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INTRODUCTION

Most leaders emerge by accident rather than intent, even the powerful and important ones, because most people don't want the job. Standing up in front of others and persuading them to do something can be difficult and even frightening. People will do it because there is something they want: not "power" in the abstract, but to make their fragmentary vision of a possible future happen in the world. They need people to help them co-create it, and they will gather as followers those who share their response to the fragment they have communicated. It needs only a few – twelve to twenty-five – and they begin to co-create like a theater ensemble, cascading their influence through a whole organization or society.

Leaders make their work in the world from what their followers make. We can be a passive audience to this process, or we can be actors; we can direct others or we can improvise alongside them. We can participate in the play of life however we choose – but we cannot *not* be in it. Leadership is co-created. It does not lie in one party or the other. It is an illusion in which we all participate. I have my own experience of being a leader, and that was mostly in the theater where the "leader of the creative process" is called a director. I like that word better. It makes it clear that in a group creative enterprise, where the outcome requires innovation, you need someone to give a direction to the creative work of the group. Directors in the theater do exactly that. They point out the direction that things need to go in.

I talk to many business leaders in the course of my work and I have noticed that when they are more relaxed – after a few drinks, perhaps – their success stories change and they begin to admit that rather than having made a successful company solely by dint of careful planning and consistent execution, they have benefited from an enormous amount of luck. Things happened that were unexpected or disastrous. Bad decisions led to failure which then revealed an opportunity that they hadn't been able to see before. The idea that they had a map with a location marked on it to which they led the company along a clearly marked route is an illusion. They were lucky, they bluffed, they had good people around them, they took a chance and it worked out. This process of guessing and reframing, of following a hunch and then scrabbling to consolidate when the hunch works out, is a process I recognize. It is the creative process – directing a group

of people through a complex and uncertain place, following a fragmentary vision, and trying to make it solid as you go.

I have called this book *The Illusion of Leadership* because I made a surprising discovery when I became a theater director. Prior to my first attempts to direct, I had been an actor. I had been led by others. In the process of being directed I had always assumed that I was, at some level, being manipulated or coerced into doing what the director wanted. Only late in my career did I discover an interesting secret: the best directors did not know in detail what was going to happen in the play until they saw me do it. They didn't tell me what I should do because they didn't know. This ability to carry on being in charge and maintaining the trust of the company, when you do not and cannot know in detail how things will turn out, seems to me to be at the heart of creative leadership in business and the arts.

I believe that many people outside the arts misunderstand the creative process and the behaviors necessary to encourage creative teamwork. If the right culture were in place, innovation would not be an issue; the function of managers would be like the function of a director of a good ensemble: merely to select from the stream of invention and suggestion pouring from the group as they engage with the tasks they have in hand. That is not to say that these conditions never arise, rather that business does not seem to know how to get them or where in the organization they need to be encouraged.

The behaviors that are in place in many of the business environments I have experienced are the opposite of those required for group creativity. They come from an internalized belief in competitive individualism. A generation has grown up who believe that "There is no such thing as society;" "It's a dog-eat-dog world;" "Only the fit survive." But of course there is such a thing as society; dogs never eat dogs: they cooperate in packs; and "fit" means "most appropriate to the circumstances" not "fastest and most ruthless." These simplistic misapprehensions, borne to us on a tide of largely American films and business culture, supported by some dubious reinterpretations of Darwin, have been readily adopted by a generation who see their organizations as largely soulless and themselves as striving for material benefits and the adrenaline rush of successful competition (Sennett 1998, 2006).

People see their work as a place where they manifest their lifestyle and cultural values and have less and less interest in the actual products or effects of the organization. Many people go to work precisely for the battles and the triumphs and the money. Increasingly, they don't care about either the long-term survival of the organization or the utility or quality of its products. This is partly, I suspect, because there is a perception that some of those who own and run these organizations don't care either. They

are engaged in another game altogether. A game of corporate gin rummy where there is the possibility of untold wealth from the manipulation of market sentiment and the cutting of deals. The net result is that there is no one directing the flows of energy and invention that are manifesting in the business world. There seems to be no end in view apart from a generalized faith in “freedom” and an internalized belief that people’s core motives, indeed their very DNA, are selfish. This is capitalist freedom it means “freedom from,” not “freedom to.” It is the state of being without boundaries or constraints. It is a kind of directionless swamp of self-indulgence.

Creativity flourishes at the edges of things. It needs boundaries and it needs constraints. The world of business has been described to me as “amoral,” as if our behavior there need not concern itself too much with ethics. There is an affinity with the idea of self-as-scientist rather than self-as-artist; that what is necessary for good business leadership is clarity, precision, measurability and emotional detachment. These qualities are not necessarily wrong, but they are not always appropriate to the business of getting good ideas out of people and implementing them. And they exclude consideration of the deeper values that people express through the work they do and the choices they make.

Management is not science, but art. It is art in the sense that it needs to be practiced with the full self: with heart, mind and soul aligned. In business it seems to me there is both a need for and fear of this mindset. What follows is intended to be of direct practical help in understanding, and getting better at, leading and managing people in any organizational context. It is about developing the artistic mindset and applying it outside the arts. It is about learning to manage the paradoxical tension between creativity and constraint, between serendipity and intention. How to encourage things to evolve in the way they need to.

Because the evidence is mounting that some of the products of the thriving capitalist economies are beginning to destroy both our health and our planet. We need, urgently, to go in another direction.

Running through the book, and intimately tied up with these issues, are questions about power and ethics, because as managers, leaders and workers in today’s organizations we must hold on to our humanity at work and endeavor to act with principle, with passion and with integrity.

For the last ten years I have been reflecting on my twenty years’ experience as a theater performer and director and applying it in other contexts. I have worked with a wide range of organizations, both commercial and state-run, from engineering to aggregates, from media to medicine. In all I have encountered assumptions and practices that to my surprise were

radically different from those in the arts. This book is an attempt to explore some of these differences and show how ideas from the arts can be successfully applied to business and other organizations.

I have set down what I consider to be best practice among the many and varied artists I have worked with. But much of my core experience was with the Royal Shakespeare Company where I worked as an actor and then as an assistant director over a period of about fifteen years, so my approach is influenced by an older theater, one where language, dialog and poetry are central to the work. I come from working in a theater where the director as keeper of the vision and leader of the process is firmly established; where the ideas and techniques of ensemble theater, brought from Europe by pioneering figures such as Joan Littlewood, are firmly embedded in most companies.

In terms of the evolution of the theater crafts, directing is the new arrival; particularly where the director is elevated to the status of auteur, with both the responsibility and the power to stamp their creative vision on the work of a playwright. In the Shakespearean theater, the role of director was probably closer to that of stage manager or even producer, the craft of the actors and the writer being the central focus of the process. It was only in the twentieth century that the director began to ascend, alongside the film director, to the status of artist in their own right, with the work of the writer and actor sometimes reduced to the role of raw materials for the expression of the director's vision.

This book will look at the ways in which good directors manage the whole process of getting a play from script to performance. It will look in detail at the relationship between directors and actors, how directors release creativity and optimize innovation, how they give space to the creative drives of performers but still maintain an outcome that is true to the original vision and delivered on time and within budget. It will also look at some of the craft skills of acting, as they relate to working within creative groups, and to some of the principles of creative working that seem to be universal across many artforms and how they may be applied outside the arts. But it will also examine the proposition that the arts, particularly the theater arts, do more than merely hold up a mirror to life. They reflect the fact that much of what we call "reality" is no more robust than the "illusions" of art. That how we are and how we behave in the real world is often a performance too.

The book divides roughly into three sections. The first four chapters look at the role of the director as a model for leadership in a creative context. The second section, Chapters 5 to 12, looks at creative teamwork and live communication. The final section, Chapters 13 to 15, is a collection of essays that explore the wider implications of applying artistic ideas and perceptions in the world.

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