

Being Alive to the Moment- Leadership Without Easy Answers

**A Conversation with Bianca Stokman
The deBaak Management Center
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“There is a new mindset required of leaders” says Michael Jones: facilitator, leadership educator, pianist and speaker/storyteller. “ In a world without easy answers, leaders need to dig deep to find their unique gifts and with this, the wisdom of the moment, in order to create a coherent field for action and learn to see the familiar with new and fresh eyes”

Michael speaks with Bianca Stokman, herself a performing artist, from the deBaak Management Center. A part of this interview was featured in the deBaak management publication, *Inside + Insight* March 2008.

Michael will be a guest of honor at de Baak’s special leadership symposium on; ‘Artistry and Leadership’ June 19th 2008.

Bianca Stokman

I meet many executives who believe that art might be of value for their leadership, be it personal or businesswise, and would like to explore more, but who are also in need of language and possibilities to translate it to their organisation. What is your experience in this, as a consultant? What can be the added value of experiencing art for the functioning of leaders and organisations? How can the contribution of art be measured or explained in a world of facts and figures?

Cultivating new Disciplines of the Imagination

Michael

To understand the value of art we need to acknowledge the new mindset required of leaders for integrated whole mind learning. As we struggle with new discontinuities, fragmentation and sudden change it is vital for leaders to think in more complex and holistic ways. This involves a shift in focus from an emphasis on individualism where the leader is the strong dependable self-made individual and hero towards a style of leading which is more relational focused on the leader working in an empathic resonance with others as a networker, connector, and convener of webs and communities. We could imagine this new relationship to be like the musician’s open stage where

individuals come together and, even when they do not know each other -that is, even when they are strangers to one another –they create beautiful musical collaborations.

This involves cultivating new disciplines of the imagination. And I use the word cultivation deliberately to convey the idea of building fertile soil so that the seeds that represent our innate potential can take root and grow. Good artists are also good tenders of soil. They know that when the conditions are right, the work creates itself.

To be Alive to What the Moment Calls For

For example, as a pianist I practice and rehearse many hours a month but this is not sufficient in itself – it only makes me a very good technician in playing the notes- but the music emerges in the space between the notes, in the pauses, the tone, the rhythm and touch. To be attuned to the deeper music. I need to listen and be open and responsive to what is coming next, to be alive to the moment and to possibility. Even the most solitary artists are deeply attuned with their environment including their surroundings, the audience, their own inspiration – there is so much that influences the music that cannot be predicted or planned in advance. This is the artist's work - to be alive to their felt experience including all that they have seen and been nourished by. With this aliveness they can be responsive to what the moment calls for. In a time of rapid and unexpected change - this is the work of leadership as well.

The Leader as Artist

So the movement from the leader as hero to the leader as artist involves a transformation in awareness from performance to presence, from answers to questions, from uniformity to uniqueness, from abstraction to beauty, from efficiency to improvisation and from a focus on language that is instrumental to achieving certain goals and outcomes to the expressive power of stories and the truth of one's own personal voice.

These are disciplines that awaken the imagination. They help transform our mechanistic view of the world to one that is more subtle and sustainable – a transcendent vision that is more creative, organic and whole. This is how an artistic viewpoint can be helpful to business leaders. It enables them to accept their own vulnerability and not knowing – of living into the deeper questions and embracing a world of uncertainty with a much greater unknown.

Some years ago my partner Judy and I decided to sell our Toronto home and travel for six months or so. While we trusted our decision, we struggled with how to proceed. So we planned our route and called ahead to friends and left voice mails to let them know we were coming and might stay for a while. They didn't call back! A colleague, sensing our difficulties said- this is a marvelous opportunity to travel with a candle rather than a flashlight – these simple words

changed everything, not only for how we traveled, but also for how to live and how to lead in uncertain times.

Two Bottom Lines

At the present time we are between stories – the old ‘flashlight’ story is passing and the new ‘candlelight’ story is not yet fully here. So the leader needs to master not one but two bottom lines- the first is financial, it is focused on assessing, prioritizing and reporting, most leaders must learn to succeed in an outcome oriented and document driven organization. But there is also another bottom line which is to be true to oneself and one’s own unique gifts. This second bottom line is captured beautifully in the words of the late Irish poet John O’Donahue when he writes-

*I would love to live
Like the river flows
Carried by the sunrise
Of its own unfolding.*

This letting go reflects the unfolding nature of leadership. That is, of knowing that we cannot always force the river, of acknowledging that our strength is also found in waiting – of working with the subtle as well as the strong forces - of leading from behind and being attuned to the nature of time’s unfolding – this is also the work of the artist - leader.

Bianca

Could you give an example of how a client of yours, individual or company, has benefited from working with art. To make it more tangible.

Finding Our Own Music

Michael

Recently I worked with Nancy S. A Chief Executive Officer and her board of directors and medical partners in a large health care centre near Seattle, Washington. Her decision to take this position had been influenced by a personal story I had shared in a leadership seminar she had attended five years before. In the story I describe how as a pianist I struggled with the conflict between playing other people’s music and accepting my own gift – that is, to listen and follow my own musical voice. At that time I was also a leadership consultant and educator and one evening, following a long day working with a group of senior financial executives at a resort – hotel, I sat a small piano in the lobby near the registration desk. It was the off-season, the hotel was quiet and no one was nearby. So, in addition to play arrangements of popular songs- I also played a little of my own music. Soon an older gentleman appeared from

the lounge further down the hall. He walked slowly and unsteadily towards the piano a glass of red wine held precariously in his left hand. Then he settled in an easy chair beside it, listening with his eyes closed as I played. When I finished he asked what music I was playing. "That was an arrangement of *Moon River*" I said. "No before that," he asked. "That's was my own music," I replied. "That music was quite lovely." He said " It is what drew me to the piano..." "But" he said pausing for a moment. " You are wasting your time with *Moon River*!"

We talked a little further and I played more of my own music for him. When I was finished he asked if I worked at the hotel. "Oh no" I said emphatically, "I am a leadership consultant- I am busy changing the world." He did not seem impressed by this and instead stood up very slowly and, as he did so, looked at me very directly and said;

"Who will play your music if you don't play it yourself?" Then putting his hand on my shoulder to steady himself he added: "This is your gift- don't waste it!" Then he picked up his glass of wine, turned and slowly weaved his way back the hotel lounge.

Nancy, the Chief Executive Officer told me that when she heard this story – it changed her life. At that time she was the Director of Financial Services but realized that while she was very good at fitting numbers into boxes - it was not her gift. Her real gift was to bring people together to create a new framework of partnership for the delivery of health care services.

The beauty of this new model was that it would engage everyone; staff, patients, doctors and community partners in finding their voice together so that they could articulate a collective vision for health care in their community that everyone could be part of and be inspired by. It was also a call to lead a way forward without easy answers.

Leading Without Easy Answers

For Nancy the artistic processes of story- telling, performed music, self-reflection, creative imagery and drawing were an awakening. They helped her realize her unique gifts for seeing the potential in others, perceiving possibilities, thinking strategically, engaging complexity and accepting the risk of a larger unknown.

Recently she invited me to speak at a retreat for her board of directors and senior medical partners to help them find their own music together. She knows that there is no road map nor easy answers for transforming a traditional hierarchical – based acute care hospital to a regional long-term partnership model for community care, but she also believes that by leading from her gifts offers a greater sense of equilibrium and coherence to the group and connects her with a deep well of intuitive insight and wisdom that will help them find their way together. As leaders they know they will need to be artful and generative as they design a new future in the midst of shifting circumstances and conditions.

Bianca

To me, it seems that we are reaching a next level in "the science of art and organizations". People seem to be more open to accept the concept and there are a lot of initiatives (arteconomy in Belgium, centre for art and leadership in Copenhagen, art and business and artists in society in the Netherlands, just to name a few) to connect art and the business environment. But there also seems a call to progress from the more abstract concept to the facts and figures, i.e. to provide the scientific evidence for the concept. Not only as proof but also to take it to a next level, to have a deeper understanding of how it works. Do you feel that as well and how do you deal with that?

Taking Leadership to the Next Level

Michael

To answer this question we first need to ask is the art we are referring to a gift or a commodity. When art is a gift it comes to us gratuitously- that is, there is something unpredictable, even mysterious, in the process of creation where even the artist does not fully comprehend the process or the outcomes. As the poet Paul Goodman wrote in his diary ' I have recently written a few good poems but I had no feeling that I wrote them.'

One moment there is nothing and then there is something. We can make explicit everything in the creative process but this – yet it seems that it is this that makes the difference between art that truly connects and moves others and art that doesn't. This suggests that at some very early and critical stage in the creative process there is a need to release or let go of oneself to make room for a deeper inspiration to come in. Yet this insight and awareness is like a shy animal - If we bring too much critical attention to it, it is no longer there. So to shine the flashlight in search of scientific evidence of the gift may cause the very thing we are looking for to retreat and hide.

As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said, *"It is not with caution, but a wise blindness" that we proceed.* To act differently we need to see differently.

The most vital aspect of artistic work is not acquired by us but bestowed upon us. It involves a shift of perspective, a new way of seeing. Artists cannot take this for granted so they receive it with gratitude and labor in its service. In my leadership example, Nancy was leading from her gifts and in doing so she realized that she had many more questions than answers. For her to proceed with a 'wise blindness' she needed to live into the questions, appreciate the strength in the diversity of gifts on her team and balance action in the world with self- reflection on her own aspirations and uncertainties.

In this context perhaps the true measure of art is how it surprises us – that is, what it awakens in us and the other, how it changes what we see and what it revives in our own soul. If we place it under too bright a light - as we so often do when we try to make art a commodity that we may replicate on demand – then we risk sacrificing the gratuitous nature of the gift in art that gives it its inner power to change and transform.

Being Stewards of Our Gifts

So to take our work to the next level I believe we need to more deeply respect and understand the nature of the gift in art and learn to be good stewards of the soil so that these gifts may take seed and grow. One of the problems in our modern world is that we have forgotten how to be good stewards of the gift. For example we are very practiced at setting goals, managing our time and measuring outcomes, but to create fertile ground for the gift we also need time to balance action with gestation – with time for rest, for reflection, for absorption, for walking, dreaming, questioning, noticing, practicing and being.

In this context it may be helpful to understand that for all of time we have co-existed in not one, but two, economies—one based on the commerce of the market, the other on the commerce of the creative spirit or gift exchange. While the gift can survive without a market, the market cannot survive for long without the gift. Yet in past years the rapid rise of industrialism has expanded the economy of the market at the expense of a healthy culture that nurtures the formation and exchange of gifts. So we live a life out of balance. An artful leader understands this – they appreciate that we need to bring the ancient wisdom of art and gift sharing and the modern world of reason and technology together again so that we may co-exist in both worlds - as masters of reason and servants of the gift.

To learn more please visit Michael Jones at www.pianoscapescapes.com

To learn more about the deBaak Management Center visit www.debaak.nl

