



# When art and business collide

Put a paintbrush in their hands and people recover some of their childhood creativity, says David Kayrouz. Now businesses are discovering they have much to gain by helping employees unleash their creative intelligence.

**I**magine the reaction if you invited your team to paint their way to getting on better, communicating more effectively, solving problems more co-operatively, being more productive and generally having a better time at work.

The cynics would have a field day. "What, me paint?" "How on earth is drawing pictures going to boost our bottom line?" "What mad scheme has the boss come up with now?"

You name the objection, I have heard it. And I have also seen those objections quietly fade away as, with paintbrush

in hand and drawing bright splashes of blue, green, red and yellow on clear white paper, people start to realise just what they've been getting wrong—and how to fix it.

Something unique happens to people when you put a paintbrush in their hands and encourage them to explore their actions and reactions, free from any threat of criticism or judgement: they recover some of their childhood creativity and start seeing the world differently.

And as they explain to each other what they have created,

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how they created it, and what it means to them, they learn more about their colleagues than they ever could simply from conversation across the cubicles.

But unleashing that creativity and opening the door to that greater understanding and more meaningful communication is only the first step. What is just as important is that it is put in context—that people understand how they can use their rediscovered skills to improve their productivity and work lives, how they can operate more effectively and innovatively as a team.

One of the rewards of facilitating workshops where this happens is to see the light go on, and to help people realise how much more potential they have—potential that has been stifled by operating in rules-based environments for so long.

### Seeking creative answers

Do you remember the first days of school? You were still looking up to an unknown world and enthusiastically asking “why?”

But that question disappeared as schooling informed you that most questions had already been asked by someone else before you and your job was to learn the ‘right’ answers. Most of us have been systematically trained throughout our education to focus on the assessable end results at the expense of engaging in the qualities that actually help us to learn.

Not only has this conditioning discouraged us from seeking new, creative answers that haven’t been discovered before, it has also encouraged us to perceive art mainly as a product. This way we can give it a dollar value, and buy, sell and invest in it.

Paintings decorate the wall, dance becomes entertainment, poetry fills greeting cards, and music fills space. The idea of art as entertainment or decoration is easy to grasp. But now, we are looking beyond the product of art to understand the processes that drive its creation.

The challenges many businesses face to accommodate today’s rapidly changing environments have led many to recognise that the processes used to create art contain the drivers they need to solve their common problems. Innovation and engagement are the stock-in-trade of artists—every day they are faced with the challenge of creating something new and desirable, something that people will pay for, out of nothing. And this is also the problem that business faces.

Creativity and innovation run hand in hand with navigating chaos and uncertainty, but therein lies the dilemma. The business world has thrived on order, structured authority and ordered process. The idea that artists and business could learn from each other seems like an oxymoron, but in reality both need the same drivers to reach different ends.

Governments, business schools, researchers and leading institu-



David Kayrouz (left) in a workshop with staff at Russell McVeagh.

tions are now studying art and business together to extend the boundaries. The British Government has backed Arts & Business, a London-based agency that aspires to be the world’s most successful and widespread creative network.

In a 40-page report commissioned in 2004 and titled *Why business needs the arts*, Arts & Business stated: “Our efforts have confirmed that too few businesses have a good understanding of what the arts can deliver in terms of their likely impact on people and performance, and that practitioners from the arts are proving surprisingly modest advocates for their wares, given their burgeoning expertise and established track record of delivering real change inside major companies. We sensed opportunities were being missed—by UK business in their attempts to transform organisational practice and performance.”

The report cites compelling statistics and opens a plethora of possibilities. It reports extensively on several companies that use artists as trainers and motivators, alongside HR staff, some as a permanent facility.

The biggest and most established example is that of Lever Faberge, a large and well-known multinational manufacturing corporation. It terms its artistic intervention ‘Catalyst’ and uses visual artists, writers, actors, photographers, musicians and other artists to meet the company’s varying objectives, ranging from writing strategic documents to sales training and production processing.

Keith Weed, chairman of Lever Faberge, sums up what is perhaps the most important benefit of the programme: “Catalyst allows you to experience new skills in neutral territory.”

Besides creating a more skilled workforce, he believes Catalyst has had a positive impact on the culture and ‘soft’ people indicators inside the business. Lever Faberge regularly conducts employee surveys on



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key people indicators, which it benchmarks against other businesses. Recently the company has out-performed the high-performance average on 12 out of 13 key people indicators, and has achieved the seconded-highest recorded score on 'valuing people'. Catalyst therefore has a vital role to play in Lever Faberge's recruitment and retention strategy and overall people development strategy.

These are impressive achievements. As a consequence Catalyst has embedded itself deeply in the business, becoming a vital part of how the business invigorates its culture, tackles performance issues, and creates an openness to change.

The measurable value arts have contributed to the results of the entrepreneurial leaders of this field now fuel the fire for more research as other organisations decide to get in on the act. Business no longer views the contributions of art-based processes as hit and

miss conceptions—instead, academics and scientists are turning their attention to unravelling the so-called mysteries of art creation.

Robert Austin, a professor of business administration at Harvard University, makes this point in his recent publication, *Artful making: What managers need to know about how artists work*.

"Many people in business admit that parts of their work are 'more art than science'. What they often mean, alas, is they don't understand those parts. 'Art' used in a business context usually refers to something done by 'talented' or 'creative' people who are not quite trustworthy, who do work that resists reasonable description. There's often a disparaging implication that art-like processes are immature, that they have not evolved to incorporate the obviously superior methods of science. The premise that underlies this point of view equates progress with the development of reliable, rule-based procedures to replace flaky, unreliable art-based processes. We reject this premise."

### Research reveals shifts of thought

Recently many of the major American universities, including Harvard, MIT, and Stanford have produced research papers that reveal profound shifts of thought about the validity of what has been wrapped up in the myth of 'creative intelligence'.

The Banff Centre in Canada has for years pioneered the crossover between the two fields, particularly in equipping arts administrators with business skills. It now leads in courses providing business people with artistic skills that help to develop their creative intelligence.

Certainly creative skills—previously considered unteachable or inaccessible to scientific study—have had a big boost from the new developments in our understanding of how our brain works.

In Denmark, a recent government initiative called The Learning Lab has been created specifically to work within all these related fields. Its mandate is to solve societal problems related to learning through practice-oriented research and development.

The Creative Alliance is a consortium within the Learning Lab that emerged out of a white paper between the Danish Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Trade and Industry. Again, a strong desire to explore learning potential between art and business has surfaced.

Research manager Lotte Darso, in her just-published book *Learning—Tales of Arts in Business*, details results of 53 interviews with art and business collaborators. Her guiding question was "What can business learn from the arts?" In her worldwide assessment of the 'state of play' (pun intended), as in the UK study, she uncovered the far-reaching effects art-based learning has to deliver in training and transformation in the 21st century.

She found arts interventions often went beyond their immediate focus. After an initial 'concert', the Washington Leadership Programme, which includes representatives from Federal Government,

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Nasa and US Treasury, continued to use a musical programme (*Concert of Ideas*) for up to 30 people at a time to uncover and train leadership skills. The PARC PAIR programme established by Xerox, which paired scientists with artists, produced not only new computer products but a book relating research to marketing. Volvo's collaboration with an artist has had internal benefits and attracted extensive publicity for the Volvo brand. Denmark's Bang & Olufsen, manufacturer of sound and video equipment, created a unique sales and training programme called 'Business Theatre' which also improved its working conditions.

Unilever has adopted numerous art-based initiatives throughout its whole operation. *UK Management Today* reports that for the past couple of years Unilever has consistently posted double-digit profit growth in a mature market.

So how will arts-based learning work in New Zealand? What does the future look like? And why should you convince your employees that they should overcome their initial scepticism?

The answer is that the future is already here and is gradually gaining momentum. Businesses are discovering just what they have to gain by helping their employees to unlock their creative intelligence and relearn their skills of innovation and co-operation. And they're doing that with art.

I will explain just how in the next issue of *Employment Today*. **et**

*David Kayrouz is the director of Creative Pathways. He helps organisations and individual unlock their creativity and innovation through arts-based workshops. Visit [www.creativepathways.co.nz](http://www.creativepathways.co.nz).*

# HRINZ Professional Development Opportunities

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