

Not Taught in Business Schools: How to Cultivate Creative Leading

Have you separated your personal and creative life from your professional life?
If so, you may be missing a key facet of leadership.

By Michael H. Shenkman

Kirsten, a young woman I've been mentoring for several years, was considering a job change. She was planning to leave her job as finance director for a community health organization and carve out a business of her own.

As we discussed what kind of business she might start, she became reflective. Almost wistfully, she said, "You know, you do everything right, and it's still not enough."

"What do you mean?" I asked. I wondered if she was regretting her decision to move out on her own.

"You go to business school to bring state-of-the-art practices into the nonprofit world. You know — learn the right skills, learn how to run scenarios, plan optimal and worst-case budgets. Then you find out that's not what leading is about at all."

"You mean these skills aren't useful once you reach a certain level?" I pressed.

"No, these skills are always useful. It's just that leading isn't about those skills. Leading is about being yourself, being open with other people. So you need to know who you are, and you need to be able to express that to others. You need to know what's important to you. They don't teach you that in business schools, and your bosses along the way never help you with it either. Maybe it's not in their interest to help you with it, I don't know.

"This is something you end up discovering on your own," she continued. "Or maybe, if you're lucky, you get a mentor to help you discover it. But, when I started working with you, it felt almost as if I was starting over."

"Was that a bad thing?"

"No, but it surprised me. I thought I had everything



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I needed to succeed, and that wasn't true. I felt let down in a way."

"And now?"

"Now? Now I'm excited. I'm doing something I completely create. I'm even willing to sacrifice some income to do work that's important to me. No matter what happens, it'll be worth it. Definitely worth it."

This conversation happened after I'd been working with Kirsten for nearly two years. Nothing happens fast in mentoring. When I met her, she was eager to expand her horizons, step into arenas of larger responsibilities, and affect more people. She saw this progression as occurring within an organizational structure, with changes in title, authority, and income.

But from the start of our work, we both knew something else was at stake. When stepping into leadership roles, many young managers such as Kirsten find that technical skills aren't enough. While she had demonstrated outstanding abilities — technically proficient, results-oriented, and attentive to the

people around her — she had a sense that she needed to consider "something else," though she didn't know what it was. Her dilemma is common, thanks to the practices of accredited, often prestigious, business programs.

Bridging the Chasm

Budding leaders, whether in the public, private, or nonprofit sector, often attend business schools to acquire skills such as planning and delegating. Then, out in the "real" world, they're frequently shocked to see that these skills don't necessarily translate into effective leadership.

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It's not that managerial skills aren't useful — in fact no organization can survive without having people who can manage to a tee. Rather, true leading isn't about those things. Leaders transform possibilities into services through the effort of collaborating followers.

Bridging the chasm between manager and leader means being able to fully appreciate one's creative talents and energies. Leaders must continually think and act creatively about their organizations. Yet creativity is neither taught in most business schools nor valued as a criterion for advancement.

Even the most hard-nosed executive director will acknowledge that a leader's effectiveness in winning people's trust depends on conveying a sense of immediacy and emotional involvement with the objectives of the endeavor. Creative expression forms bridges from one person to another. It makes us real, and it validates for others our ability to learn and grow — along with them — in the experiences they're undergoing. That connection is often forged by using the same technique of blending discipline with empathy that is applied in teaching creative practices.

Just what kinds of creative practices am I referring to? Well, the obvious: painting, writing, playing a musical instrument. But leaders also benefit from other kinds of self-expression, such as learning a sport, yoga, or martial arts, or exploring a subject or discipline. Many leaders, for example, study a period of history or enjoy non-business travel and adventure.

Creative activities are those that help you grow, learn new skills, and respond spontaneously in order to master a situation. Situations in which a teacher is involved are preferable, since mentoring contributes important dimensions to the experience. The activity should have infinite learning horizons so that you know there's always further to go.

If you're like most professionals, you long ago abandoned your pursuits of art, music, or athletics. Instead, you focused on specific managerial functions, working hard to climb the organizational ladder. For the most part, this is all to the good. But the harm is done when this translates into cutting off your creative energies, segregating the personal and creative from the professional. This dynamic results in a truncated view of life.

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The Same Moral Par

Leaders must be willing to act as an example, showing employees how leaders behave, speak, think, and listen when they care about bringing something new and daring into the world. True leaders demonstrate that organizational life can be conducted on the same moral par as that of other aspects of their lives, such as their spiritual and environmental connections, their

obligations to the health of their communities and families.

Demonstrating values, a process that demands high levels of creativity, is the single most important factor that distinguishes leading from managing. Creative expression is the only way values can be made clear and compelling in situations demanding leadership.

Having access to a wide range of expression is crucial. Creative practices — the way we dramatize and demonstrate our values — though *not* taught in business schools, are nevertheless the foundation of any leading worthy of the name. ■

Resources

Brinckerhoff, Peter, "How to Stretch Your Organization," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 21, No. 6.

Shenkman, Michael H, "Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 23, No. 5.

Temkin, Terri, "Nonprofit Leadership: New Skills Are Needed," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 5.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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