

THE ARTIST AS LEADER

Educator and democratic champion of creativity Tom Tresser suggests “POETICS” is a useful acronym for the creative process and business leadership

WORDS
Tom Tresser

As we come together to explore the intersections of art, creativity and business, let’s offer the best lessons that the arts and creative practice teach about the generative and transformative powers of creativity.

I offer seven mindsets or practices from the arts and creative practice as markers of leadership for business and civic life.

P Passion and persistence

One of the leadership attributes that creative people – creatives – possess 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 they get going and inspires others to join in. This is a very useful trait in a public or business leader.

Related to this state of being and doing is a feeling 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.

O Out-of-the-box thinking and outrageous questions

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”.

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”.

E Empathy and easy inclusion

Creatives are extremely empathetic. They 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 aspect of the creative persona is extremely important when we’re looking at civic and business leadership. 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.

These mindsets or practices from the arts and creative practice are markers of leadership for business and civic life

T Truth

Creatives are explorers and investigators seeking what is true. 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.

I Intrinsic worth

Who gets to decide what is valuable? It seems the current school of thought tips the argument in favour of government getting out of the way of private enterprise and not to think big thoughts or try to fix any persistent social problems.

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. However, 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.

But aren’t the best and most precious things in life beyond price? It seems to me that we need leaders who can balance the overwhelming drive to create short-term profit against 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 greater good. Artists and creatives do this all the time and we should welcome this mindset to the business sector.

C Creatives

Creatives create stuff. They have the ability to take an empty page, empty canvas or empty space and re-arrange, apply and build 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 creative work. Even if the assignment is a business problem or engineering application, the creative ideation comes first.

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 organising effort in an unpredictable and undesirable direction.

S Sharing

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 undervalued and misunderstood dynamic to the general public, and they can help everyone exercise and apply their creative abilities towards the common good.

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 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.

Theatre 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. The jazz ensemble is a great example of fluid democracy and collaboration.

We need a healthy dose of ensemble-building in politics and business affairs. We need this skill-set to facilitate the bringing together of diverse groups to solve pressing problems.

These seven qualities are a short list of the qualities I believe artists and creative professionals possess. ■

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