of information embedded in issues under consideration. “Prismatic thinking” means exploring problems in all their messy dimensions and accepting that there is no single “point” an-

swer. Rather than seeking that one answer, managers must deepen their thinking by considering multiple and contradictory scenarios. They must take action on an experimental basis, always scanning for new information and readily adapting to changing circumstances. This echoes Eisenhardt's findings on successful companies in "high velocity" industries. Rather than limiting the information they review, these firms seek more information and evaluate more alternatives than their slower-acting and less successful competitors. She cites an executive at one successful computing company who characterized the process by which his teams evaluated multiple scenarios before making decisions. The approach was "(1) proposing a sincere alternative, (2) supporting someone else's alternative even when actually opposing it, and (3) proposing an insincere alternative, one that the proposer did not actually support." The purpose, according to the executive was to "aerate" different possibilities.

Lessons from performance—maintaining high performance teams.

"The thing you've got to realize about directing is that you are not controlling the evening and that's one thing I've learned over the last 15 years as a director: to control less and less."—Declan Donnellan; In Contact with the Gods? Directors Talk Theater

Once a play is in performance, the most active phase of a director's work is completed. He must now stand by and watch the company execute what was developed during rehearsals. However, just as the business leader monitors ongoing operations, the director can also periodically check up on a production to ensure that it is staying focused and fresh each time. The difference lies in what entails the subject of his scrutiny. Although business leaders look critically at the end result—profits, market share, and so forth—the "best-in-class" director is most interested in the process. Regardless of the end results (in terms of critical praise, audience response, ticket sales), he looks to continue

improving on the process and to continue learning about the play.

Staying in the moment. Although the production is shaped through the process undergone in rehearsal, the ongoing performance requires a freshness that brings the play to vivid life for each audience. What the director looks for, and what actors seek to provide, in each performance is a sense that everyone on stage is fully involved, focused and "mindful" at each moment. Rather than falling into habit, delivering lines and taking movement automatically, good actors seek to "stay in the moment" and respond authentically to any subtle change that occurs on stage. As award-winning director Peter Sellars puts it, "I create a structure in which the actors on stage are as surprised as the audience about what happens moment by moment, and where the performance is never the same any two nights in a row. . . . Again for me the point of theater is that it's not ever fixed. It's about how immediate can we get to how we feel about this at this minute? And one night the actor has a lot of emotion about something and the next night not. And so I ask the actors not to fake it. If a scene doesn't go the way you want, it's too bad, you have to just stay in it and figure out a way for that character to deal with whatever's happening. And, meanwhile, that will then affect the scene two scenes from now. So when you next walk on, you'll be walking on with everything that upset you two scenes ago."

Contrast this to the business setting, where systemization and routinization are seen as the keys to efficient and consistent performance, where expert systems supplant human judgment, and where best practices are taken from one organization and imposed wholesale on another. Although many of these tactics do indeed provide efficiencies and improve performance, they also undermine the individual's incentive to stay attuned to the nuances of what is going on around her and to respond "off script" if the need arises. They may make the group more

efficient, but these tactics also seem sure to take the sizzle out of any "hot group."

Two techniques employed by directors help mitigate this problem on stage:

- Directors must emphasize the importance of listening and responding to the immediate environment.

- Directors must accept risk-taking.

Listening and responding authentically to one's surroundings may seem an obvious and easily executed piece of advice, but it's trickier than it appears. Just as in life we often find ourselves on "auto pilot," responding to stimuli automatically and without full awareness, actors fall into habits. Given the need to repeat the same lines and the same movement each evening, the danger of this kind of automation is particularly acute. In addition, actors often feel an obligation to the script and the rehearsed staging that intimidates spontaneity. Director Randy Strawderman tells the story of a performance he watched in which the actors fell into this very trap. In the scene, one of the actors playing an old man was sitting in a rocking chair talking to several other characters when, in a moment of overexuberance, he rocked himself right over, toppling backwards off the porch with his chair. The other actors, who were no doubt appalled by this turn of events, continued to go about the scene as rehearsed. Rather than responding to what was actually happening on stage, they continued speaking to the man in normal tones and even stepped over him as he flopped about, struggling to get out of the chair and back into place. Needless to say, the audience was torn between laughter and concern for the man, and the scene and subsequent performance deteriorated from there.

Encouraging better listening and authentic response to the situation requires that the director trust his cast to take risks and depart from what had been rehearsed when necessary. If this kind of behavior is encouraged from the start and allowed during the rehearsal process, the director is not only able to build that trust in his ensemble; he is also

able to prepare the cast to take such measures.

For the business leader, this means encouraging organizational members to "stay in the moment." Rather than staying rigidly focused on preset objectives or constrained within a preset system or set of policies, organization members must stay attuned to their environment and, when necessary, take risks to respond authentically to what they see unfolding before them. Once again, Eisenhardt's work is relevant in her findings that successful high velocity firms stay far more attuned to "real-time" operating data than to historic measures or to forecast predictions so they can respond to change as it occurs. She describes one microcomputer company whose senior executives monitored a raft of quantitative and qualitative data, meeting several times a week to address key issues that surfaced in the data. This company was known for its ability to change tack far more rapidly than its competitors, who tended to focus on either historic data or on future issues.

"Staying in the moment" means business leaders need to cast a more skeptical eye on the benefits of systemization and detailed policies and practices. They may speed and streamline the organization but they may risk encouraging employees to continue repeating their lines while simply stepping over new problems as they arise.

Managing the tension between learning and creativity.

"We normally find that we didn't really know what the play was about until after the last performance, which is very regrettable . . . But there you go, all these things are a work in process and they're part of your life."—Declan Donnellan; *In Contact with the Gods? Directors Talk Theater*

As in any profession, including business, good directors recognize that they must embrace continual learning to further their growth. The difference for the director is that she also recognizes that she must be vigilant in managing the tension between the tech-

nique gained through learning and the creativity fueled by a sense of newness.

Continued learning strengthens craft whereas also renewing the director's creative energy. Lev Dodin says, "This is an ongoing process lasting the whole of our lives. Just before yesterday's show . . . we had another rehearsal of the same play and still we criticized each other and discovered new things. This is one of the ways of bringing up actors and educating actors. This means that the process is not over and can never finish, that the truth has not been discovered and that there is always a great space to go on and to discover. . . . In fact there is a whole system of training . . . and this system is directed at acquiring the ability of making an actor always relate himself to the time, to the present atmosphere and the present moment of life."

The tension the director faces is between technique and creativity. Although solid technique frees the director to fully explore her creativity, it can also cause the director to lose the rawness that spurs unusual and innovative thinking and approaches. Tyrone Guthrie put it this way, "It is the case that as one gets older one's technique, if one is an industrious and intelligent person, tends to become better; but there is also the danger that it becomes a little slick. . . . The record begins to get worn, and we slip too easily into old grooves, the same association of ideas comes back too readily and easily. . . . That is obviously frightfully dangerous in any creative work. It is the negation of creativity; it is just falling back into habit."

The director battles this problem by remaining critical of his own work, questioning his choices and challenging himself to reject "habits" in favor of choices that are new and ambitious. Most important, the best-in-class director always assumes that each play creates new opportunities to learn. As Declan Donnellan says, "For me, theater is always at its best when I'm learning as well. So long as we do all understand that we are learning, we gain from that. That's very important, as opposed to the idea that we're predigested experts. I don't feel in any way like that. When I go into a play I can feel I

have confidence, because something has happened before, which is rather different from having technique to rely upon."

The lesson for business leaders is to continue pursuing learning in their field, but to seek to stay on guard against falling into habit. Although acknowledging that experience and learning build craft and technique, they must seek to protect their creativity by approaching each new problem as a novice. As AES Chairman Roger Sant puts it, "We try to reinvent the wheel every time we get a chance. The process of learning and doing is what creates engagement—fun."

SUMMARY

In the rapidly changing, increasingly complex world in which the business professional operates, it is becoming less and less difficult to see where the worlds of business and theater, as traditionally conceived, collide. When competitive advantage depends upon the uniquely human ability to sense and adapt to changing environments, it becomes critical to see the corporation as far more than the sum of its economic activities and to embrace a view of the corporation as something more complex, more richly human. As they seek to instill greater speed, creativity and flexibility into their organizations, the Principle of Unity and Multiplicity can become a key source of guidance.

Best-in-class theater directors draw upon this principle as the foundation for their work with the theater ensemble. Several techniques have been identified that are derived from this principle:

- Drawing vision from particularity—focusing on the particular and intensely personal, seeking a deeper and richer understanding of human nature, to enable the intuitive leap from knowledge to vision;
- Emphasizing good casting—focusing on the person rather than control measures; emphasizing ensemble;
- Approaching the work collaboratively—by creating the "scaffolding," ad-

dresser fear, encouraging experimentation and failure, keeping the scale small;

- Embracing complexity—practicing “prismatic thinking”;

- “Staying in the moment”—attunement to the environment rather than adherence to systemization;

- Managing the tension between learning and creativity—gaining craft whereas maintaining “newness.”

As business leaders find themselves in-

creasingly called upon to follow the Principle of Unity and Multiplicity—shaping organizational cohesiveness whereas simultaneously encouraging unique individual achievement—they can gain insights from those practitioners whose craft is focused on such a result. “All the world’s a stage,” Shakespeare tells us. Although business leaders may not be used to thinking of their domain in these terms, it might be time to consider the possibilities inherent in that idea.



SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

For some engrossing accounts of effective and creative leadership, see Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman, *Organizing Genius* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997). For more information about the "New Leadership," see B. M. Bass, *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* (New York: Free Press, 1985); R. J. House, "A 1976 theory of charismatic leadership" in J.G. Hunt and L.L. Larson (Eds.), *Leadership: The Cutting Edge* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977); J. A. Conger, *The Charismatic Leader: Behind the Mystique of Exceptional Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989); A. Gini, "Moral Leadership: An Overview," in W. E. Rosenbach and R. L. Taylor (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); W. Bennis, *Why Leaders can't lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989); M. Sashkin, "The Visionary Leader: A New Theory of Organizational Leadership," in J. A. Conger and R. N. Kanungo (Eds.), *Charismatic Leadership in Management* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988); Westley and Mintzberg, 1989; J. Krantz, "Lessons from the Field: An Essay on the Crisis of Leadership in Contemporary Organizations," in W. E. Rosenbach and R. L. Taylor (Eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); F. R. Westley and H. Mintzberg, "Visionary Leadership and Strategic Management," *Strategic Management Journal* 1989, 10, 17-32; Peter Drucker, *The New Realities* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989).

For interesting discussions on the need

to incorporate the humanities into business, see Donaldson, T. J. and R. E. Freeman (Eds.), *Business as a Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1994). For more on business leadership and the arts, see Peter Vaill, *Managing as a Performing Art* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991); H. Mintzberg, "Covert Leadership: Notes on Managing Professionals," *Harvard Business Review* 76:6; and the entire September-October 1998 issue of *Organization Science*. For an instructive account of empowerment in large corporations, see the interview with AES Chairman Roger Sant and CEO Dennis Bakke by Suzy Wetlaufer, "Organizing for Empowerment: An Interview with AES's Roger Sant and Dennis Bakke," *Harvard Business Review* 1999, 77, 110-123.

For insights into the craft of the theater director, we found the following extremely useful: Louis E. Catron, *The Director's Vision, Play Direction from Analysis to Production* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing, 1989); T. Cole and H. Crich Chinoy (Eds.), *Directors on Directing* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976); M. M. Delgado and P. Heritage, (Eds.), *In Contact with the Gods? Directors Talk Theatre*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); J. Leure and S. Berger (Eds.), *The Theatre Team*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998); Constantin Stanislavki, *An Actor's Handbook*, Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (Ed.), (New York: Theatre Arts, 1963) Other works cited include: Alan Schneider, *Entrances*, (New York, Viking Penguin Inc., 1986); Harold Clurman, *On Directing* (New York: MacMillan, 1972).

