

The Artist as Leader? A Call to Service



Does This Sound Like You?

(1) Passion and Persistence

"What really counts is to strip the soul naked. Painting or poetry is made as we make love, a total embrace, prudence thrown to the wind, nothing held back." - Jean Miro

A lot has been written in the last ten years about emotional intelligence. Heightened performance in the business setting and a more balanced life are two of the results of a person's mastery of the non-rational or non-cognitive aspects of knowing. Creative people have always lived in a place where the senses and emotions were not second class citizens. Perhaps unfairly, artists have been labeled as unbalanced or anti-social and there is a romantic notion of the "starving artist" living in the garret and seeking alienation. Creative people are more "emotion-centric" or in touch with their emotional intelligence than most people. I hate making such sweeping generalizations, but it seems to me that creatives are more at home with and around emotion.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written extensively about the mental state he calls "flow," the experience of doing something fully and enjoyably - not necessarily for money or professional goals - but because the experience, itself is rewarding. He identified nine aspects of Flow:

- There are clear goals every step of the way
- There is immediate feedback to one's actions
- There is a balance between challenge and skills
- Action and awareness are merged
- Distractions are excluded from consciousness
- There is no worry of failure
- Self-consciousness disappears
- The sense of time becomes distorted
- The activity becomes an end in itself¹

I've seen creatives in the Flow - I've experienced myself occasionally. People who can enter this state easily get stuff done and they often do so in innovative and resourceful ways.

One of the leadership attributes that creatives possess, therefore, is a burning passion to create and when they are involved in the creative process, the clock and calendar become meaningless. This passion or drive makes creatives sometimes seem single-minded or oblivious to the rest of the world. But this passion also makes the creative person hard to stop when she gets going and inspires others to join along. This is a very useful trait in a public leader.

Related to this state of being and doing is a feeling of optimism. I don't mean that creative professionals are universally optimistic or that the work they produce is always cheery or Pollyannaish. But I do think that to engage in the creative act, regardless of the subject matter or form taken, is essentially an act of optimism. To create is to hope. To have hope is often irrational but it powers so much of what is valuable and worth cherishing in the world.

¹"Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention," Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, HarpersCollins, 1996, p.111-113.

(2) Out-Of-The-Box Thinking/Outrageous Question-Asking

"Dare to be naive" - R. Buckminster Fuller

Can you think of the last time someone told you "You can't do that. That's impossible!" Or have you been told, "We've never done *that* before here - *that* won't work here." Have you been discouraged from trying something or some avenue of investigation at work? Have you been told "We don't have the money to do that" when trying to solve a problem?

Has being told "that's impossible" stopped you from doing the "impossible"? If you can recall a few instances of this, then I submit you have an extraordinary attribute of leadership. Somehow you did the "impossible." You marshaled the available resources, got people to help, rolled up your sleeves, found new resources and plunged ahead. You may not have succeeded 100% of the time, but you probably succeeded in doing the "impossible" more often than not.

This ability to challenge old assumptions, to ask new and provocative questions and to take an unorthodox approach to problem-solving, is a persistent feature of the creative person. You don't care that it hasn't been done or it looks hopeless or your idea seems "off the wall" and "out of the box." Sometimes, I'm sure, you're not sure where you get the ideas you get - where you get the perspective on a problem that has escaped everyone else. But you do see around the corner and see connections that others miss. You may respect tradition and the lessons passed on by previous masters or experts, but you're not afraid to try something new, unprecedented and not found in the rule book.

There is a brashness about the creative American -- maybe because we don't have that long a collective history and because we all came from different countries and bring a polyglot mishmash of traditions to the public square.

Consider the application of creative thinking to civic issues. It's not that aren't thoughtful and learned experts at work in the public policy arena already. We certainly have an enormous number of think tanks, lobbyists and citizen groups on any given issue. But our governing class are mostly cut from the same cloth. There's plenty of room in local government for divergent thinkers and creatives who approach problem solving in a holistic and artistic manner.

Remember what Einstein said about the need for new thinking: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

(3) Empathy and Easy Inclusion

"Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)" - Walt Whitman

Creatives are extremely empathetic. "Empathy" is defined as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner."

Creatives routinely take the viewpoint of the Other. They can put themselves in another person's shoes and see the world from their viewpoint. They do this when they write, when they act, when they create a new product, prepare a lesson plan, plan a special event. "What does it feel like to be another person?" is a question they regularly grapple with.

This activity is part of their research as they prepare for role to play, or part of the research when preparing a marketing plan. If you ask an actor, "Is it possible to hate the character you're playing -- even if the character is unsympathetic?" The answer is "No." You must always find something to like, something to champion, in every character you play as a performer. This method of working -- preparing for a performance -- is just one way that creatives employ intentional empathy as part of their routine.

Closely aligned to the quality of empathy is inclusion. Perhaps this is because creatives live a bit outside of the norm or have felt themselves outsiders, or perhaps creatives see the value in the unusual. I maintain that creatives tend to be more open to difference. I'm not saying that no creative professional is guilty of prejudice or bigotry. I'm saying that, as a class of people, creative professionals are more open to difference than most

people. It's part of their operating system. Not just open to it – they seek it and value it.

This aspect of the creative persona is extremely important when we're looking at civic leadership. Since America is becoming increasingly non-white and since we're operating in a global economy, understanding and respect for difference is simply a "must-have" for civic leaders.

In Chicago non-whites are already a majority. According to the 2000 Census, whites comprise 42% of the city's population. According to recent census reports, Texas became the fourth state where "minorities" are the majority of the population. Texas joined California, New Mexico and Hawaii with majority-minority populations. Five other states are close behind in this measure, with Maryland, Mississippi, Georgia, New York and Arizona all having 40% minority populations. At this rate America will be more than half minorities by 2050. Sort of makes the term "minority" out dated, doesn't it?

If you add the fact that every company faces competition from players around the globe and add the importance of the growing economies of Brazil, India and China, then you have a public imperative to think outside of the "old white man" box.

Earlier I asked rhetorically if it was possible to predict who the next Steve Jobs would be or where the next Jonas Salk would come from. I doubt very much that he will look like me or come from my neighborhood. I doubt very much if "he" will be a "he."

Being open. Being willing to accept the new and different. Being not just tolerant, but eager to accommodate difference is now an absolutely vital mindset for leadership.

4. Truth Seeking/Truth Telling

"The experience of doing anything well -- from the minor scale to the Hammerklavier Sonata -- is an irreplaceable event of the spirit." - Robert Crudin

Creatives are explorers and investigators seeking what is true and constantly asking questions. Not that anyone can claim to have actually found the fount of all truth - but rather much of our creative work is aimed at discovering and uncovering truth. Creatives are concerned with being authentic, with trying to separate what they believe to be true from trends, fads and outright lies that we being fed to us through so many channels.

This is a very important distinction for civic leadership. Americans feel that they're being lied to on a daily basis. They feel their government is lying to them -- meaning elected representatives and the spokespeople for the executive branch. They feel that the advertising and marketing messages they're being inundated with are lies and attempts to manipulate. And increasingly, people feel that the news media is lying - or at best incompetent to tell me truth about what business and government has been up to.

I recall reading "Teaching as a Subversive Activity" by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner over 35 years ago. They recalled an interview that Ernest Hemingway gave in the 1950's where he was asked about how he prepared and worked as a writer. He said that writer's needed a bullshit detector. That, in a nutshell, Postman and Weingartner, affirmed, was what education should give all students -- a built in BS detector. In other words, to have critical thinking skills and be able to distinguish truth from lies in public life.

I loved that image and it's stayed with me through the years. I researched the original interview where Hemingway made the statement.

"A writer without a sense of justice and injustice would be better off editing the Year Book of a school for exceptional children than writing novels," Papa told George Plimpton in an interview from the Spring 1958 issue of the Paris Review. "The most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock-proof, shit detector. This is the writer's radar and all great writers have had it." (p. 88)

Isn't that a great way to sum up the import of a well rounded education? To be able to tell when you are being lied to. To be able to sort out the special interests and come to a reasonable conclusion about who's got what ax to grind when you're told something. To be able to detect the smell of double-dealing, lies and hypocrisy - that should be the hallmark of a great education. I love that sentiment.

Is your BS detector sounding shrilly day and night? Does the parade of drivel that passes for news make you grind your teeth? When you hear public officials speak in platitudes and opaque bland-isms, do you want to laugh? When you read of another U.S. corporation paying a billion dollar fine for sleazy or illegal practices but admitting no wrong, do you want to scream? If so, then we need you to apply your imagination to new ways to explain, to reveal, to question and to report on what government is, isn't and should be doing.

5. Intrinsic Worth Valued

"My feeling that the concept of creativeness and the concept of the healthy, self-actualizing, fully human person seems to be coming closer and closer together, and may perhaps turn out to be the same thing." – Abraham Maslow

Should the profit motive drive decisions of government regulation and public policy? Should government operate like the private sector? What, exactly, should be the main mission of government – to simply get out of the way of business, to provide opportunity to all citizens, to take an active role in shaping a city's or nation's future?

It seems that the current school of thought tips the argument in favor of government getting out of the way of private enterprise and not to think big thoughts or try to fix any persistent social problem.

How do you think that's working so far?

One of the features of creative work is that, for many, it is its own reward. Sure, many of us hope to earn a living from our creative work. But making money is not what drives the creative process. There is an intrinsic value to making and experiencing creative work. Sometimes this is deemed impractical and irresponsible. It might seem that way to people who are extremely practical and see things in a linear or cut-and-dry perspective. But aren't the best and most precious things in life beyond price? What is the value of a laughing baby or a questioning mind or a beautiful park? If public policy is only formulated according to profit and loss statements or a mindset driven by corporate logic, we could abdicate our social and environmental stewardship and lose long term benefits for the many in favor of short term gains for the few.

It seems to me that we need leaders who can balance the overwhelming drive to create short-term profit against the harm to the planet and the body politic. It would be wise to have some leaders who can envision, give voice to and champion some notion of the commonwealth and the greater good. Artists and creatives do this all the time and could bring this mindset to the public sector.

6. Creative Maker/Creative Do-er

"There ain't no rules here! We're trying to accomplish something!" - Attributed to Thomas Edison upon being asked by a new worker at Menlo Park where the lab rules were posted.²

Creatives create stuff. They have the ability to take an empty page, empty canvas, or empty space and re-arrange, apply and build - and the result is something. This something is often provocative, beautiful, thoughtful, inspiring and perplexing. But before the assembling and applying can begin, they first have a vision or inspiration which fires up your creative work. Even if the assignment is a business problem or engineering application - the creative ideation comes first.

When I was a volunteer organizer for the Industrial Areas Foundation Chicago organizing effort in the mid 1990's, I attended their basic training session. The IAF was founded in 1940 by Chicago organizing pioneer Saul Alinsky and believes in bringing citizens together across traditional boundaries of race, religion and geography. They believe in building lasting organizations whose members are other organizations -- houses of worship, neighborhood groups and unions. The common work undertaken by these powerful meta-organizations is aimed at winning real improvements in working people's lives AND altering the relationships of civic power in the region where the work takes place.

²"At Work With Thomas Edison," Blaine McCormick, Entrepreneur Press, 2001, p. 108.

Creativity quotes in italics are from "*Creators on Creating - Awakening and Cultivating the Imaginative Mind*," edited by Frank Barron, Alfonso Montuori & Anthea Barron, Tarcher Penguin, 1997.

During the evening training session the trainer was explaining the process by which organizers seek to engage a community and move toward common action. "Imagination precedes implementation" he said. As I understood the maxim, an organizer has to be able to make real and vivid in the minds of the community not just the threat but some better vision of the future where the threat has been removed and something better has been instigated. Paraphrasing all these years later, I describe this process in this way: You can't move towards a better vision of the world without a vision that moves you. To do otherwise is purposeless reaction and is likely to take your organizing effort in an unpredictable and undesirable direction.

When I heard the trainer use that phrase, It struck me immediately that this process is a fair description of what an artist does on a daily basis. The ability to see some image or vision - even if it's imperfect - and to move purposefully, organizing your energy and materials at hand to bring that vision into reality.

I'm engaging in this process right now. I've been thinking and working on the issue of creativity and civic engagement for 17 years. It's been a very long work-in-progress, much of it improvised and done in front of a live audience. But it's also a product of reflection, reading, interacting, interviewing, failed actions and reviews of current events. This book is based on a presentation I started doing in 2004, which I now call "The Politics of Creativity - A Call to Service." I've been experimenting with blending entertainment, performance, inspiration and training on and off since I produced an evening of political performance and political speeches at Club Lower Links in 1991. I hope to further experiment with the form this publication takes - turning it into a web-based document, adding collaborative blog-like features to each chapter, and perhaps turning it into a performance.

Creative professionals *get* creativity and see that it's an essential ingredient in problem solving, community building and democratic practice. They can help explain this under valued and misunderstood dynamic to the general public and they can help everyone exercise and apply their creative abilities toward the common good.

The main point is -- creatives create and that is no small thing. America needs more imagination applied to her civic problems in order to show new paths to solutions. You can do this. We need you to do this.

7. Sharing, Collaborating, Ensemble Building

"It takes a village to survive" - Isabel Allende

Creative professionals are used to working in a team environment. In fact, although creativity resides in a person and is expressed by a person's actions, it's often the fact that creativity is often the result of a context. For many creatives, creativity takes place as a social transaction - producing creative work as a reaction to a shared experience with inputs from others.

Theater and dance performers routinely work in an ensemble setting where the group must quickly assimilate the combined talents of the whole to produce a seamless product. Marketing and product development managers work in teams. Advertising creatives work in high-pressure team environments. Artists who work in community settings frequently are called on to manage groups of community residents or teens and combine team-building with arts skills training.

Think of the process of preparing a play for production. On the first day of rehearsal a group of (usually) strangers meet for the first time. They are introduced to a creative management team led by the director and are given their scripts - the common text that will bind them for the next few weeks of rehearsal. The director has a vision for bringing the script to life and works with her production team of designers to realize that vision. She guides the actors to meld their particular personalities, talents and perspectives on their own characters to tell a seamless story that begins when curtain goes up on opening night. Actors may try things in the rehearsal process that express their characters in relationship to the other characters and the given dialog and situation. An actor may have a theory about why his character is doing a certain thing and what he wants to achieve in the scene. A director may give an actor feedback during the rehearsal and ask the actor to try playing the scene differently, with a different motivation or tact. If the director feels that something an actor has done is not serving the play - if that action is out of place - the director might also give the actor feedback at the end of rehearsal as she delivers her notes. All the actors hear all the notes and each actor acknowledges the note and is expected to absorb and act on that note. This process is repeated over and over again as the actors work with one another in rehearsal and on their own. Directors have many techniques to get the performances they feel are required for the play. Some have group exercises that the company does at various points in the rehearsal process. Some ask the actors to do different sorts of research - sometimes by reading, sometimes by going

somewhere and observing. As a performer I've received hundreds of such notes and benefited from the feedback loop a good rehearsal process provides. You learn to submerge your ego and "take the note" and do your best to follow the director's guidance even if you feel strongly that your approach to the character was right.

In a few short weeks the group of strangers transforms into an ensemble whose work product is a (hopefully) smashing production that will flow effortless and will excite and engage the audience. This process of team building goes in varying flavors all across the creative landscape.

Take the jazz ensemble. Jazz is a wonderful way of talking about democracy in America. The way a jazz group interacts is extremely relevant for the conduct of business and civics. There was a marvelous symposium at Lincoln Center in December of 2003 called "Jazz and American Democracy" hosted by Jazz at Lincoln Center Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis, moderated by PBS' Charlie Rose and featuring the 42nd President of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton. The President had this to say about the connection of jazz to the American experience:

"You find a lot of parallels in the way America developed in other ways. Jazz is about creativity within a certain order. It's sort of made for a people that are creative and entrepreneurial. It also gave black people a little way to be free and escape from the boxes they were in, which was an extra added benefit, and it gave white people a way to get out of a lot of their stereotypes, if they had enough musical ability and rhythm to get into the act... And I think there is something about freedom and jazz that work together. I mean, it's no accident that jazz was important in the Czech Revolution...."

Cornell University historian, Michael Kammen, commented: "Let me [say] something about parallels between jazz and democracy. Within jazz, there has to be room for improvisation, but within a structure. We've all heard that a million times. But there are these wonderful quotations from performers who played, for example, with Jelly Roll Morton, who say that "he wanted each of us to have our solos, he encouraged us to improvise, but he was always there as composer, as arranger, and if we ran out of ideas he would play some little tune on the piano and that would inspire us to come up with improvisations." So the notion of individualism within structure is terribly important to jazz, and it's also very important to democracy. A story that goes back to Alexis de Tocqueville, in the most famous commentary ever written about democracy in America, "Democracy in America," where he pointed out that Americans are immensely proud of their individualism, but also they are a nation of organizers -- they like to belong to something."

Farah Jasmine Griffin, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia made this observation: "Jazz also teaches us that - that it is a form that is about conversation and dialogue, and as a part of that conversation and dialogue there is also a place for dissension. Dissension is available for you there, and it's not dissension in a way that is about destroying, but it is a dissension that is about creating. So you think of an example like...the most famous one is probably the break between swing and bebop. People think about that all the time as a dissenting moment. But it's not a moment of the absolute rejection of everything that came before. It's a moment of building on what came before. Right? That you can't move forward without that kind of dissent. Traditions can't move forward. Our nation can't move forward. We can't move forward. So it's maybe creating a new mythology, but always understanding the one that we bring with us. Right? The history that we bring with us."

We need a healthy dose of ensemble building in politics and civic affairs. Creative professionals would bring this skill set to facilitate the bringing of diverse groups together in order to solve pressing problems.

The jazz of democracy. Sweet.

Creativity champions would help make our democracy swing, groove and evolve!

These seven qualities are a short list of the qualities I believe artists, creative professionals and change agents possess. We should be about finding new ways to enter public service and start applying these abilities to doing the public's work.

To simplify this menu of creative civic mindsets and skills, use this short cut:

P. O. E. T. I. C. S.

P = Passion and Persistence to succeed
O = Out of the frame thinking, Outrageous question asking
E = Empathy, Eager to see the world through another's Eyes
T = Truth seeking, Truth telling
I = Intrinsic value recognized and sought
C = Creative, maker, doer
S = Sharing, collaboration, ensemble building



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