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Leadership 2010 6: 311

DOI: 10.1177/1742715010368761

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Leading aesthetically in uncertain times

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Leadership

6(3) 311–330

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DOI: 10.1177/1742715010368761

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Abstract

'Leading Aesthetically' highlights the processes by which leaders can inspire and motivate using sense perceptions that go beyond rational, objective, communication. In this article, we contribute to the theoretical development of aesthetic leadership by drawing on phenomenologist Roman Ingarden's notions of presencing and concretization; backward reflexivity; attention to both form and content; and myth-making. We illustrate the particular relevance of these theoretical concepts to leadership in conditions of uncertainty and crisis by discussing the case of Hurricane Katrina's impacts on New Orleans in 2005. The article concludes that aesthetically-aware leaders are able to deploy a range of intellectual and emotional skills that can complement more conventional rational-instrumental decision-making approaches in ways that can have considerable benefits in times of uncertainty, and most especially in crisis situations.

Keywords

aesthetics, crisis leadership, Ingarden, music, reflexivity, symbolism

Ui mai koe ki ahau he aha te mea nui o te ao, Māku e kī atu he tangata, he tangata, he tangata!

Ask me what is the greatest thing in the world, I will reply: It is people, it is people, it is people!

Māori Proverb

Novelist James Lee Burke begins his 2007 novel, *The Tin Roof Blowdown*, with Detective Dave Robicheaux waking from a nightmare. Robicheaux is plagued with memories of service in the Vietnam War and the cruel death of one of his platoon soldiers. He has finally overcome his resentment against his country for its failure to support the returning

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troops and to honor the memory of those who died. Having woken from his sleep Robicheaux reflects on his current life working in the New Iberia police department in the State of Louisiana, about 140 miles west of New Orleans. He is convinced society has moved beyond the follies of that war and he reflects:

When I go back to sleep, I once again tell myself I will never again have to witness the wide-scale suffering of innocent civilians, nor the betrayal and abandonment of our countrymen when they need us most.

But that was before Katrina. (Burke, 2007: 2)

For the fictional Detective Robicheaux, Hurricane Katrina revived painful memories of incompetent leaders and the unnecessary suffering of followers. Yet the mantra ‘that was before Katrina’ is iterated by BBC journalist Matt Frei (2009), who writes a similar story, informed by his own experiences of being in New Orleans to witness the aftermath of the Hurricane’s devastation. Frei summarizes the infighting that resulted and the tendency for city and state leaders to blame each other for the failure to rescue stranded and starving people. Ultimately, however, Frei focuses his attention on the President himself, pointing to:

The abiding image of the commander-in-chief...sitting on Air Force One, looking out of the window as his jet flew high over the flooded city. It was supposed to be a photo opportunity of presidential concern. It turned out to be a damning picture of aloof indifference. (Frei, 2009: 155)

For Frei, Hurricane Katrina was testament to the nation’s powerlessness and pointed directly to the Federal Government’s incompetence. In sum, Frei assesses G. W. Bush’s presidential tenure by claiming that, ‘The Iraq war turned out to be the death of the presidency by a thousand cuts. Katrina was the body blow that accelerated the bleeding’ (p. 156). Klein (2008) concurs, adding that in his tenure the President displayed both ‘overweening arrogance and paralytic incompetence’ (p. 17).

Burke, Frei and Klein saw the disaster wrought on New Orleans as evidence of the failure of leaders to take the kind of timely and dramatic action necessary to save lives. Their works of fiction and journalism explore this common theme, and are designed to provoke visceral and thoughtful responses to the events of September 2005. Their focus on the inability of leaders to manage the crisis is echoed by Bateman (2008), who claims that ‘leaders were no doubt busy, but too often were acting in ways that, in appearance and substance, were not appropriate’ (p. 303). The Katrina crisis, then, offers an opportunity to reappraise the role of leaders. More specifically, it placed leaders in the forefront of dramatic events where the stakes were high in terms of saving property and human life, especially the lives of those who suffered the most: those who were black, poor and aged.

As the events unfolded in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina the main protagonists singled out by organizational researchers as ‘leaders’ were New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) chief Michael Brown, the State of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and President Bush himself (Martinko et al., 2009); and each played a crucial role in managing the crisis. Our agenda in this article is not so much to add to the litany of blame placed on these particular individuals by various writers. We assume that the Katrina crisis was beyond the abilities of any single individual to manage, and furthermore that it is possible for leaders to act in ways that paradoxically prohibit leadership (see Jackson and Parry, 2008:123–124) from occurring. Working from these assumptions, we step back from the crisis and re-examine this well known global event

from an alternative perspective, asking ‘if these leaders had been aesthetically alert, how would they have dealt with the Katrina crisis?’

Guiding this question is a desire to further develop leadership theory beyond its psychological roots, which, as a number of commentators have noted (Parry, 1998; Sinclair, 2007; and Fairhurst, 2008), have dominated, and to a certain extent limited, the field’s evolution. We seek a socially constructed analysis of leadership which accepts that problems that arise in crisis situations are not easily solved (Grint, 2005). We are guided by the belief that as we ‘abandon the infinite quest for scientific certainty and seek out the philosophical, fine, martial, and performing arts’ (Grint, cited in Jackson and Parry, 2008: 104), we might locate ways of leading that ultimately considers those who were left vulnerable in Katrina’s aftermath. Hence, in this article, we inquire into the nature of the artful approach advocated by Grint and ruminate on how aesthetics can enlarge the repertoire of usable and useful tools available to leaders (Taylor and Hansen, 2005; Taylor and Ladkin, 2009) within the frame of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005).

More specifically, De Pree (2008) in his inimitable narrative style, writes of leadership as an art form that relies on spontaneity and an ability to improvise. Although the term ‘aesthetics’ does not feature explicitly in his insights, it is implied in the four ‘echoes’ that he suggests lie at the heart of leadership practice. These he lists as a ‘hunger for relationships, delight in beauty, [a] quest for spirituality [and] longing for justice’ (p. xv). For De Pree it is the ‘common good’ (pp. 109–111) that drives the leader’s agenda and this is achieved by becoming engrossed in the followers’ needs and expectations. Indeed, De Pree outlines a genesis of the art of leadership that is encapsulated in the three-fold repetition of the Māori proverb that ‘It is people, it is people, it is people!’ This rhymes with the essence of De Pree’s view in that the *mauri* (the life force), *tapu* (sacred essence) and *hiranga* (energy) are all central to human existence (Whiu, 2009, personal correspondence). In order, then, to locate leadership as an art we turn to aesthetics, for it is in this field of inquiry that the elements expressed in the indigenous wisdom of the Māori people and the issues advanced by De Pree are explored.

Turning to aesthetics

Aesthetics, which can be defined as ‘sense perception’ (Williams, 1983: 31), focuses primarily on that which is dynamic and sensate within relationships (Hansen et al., 2007) and allows for imagination and tacitly-held beliefs to be expressed (Adler, 2006: 491), thereby complementing traditional ways of knowing and leading. Organizational scholars have turned to consider aesthetics as an alternative to the instrumental view that leaves individuals’ emotional and symbolic responses unnoticed and, therefore, unexamined within the organizational context. In this regard, Fineman (2008) notes that although emotional expression is vital for human existence, so far as management practice is concerned, it distracts from and inhibits rational decision-making. In sum, he argues that managers tend to consider that ‘emotion is good and bad, vital but *interfering*’ (Fineman, 2008: 218, emphasis added) and, therefore, they pay only perfunctory attention to its importance. In their article in this issue Woodward and Funk agree, claiming that the aesthetic approach avoids getting stuck on ‘old maps’ that are now redundant and are no longer useful in solving complex and constantly changing problems.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that although instrumentality, ethics and aesthetics are all necessary elements that inform leadership practice (Clegg, 2005; Guillet de Monthoux and Statler, 2008), aesthetics itself has received precious little

attention to date. With regards to leadership studies Hansen et al. (2007) discuss how aesthetic engagement may assist leaders to ‘construct, represent, and interpret the felt meanings and sensory experiences’ (p. 546). They argue that this ability to firstly acknowledge sensate responses and then communicate those to followers is an essential leadership skill. As they conclude:

The motivation to take that leap of faith is not always based on rational, objective, and empirical evidence because there may be none. Instead, leaders must inspire through the *felt meaning* of the organizational vision. (Hansen et al., 2007: 549, emphasis in the original)

Therefore, rather than treating tacit knowledge and sensation with suspicion, the aesthetic view of leadership values leaps of judgment, and the spontaneous insights and decisions that the imagination provokes. This enables us to avoid the ‘habitual mental cramp’ that leaders readily fall prey to due to fatigue and the weight of responsibilities, as well the danger of becoming ‘seduced and trapped by the rational’ (Guve, 2007: 131).

But if leadership researchers wish to avoid this trap, how exactly should we study the aesthetic dimensions of experience? In order to extend and explore aesthetics and its impact on leadership practice, we draw in the following section on a series of interpretive devices used by phenomenologist Roman Ingarden to understand a musical work of art. The basic analogy is that events that occur in the life of an organization can be compared heuristically to musical performances. Like music, organizations adhere to some kind of form and these formal arrangements can be examined through an aesthetic lens. Hence as Dean et al. argue:

Indeed we cannot even conceive of organizations without evoking form, because the very language we use to depict organizational phenomena is full of references to form. We *reform* institutions, *transform* work practices, enhance or measure *performance*, *formalize* procedures, analyze *informal* behavior, *formulate* strategies, have personnel wear *uniforms*, fill out *forms* (*formulaires* in French), and *inform* people. (1997: 422, emphases in the original)

As we will see below, the concept of ‘form’ in itself can be misleading because it implies a static condition that remains stable and, therefore, determinate. Organizations, we will argue, are volatile and open to environmental flux, and thus require adopting a more fluid approach to leadership that can account for these indeterminacies and complexities (Austin and Devin, 2003; Mintzberg, 1987). Therefore, it is to performance art and music in particular that we turn in order to theorize the linkages between the reception and concretization of art and the communication of leadership between leaders and followers (Jackson and Parry, 2008). In this way, we will arrive at a series of implications for practicing organizational leaders to actively consider.

Performance art and aesthetic qualities

The art of music making has been most frequently explored by organizational theorists in reference to jazz (see for example Barrett, 2000; Hatch, 1998; Weick, 1998). The attraction of this metaphor is that it helps explain how improvisation works and how decision-making might be less restricted and more free-flowing than traditional managerialist approaches allow. What is missing from these and other metaphorical explorations is an in-depth and broader discussion of music as a distinct phenomenon and how understandings of the nature and meaning of music as an art form may translate into organizational life and the art of leadership.

In order to address this gap and articulate the congruence of musical aesthetics with organizational leadership practice, we draw on the work of Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden (1893–1970). This choice springs from the distinct focus that underpins Ingarden's oeuvre, namely *how* we understand the existence of things. Ingarden includes economics and politics in his discussions, maintaining that they are all 'cultural products'; artifacts of human creativity, and therefore can be analysed through the aesthetic lens in much the same way as more obvious aesthetic practices such as music making and musical appreciation (Ingarden, 1986: 57).

Although a pupil of Husserl, Ingarden turned from transcendental phenomenology and established himself within the school of 'Realistic Phenomenology', which rejected Husserl's notions of 'epoché, reduction, and purification' (Embree, 2003: 183). For Ingarden, musical works are both generic and particular; a mix of both skeletal forms which are transferable across genres, and content which is idiosyncratic and particular to one piece of music (Dziemidok, 1993). Thus by adopting a 'realist' stance Ingarden turned from the Husserlian notion that we "'put in brackets", anything which is beyond our immediate experience' (Eagleton, 1996: 48), and argued instead that musical awareness necessitates experiencing it as it happens in real time and space. The implication of the shift in emphasis is that the phenomenological approach advanced by Ingarden sees leaders becoming engaged in events as they occur (Cunliffe, 2009). Hence it is music's temporality and its changes over time that mirrors human and organizational life. Biehl-Missal, in this issue, argues similarly that the temporality of theatre performance provides audiences with the opportunity of unmasking reified images of characters in order to see their defects of character, thereby opening space for continuous and dynamic interaction.

Critics of Ingarden claim that he defaults to a purely linear view (Bensch, 1994). However, as we will shortly discuss, his notion of temporality is fluid and requires the ability to continually double back on current perceptions in the light of new experiences, as they occur. Thus, the sometimes paradoxical elements that aesthetic inquiry poses require the aesthete to consider forward movement, but within the context of what is always already present. To address this paradox, we offer a distillation of Ingarden's aesthetics in order to provide a novel analytic paradigm for understanding artful leadership.

Ingarden's phenomenology contributes both to philosophical aesthetics (to the extent that he explores specific components of the aesthetic experience) and, to a lesser extent, to art criticism (to the extent that he focuses on particular works of music). Our point is that leaders who are aware of these dimensions of experience may be better suited to manage effectively under conditions of crisis and extreme uncertainty. Put differently, we suggest that awareness of the aesthetic dimensions of experience, especially including the relationship between *presencing and concretization*; *backward reflexivity*; attention to both *form and content*; and *myth-making*, can usefully extend existing leader capabilities.

Accompanying these elements is the caveat that according to Ingarden, aesthetic experience concerns the work of art itself, both its objective qualities and our subjective appreciation of those qualities. Ingarden eschews the kind of subjectivity that uses the work of art 'as an external stimulus for evoking... feelings and other psychic states' *outside and separate from* the work of art (Ingarden 1931/1973: 24). Thus, the Māori proverb with its thrice-fold reiteration that 'it is people' refines the aesthete-leader's focus to both the object 'the people', and the subjective experiences of those people with whom leaders interact.

Our pragmatic, normative hope is that by articulating aesthetic dimensions we may bring the centrality of people and their responses to the attention of leaders currently struggling with complex crises. In turn, by becoming aware of aesthetic dimensions of experience, those leaders may take different actions and develop different forms of leadership practice. Our discussion takes these four inter-related elements that contribute to the artistry of leadership. We discuss them in turn, and then subsequently use them as lenses through which to interpret the case illustration of Hurricane Katrina.

Presenting and concretization

The first key element of Ingarden's aesthetic theory – presenting and concretization – pertains to the construction and reception of works of art. Ingarden claims that there is a living relationship between the artist, the work of creation and the audience of perceivers, who all engage in the act of constituting the work of art. He argues that this dynamic relationship is the essence of the creative process and involves the two interlocking elements of presenting and concretization (Ingarden, 1975).

The notion of presenting begins with a work from the artist's perspective and explores how the piece develops over time from the original stimulus to the final work. While the notion of presenting has been explored by Scharmer (2000) and Senge et al. (2004) in organizational studies, their usage explores how future possibilities may become present realities. To this end Senge et al.'s. (2004) paradigmatic view sees the notion of presenting involving an individual's inner reflection and retreat from the immediacy of sensate responses, allowing time for 'seeing from the deepest source and becoming a vehicle for that source' (pp. 88–89). Rather than an interior process that might precede what Senge et al. (2004) call 'realizing', for Ingarden, presenting is an active moment-by-moment creative engagement that allows the work of art to unfold within the contingencies imposed by the environment, and the skills of the artist.

Concretization, on the other hand, looks at an artifact from the perceiver's point of view, noting that it is ultimately the audience of listeners that brings the musical work into existence. For, as Ingarden claims, it is the act of concretizing that is 'the basis for constituting in an aesthetic object the aesthetic qualities that manifest themselves in the object' (Ingarden, 1983: 20).

These terms are, for Ingarden, a means of articulating the mystery of music, which is ephemeral, yet nonetheless describable. Furthermore, according to Merleau-Ponty (1995) music offers us access to ideas that are hidden from view yet express important human qualities.

Literature, music, the passions, but also the experience of the visible world are . . . the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas. The difference is simply that this invisible, these ideas, unlike those of that science, cannot be detached from the sensible appearances and be erected into a second positivity. (p. 149)

Taking this approach within organizations, musical aesthetics leads to the view that, rather than being fixed, enterprises are presented dynamically, with people and processes being in a state of continual transformation. Concretization takes place as followers transform ideas into action and this necessitates a 'follower-readiness' (Hansen et al., 2007: 548) on the part of leaders. The challenge for the leader is to elicit organizational layers and uncover what Ingarden terms as the *sounding* and *non-sounding* elements – the elements that are known and

recognized as well as the assumptions and attitudes that are hidden beneath the surface – as they continually interact. Springborg, in this issue, concurs, arguing for ‘a kind of hovering over the subject’ that continually asks ‘what else is connected to this situation’, thereby avoiding becoming ‘fixated’ on a single solution.

Where organizational culture theorists such as Schein (2004) are apt to see a disjuncture between visible artifacts, espoused beliefs, and the underlying invisible assumptions within organizations, Ingarden’s approach preserves the polyphonic interaction between the visible and the invisible. Further, the artifacts and the underlying non-sounding elements of form, emotion and story inform one another and *together* presence the enterprise. By extension, then, the aesthetics of leadership works at both levels. Hence both imaginative and tangible activities inform the aesthetically-aware leader through presencing the organization as a living, dynamic entity by intentional, concrete acts.

For example, an aesthetically-aware leader will be cognizant of timing. Deciding when to intervene by taking control, and when to remain distant from events by letting them run their uninterrupted course, involves the leader deciding when to concretize a decision into an action, if at all. To this end Tichy and Bennis (2007) distinguish between ‘indecisiveness and deliberate deferral’ (p. 318). To defer a decision requires an astute sense of judgment and the courage to wait. They cite an example from the Vietnam War, especially when troops were facing volatile situations. They extrapolate from this example set in the theatre of military action that ‘take too long and you will miss an opportunity, move too quickly and you deprive yourself of the opportunity to learn more’ (p. 319). This kind of time-sensitive judgment-call attends to an unfolding narrative that is not necessarily linear or even logical, but is an aesthetic quality that underpins Ingarden’s dual notion of presencing and concretization.

Similarly, the aesthetically-aware leader is sensitive to the productive nature of dissonance. By being aware of discord within the enterprise and by seeing it as a necessary part of the whole, dissent can become a way of provoking change and adaptation to the organization’s strategic direction, with the leader assessing appropriate moments in which to intervene. In their discussion on developments at computer chip manufacturer Intel, Burgelman and Grove (1996) claim that the failure of the Pentium processor in 1994 presented a moment of strategic dissonance that offered the company the possibility for a change in direction. The challenge for management, they maintain, is ‘how to tell signal from noise’ (p. 10). By being able to discriminately hear the ‘signal’ one can then make the appropriate strategic adjustment.

When faced with the need for decision-making processes resulting from crisis events the aesthetically-aware leader continually functions on the cusp of dissonance and consonance. Rather than taking a unitary approach, this interplay between consonant stability and dissonant instability sees leaders at times seeking resolutions, while at others allowing dissonance to increase in order to allow new directions to emerge and take shape. The aesthetically-aware leader thus makes continual assessments about how to allow disorder to take formal shape in an ultimately constructive manner.

Backward reflexivity

These qualities of presencing and concretization have as their basis the notion that enterprises are temporal phenomena. Together with this awareness, the aesthetically-aware leader uses backward reflexivity by acknowledging that the present is informed by the past,

and indeed, anticipates the future. Here the listener develops a perception of the piece of music's temporality; its ideas as they develop over time through its rhythmic, harmonic and melodic changes and adaptations.

More broadly, the concept of 'temporality' has been developed to emphasize the difference between 'physical time and social time' (Elias, 1992: 44) with physical time being homogeneous and social time being heterogeneous. Hence, thinking about the 'cyclical and qualitative nature of social time' (Hassard, 1996: 586) necessitates not only thinking in anticipation of what is to come, but also by retrospectively allowing the past to inform the present. The ability to think backwards (Moore, 1996) can be illustrated in musical perception where listening skills require a 'backward reflex' (Ingarden, 1986: 72) with the listener continually referring within a piece to the past melodic and harmonic ideas as a reference point for present sound. To explain this phenomenon, Hepburn uses the phrase 'paradoxical co-presence' (Hepburn, 2002: 27) where the present, past, and indeed future, are considered simultaneously in the *both-and* view that underpins aesthetic engagement.

Karl Weick (1995) echoes this view when he speaks of the aphorism 'stamp in verbs' (p. 187) that signals the shift from seeing organizations as fixed, static entities to acknowledging their temporality. This shift necessitates being alert to process and to being 'attuned to sequences, unfolding, generative settings, amplifications and small events with large consequences' (Weick, 2004: 664). For Weick, elements such as evolution, ambivalence, and complexity are necessary prerequisites for appreciating process. Within an artistic context, this skill is evident when listening to music. A single note or chord only has meaning within its context. The listener considers present sound moment-by-moment by reflexively comparing it with what has gone before. At the same time future melodic and harmonic directions are reflexively anticipated, thereby making each moment fertile with both a past and future.

Translated into leadership practice, this idea of backward reflexivity encourages leaders to explore what is happening in their enterprises at any given moment by attending to past experiences and using those to inform the present. For example, Weick (2007) discusses the problem of pediatricians at the Denver, Colorado, children's hospital in the 1950s being blinded by their own competency when facing problems of child abuse. These practitioners needed to be made aware by social workers of the causes of trauma, and hence 'they dropped the tepid label under which they grouped these cases, "multiple unsuspected trauma syndrome", and replaced it with the much more vivid label, "battered child syndrome"' (p. 9). To make this profound change in language required the reassessment of past experience in the light of new information. Hence leaders reflect back on similar occasions in the past and inquire into the thoughts, feelings and actions that accompanied those prior decisions, and then assess the impact of those decisions on the organization's strategic direction. Becoming sensitized to the dilatory effects of the ways in which they worked in the past enabled the pediatricians to revise the ways in which they work in the present.

Form and content

The third element of Ingarden's aesthetic theory is a heightened awareness of the continual interplay between form *and* content. By becoming aware of this interplay, leaders can ensure that generic policies and procedures that cover all contingencies can work alongside the idiosyncratic and sometimes chaotic events of daily organizing. To this end, Ingarden

distinguishes between generic form and idiosyncratic content by using the terms 'real' and 'ideal'. By real he means a particular work of art with all its unique features and flaws. However, an ideal object is 'ontically independent of any cognitive act directed at it' (Ingarden, 1931/1973: 10). Thus the ideal element of form anchors music so that listeners can attend to the unique content elements within the work.

In this regard, Ingarden notes that for aesthetic knowledge to become objectified (*idealized*), the perceiver seeks to create neutral properties – an 'axiologically neutral skeleton' (Ingarden, 1964: 207) – that give *voice* to a work of art. Ingarden turns this notion of neutrality back onto the work of art, claiming that it is this that gives an individual piece its unique identity.

Therefore, Ingarden contends, the process of engagement between the objective elements of the artwork and its subjective content is far from linear. Rather, there is a dynamic interplay between the real and the ideal with the ideal informing the real and vice versa. Susanne Langer agrees, in that she considers symbol creation as central to human identity, and this process leads to 'a dialectic interplay between subjective and objective elements in human experience' (Langer, 1962: 13). However, rather than this interplay presenting a unitary flow from the subjective to objective, each continually informs the other.

Thus, concepts are, following Langer, abstractions of symbolic experience (Langer, 1962: 63). Furthermore, symbols enable us to go beyond individual surface expression to observe the form in its totality 'in a single instance' (Langer, 1962: 64), helping us to see the relationship between the parts and the whole. Langer goes further, to say that not only do symbols reflect our experience, but artistic symbols also help shape our experience (Langer 1962: 93–94).

By attending to both form and content, leaders are able to simultaneously consider the whole and the parts of the organizations they lead within the broader environment. By taking both a global and local view, they are able make adjustments to formal policies and practices as new events unfold, thereby allowing for the oscillation between the need to respond to the demands of the moment and the formal structures within which the organization operates. For instance, Austin and Devin (2003) make a connection between the processes of rehearsing theatrical productions and the reiterative processes that necessarily accompany the launch of a new software product. Because existing practices cannot easily accommodate unforeseen developments resulting from implementation, there is a need for continual refinement. This refinement occurs as leaders allow the product development process itself to suggest how the organization might be structured in order to cope with the needs of the marketing and production *and* research and development departments. Barry and Meisiek, in this issue, also note that artful engagement 'moves in the direction of the "departure" category of art rather than the "arrival" category of craft' thereby going beyond closure, enabling a continuous renegotiation of what could constitute an end point.

Myth-making

The fourth, and final, element of Ingarden's aesthetics that underpins our theoretical framework of aesthetic leadership is the idea of myth-making. Here the use of the word *myth* is defined as 'ideology in narrative form' (Lincoln, 2006: 242) and according to Ingarden is derived from characterizations within narratives (Ingarden, 1983: 52). Myths are part of everyday life and enable us to make sense of complex situations by 'helping us to

get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality' (Armstrong, 2005: 7).

Roland Barthes (1972) shows the movement in language analysis away from semiotic investigation to myth-making, claiming that myth shifts the focus from the micro analysis of signs and codes to a more macro level interpretation. Myths can take the form of words, a photograph, cartoon, an action or even a work of art, and can generate stories at a meta-level. Myths shift and adapt, and, through the process of myth-creation, symbols adopt a global meaning that suggests meaning beyond the symbol itself. Therefore, myth extends a symbol, giving it a life of its own, where the myth itself becomes the tool for making sense of phenomena. Thus Wicks and Rippin, in this issue, explore with their leadership students the myth-laden properties of dolls and how, in constructing dolls in a classroom situation, students become 'liberat[ed] from the tyranny of conscious purpose', freeing them to access the mythological relationship between the doll and its maker.

Within organizations myths are evidenced within the daily discourse of the members of the enterprise. For instance, the use of a metaphor such as *team* to inspire cooperation and commitment to the organization's goals relies on a discursive shift, from what Barthes calls first to second order semiology (Barthes, 1972: 115; Johnson and Leatherman, 2005). A first order understanding of the concept of team, as a group of people gathered around a common goal, transfers through second order semiology to the myth of a group, akin to a sports team, striving against the wiles of the opposition in order to win.

This process of team formation is evidenced by Team New Zealand's campaign to win sport's oldest trophy, the yachting America's Cup, under the leadership of Peter Blake (Orams, 2009). Maani and Benton (1999) described that team as possessing 'capabilities of a learning organization' (p. 48) and as being collaborative and having open communication; qualities that enabled them to successfully defend their title in 2000. Hence, the language of team became for Team New Zealand a mythological tool their leader used to encourage staff to make personal sacrifices in order for the enterprise to succeed. However, this was to fail them in their 2003 defense, with commentators noting a breakdown of communication and an inability of the leaders to learn from team members (Tunnah and Ash, 2003), thereby denying the potency of the 'team' myth to help them succeed.

The theoretical model of aesthetically-aware leadership that we have distilled from Ingarden's writings on aesthetics is presented in Table 1. The table shows the direct connection between aesthetic phenomena and leadership competencies that aesthetician-leaders should strive to master. The qualities of presencing and concretization translate to the competencies of an alert imagination, the ability to act or defer and an awareness of the potential of dissonance to provoke dramatic changes in strategic direction. Backward reflexivity translates into an ability to analyse past actions and prefiguring future trajectories; form and content include the paradoxical competencies of preserving existing modes of operation and a willingness to change direction quickly. Finally, the quality of myth-making translates into the competencies of recognizing symbols in use and an awareness of the rhetorical power of language.

In what follows we apply this theoretical model of aesthetically-aware leadership as a lens through which to view and interpret the case of Hurricane Katrina. In particular, we seek to illustrate how Ingarden's musical aesthetics can be useful for leaders dealing with complex and uncertain situations.

Table 1. The relationship between aesthetic phenomena and leadership competencies

Aesthetic phenomenon	Leadership competency
Presenting and concretization	Alert imagination To act or defer
Backward reflexivity	Awareness of the potential of dissonance Analyzing past actions Prefiguring future trajectories
Form and content	Preserve existing modes of operation Willingness to quickly change direction
Myth-making	Recognizing symbols in use Awareness of language

Case illustration: Hurricane Katrina and aesthetically-aware leadership

The unpredictable nature of crisis situations means that complete and all-encompassing rational preparation may be difficult, if not impossible. For, as Mitroff (2004) argues in his analyses of the bombings of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 19 April 1995, and the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on 11 September 2001, unpredictable crises present us with unthinkable events. What is required, says Mitroff, when the unthinkable occurs, such as a terrorist attack on an unprecedented scale, is the need to 'exercise human judgment' (p. 99). While Mitroff does not use either of the terms aesthetics or artistry, the ability to make spontaneous judgments, which he places so much stock in, relies on the aesthetic phenomena and leadership competencies that were described above.

That being said, the possible effects of a hurricane like Katrina were well known prior to the crisis. In his analysis of the Katrina crisis, Barton (2008) claims that:

There are three essential requirements for managing your way out of a natural storm: a leader, a strategic platform for decision making, and the means to communicate. With Katrina, the city lacked the first, blew the second, and completely underestimated the third. (p. 127–128)

Although we concur with Barton that appropriate leadership is crucial to any responses to a crisis, and while political commentators who assessed the leadership style of President George W. Bush blamed him for incompetent leadership during the Katrina debacle (see for example Klein, 2008), our analysis follows a different trajectory in our application of the aesthetic leadership framework described above to find a better way to manage the problem. We do not assume one person as being ultimately responsible; as noted above, the list of people possibly to be blamed for inadequate leadership is quite long. Instead, our interpretation seeks to identify the presence or absence of the leadership competencies discussed in our analysis of Ingarden's musical aesthetics. Rather than focusing on one single level of decision-making authority or one single organization, we approach the case generically, seeking to identify specific situations in which awareness of the aesthetic dimensions of experience might have usefully complemented other leadership capabilities.

There had been six days to prepare for the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina on 29 August 2005. A tropical cyclone had formed off the African coast on 23 August and had begun to

track towards Florida and Louisiana. The ensuing floods in New Orleans of September 2005 brought human devastation unparalleled in the recent history of the USA. Loss of life, the displacement of over 800,000 people, the destruction of property and lost employment all resulted from the disaster; and much of this suffering was attributed to the inability of leaders at federal, state and city levels to act in a timely and coordinated manner ('White House admits Katrina flaws', 2006). Could this destruction and displacement have been significantly reduced, or at least minimized?

In the face of insurmountable problems resulting from the loss of personal resources, the people of New Orleans turned to their federal, state and city leaders to act on their behalf. The floods left multitudes of people homeless, and because much of the infrastructure had been destroyed, hundreds of thousands were left stranded without the basic necessities of water and food. Financially, the disaster is estimated to have cost in excess of US\$ 100 billion, including the destruction of infrastructure and disruption to oil production (Lawrimore, 2005). This desperate situation required leaders who could lobby for immediate resources and build morale.

In the early stage of the crisis, the perceptions of these leaders, how they *presenced* the crisis, determined how the disaster relief operation would unfold, especially in the allocation of resources. These initial reactions were focused on solving the problem of property destruction. Instead of concentrating efforts on saving lives and rescuing the stranded, state and federal leaders perceived property to be of greater value and sought ways of protecting individuals against theft and looting. In response to this perception, armed soldiers were immediately dispatched to the area to guard against the citizenry appropriating goods by force.

The nominal leaders concentrated on the protection of property rights rather than the alleviation of human suffering. When it came to saving or supporting people who were stranded by the flood waters, leaders appeared either unwilling or unable to act, and 'the hesitation seemed to start locally and then infect the chain of command all the way to Washington' (Ripley, 2005b: 33). Thus the immediate needs of victims were often tragically ignored by local, state and national leaders. In spite of the thousands sheltered in the New Orleans Superdome pleading for relief, 'looting was seen as a greater risk than rising waters, incipient disease, and hunger in the refugee Superdome' (Hari, 2005: A19). And yet, a month after the disaster struck, fears of widespread anarchy proved to be unfounded and no life was lost as a result of the predicted vigilante action (Gumbel, 2005).

While it could be argued that the lack of looting confirms the wisdom of placing armed troops in the area it belies the initial responses from President George W. Bush who confirmed the view that property destruction was a greater danger than the life-threatening situation that was developing. In his comments in the early days of the disaster, he proclaimed that Mississippi's Republican senator Trent Lott's home would be rebuilt into 'a fantastic house' (Cooper, 2005: 43) but omitted any statement on the re-housing of the many hundreds of thousands of New Orleans's poor displaced by the floods. Rather than meeting the needs of the general populace, it seemed that national leaders were distracted by their own misfortunes.

This bias was confirmed seven months later in March 2006 with the disclosure of video footage of a White House conversation between President Bush and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff being briefed on August 28, one day prior to the hurricane's arrival. From the conversation it appears that President Bush had already decided that property was to take higher priority than potential loss of life. Jones quotes

Bush as saying,

'I want to assure the folks at the state level that we are fully prepared to not only help you during the storm, but we will move in whatever resources and assets we have at our disposal after the storm to help you deal with the loss of property.' Bush says in one part of the video, 'We pray there's no loss of life, of course' (2006, n.p.)

By presenting the crisis as a property issue the concretization that ensued saw leaders enact decisions to protect their power base, but with little reference to those bearing the brunt of the disaster. Within this frame of presenting and concretization we explore how the three aesthetic elements of *form and content*, *backward reflexivity*, and *myth-making* that we described in the preceding section can be used as a means of investigating how the disaster was led, and how it might have been led more effectively.

Leaders who are aware of the continual interaction of form and content can apply creative and innovative solutions to problem situations. However, where either form or content dominate, a nihilistic tendency towards closure and finality occurs, thereby stymieing creativity. The dominance of form sees macro structures taking priority over micro needs; whereas, when content is more evident, rigorous application of idiosyncratic ideology overrides the need to see the wider implications of that belief. In the Hurricane Katrina case, we note that form most definitely dominated content in the same way that a musician might keep faithful to the written score but fail to spontaneously explore the nuances of the music as it is being performed.

Post-hurricane rescue efforts in New Orleans became hamstrung because of an inability of various agencies to decide which one bore responsibility for managing the crisis. Was the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to take charge, or would responsibility lie with Louisiana State authorities? Unwilling to cede power, neither federal nor local bodies were able to coordinate their efforts. This led to 'uncertainty about who was in charge at crucial moments' ('4 places where the system broke down', 2005: 48). The inability of agencies to look beyond their 'patch' to solve a greater need saw the triumph of form over content. Hence, the tendency to protect existing structures and lines of control which were useful under normal conditions now became dysfunctional; and the urgent requirement to respond to the immediate needs of the homeless and destitute (content) became subsumed under the desire to keep existing management structures in place (form).

This was also seen in a federal administration wedded to fixed leadership arrangements. Reporter Mike Allen, quoting a White House Adviser, wrote: 'The extremely highly centralized control of the government – the engine of Bush's success – failed him this time' (Allen, 2005: 34). Being unable to respond to the crisis of the moment by remaining fixed to a given process is further reflected in a comment by Republican Congressman for New Orleans, Bobby Jindal: 'The bureaucracy needs to do more than one thing at a time' (Cooper, 2005: 43). Jindal's critique advocated that managing this crisis required leaders to think polyphonically and persuasively to bring bureaucratic functions in line with the immediate requirements that the chaotic environment presented. By privileging form over content, the Federal Government was unable to respond quickly to new situations.

Not only did form drive out content at the national level, leaders were also incapacitated at local level, unable to release much needed funds for fear of the consequences. A *Time* account claims: 'Leaders were afraid to actually lead, reluctant to cost businesses money, break jurisdictional rules or spawn lawsuits' ('4 places where the system broke down', 2005: 48).

Ironically, by leaders protecting their existing positions and roles, appropriate leadership was thwarted.

And yet the Coastguard showed great courage and a willingness to innovate in the face of the crisis (Lee, 2009) along with other members of the general populace who were able to look beyond their long-held ideologies, and offer jobs and succor to individuals and families with contrary belief systems and lifestyles. For example, in Arkansas a website, *openyourhome.com*, was created by a private citizen to match the homeless with host families. Through this private initiative, Ripley wrote of a 'conservative retiree' hosting a 'lesbian couple and their family' (Ripley, 2005a: 23), an arrangement that under normal conditions would have violated the values of both families, and yet was set to continue until the displaced couple found work and were able to resettle. Here at this micro level, people were able to allow the needs of the moment to inform their behavior, thus allowing the *form* of long-held belief systems to be reshaped by the *content* embodied in the needs of the moment. In the process these individuals collectively demonstrated authentically attuned leadership.

One of the fundamental questions commentators keep returning to in dissecting the Hurricane Katrina tragedy is why authorities were so unprepared to deal with the crisis in spite of knowing well in advance the probable extent of the devastation. The aesthetic phenomenon of backward reflexivity pertains to this leadership challenge. Backward reflexivity offers leaders the ability to see the present in terms of the past and to anticipate future directions; a skill that could have enabled leaders to be better prepared for the inevitability of the disaster and to respond more appropriately when it occurred.

Over a year before the disaster, in July 2004, city officials had participated in a computer-simulated hurricane code-named *Hurricane Pam*. This virtual recreation based on accumulated past experience, going back as far as the devastating floods of 1927, accurately predicted the outcomes played out in real time 13 months later (NOVA, 2005). Similarly, in her first account from New Orleans, Ripley also claims that computer modeling had predicted the kind of devastation that would most likely result from flooding. All the studies agreed, the levees that kept water away from a city built below sea level would not hold. She ironically declared that, 'If experts had prophesied a terrorist attack with that kind of accuracy, they would be under suspicion for treason' (Ripley, 2005b: 28).

Previous experiences of disasters in the region had taught emergency administrators that immediate response is crucial, which is why Ripley reports that disaster coordinators needed to be immediately present and visible. She quotes a former director of disaster relief saying, 'If you are not visible within 72 hours, you will have chaos' (Ripley, 2005b: 33). Visibility reassures victims that agencies are being active and responsive thereby protecting them against the possible spread of anarchy.

With the benefits of computer modeling and past experience, what could account for the inability of the disaster relief agencies to swing into immediate action? We argue that key decision-makers lacked the skill of backward reflexivity. As the word *reflexive* implies, backward reflexivity is a spontaneous act that seeks to make sense of the present in the light of the past, and then intuitively anticipates the future based on these evaluations. In this way *gut feel* works closely alongside the rational view championed by the scientific approach.

An aesthetically alert leader is conscious of the shift from how an issue is presented, its intentional construction; and the way it is concretized, or read, by those observing the action. Pleas for help by people housed in the New Orleans Superdome and trapped on

the freeway above the high water line, offered a cue to those managing the crisis of the need to change focus from protecting property to saving lives.

Such a shift required attention to both the macro and micro levels of disaster management. Therefore, coordinating the agencies *and* finding means of immediately attending to the suffering of those left un-housed on the freeway necessitated an ability to improvise and make decisions based on solving immediate problems. In all of the efforts of agencies to act proactively, it seems that leaders did not effectively frame the rescue effort within a mythology that galvanized public opinion and garnered support from the rest of the nation.

Ironically, New Orleans already possessed a mythical status in its musical history that could have been used to initiate immediate responses, and it could be that this same mythology could have acted as a means to obtaining the necessary financial resources and political will to rebuild the city (Marsalis, 2005). Certainly the sophisticated technologies that can predict and determine the effects of hurricanes did not awaken the imagination of leaders sufficiently enough to overcome their fear of acting outside of the *script*. The problem is that the public did not *believe* they were at risk from the approaching hurricane in the same way the general populace felt vulnerable to terrorism. Ironically, where the adversary is invisible, leaders are able to create a mythology to manipulate public opinion, but when the threat is known and understood, it is much harder to exert control. For, 'In times of war or crisis, power is easily stolen from the many by the few on a promise of security. The more elusive or imaginary the foe, the better for manufacturing consent' (Wright, 2005: 49).

Implications

Within our theoretical framework of aesthetic leadership, which incorporates Ingarden's aesthetic elements of presencing and concretization, form and content, backward reflexivity and myth-making, we have examined the flawed leadership of the Hurricane Katrina crisis; an analysis that has been conducted with the supreme benefit of hindsight from the comfort of our scholarly armchairs with limited exposure to risk or retribution. These considerations aside, what might be the key lessons that leaders might derive from this illustrative analysis, to help them avoid future devastations? Our claim is that by engaging in aesthetically-sensitive practices, leaders could have acted in such a way as to mitigate the adverse effects of the disaster on the people of New Orleans.

In sum, in this article we have argued that aesthetic awareness can provide leaders with a range of intellectual and emotional tools that complement pure instrumentality. Although advanced technologies helped to track the course of Hurricane Katrina, they could do little to solve problems at a human level. For many of the citizens of New Orleans, the ensuing floods represented extreme devastation, resulting in loss of property, relocation from their homes and indeed destruction of their functioning city. Measuring the trauma of these individuals is all but impossible. However, New Orleans and its surrounds required artful leaders empathetically attuned to the sufferings of the displaced as well as being aware of the socio-economic and political environment. Table 2 summarizes the issues that arise from our study of the Katrina case.

In this article we have explored the notion that aesthetically-aware leaders, who can both feel the sufferings of the populace and to see the overarching political and economic implications, could be more effective as managers of disasters and other crisis events. Such leaders can negotiate the tensions between form and content and to use their

Table 2. Artful leadership of the Katrina disaster

Aesthetic phenomenon	Leadership competency	Artful responses to Katrina
Presencing and concretization	Alert imagination To act or defer Awareness of the potential of dissonance	Imagine the possibilities once the hurricane formed in the Atlantic To act immediately and consider consequences later Awareness of political differences to derail rescue efforts
Backward reflexivity	Analyzing past actions Prefiguring future trajectories	Lessons from Hurricane Pam Enhance the role of the Coastguard in disaster relief
Form and content	Preserve existing modes of operation Willingness to quickly change direction	State and city authorities working in concert Lobby for immediate resources to the Superdome (to save lives) Support for private housing and employment initiatives
Myth-making	Recognizing symbols in use Awareness of language	New Orleans the home of jazz 'America's Soul Kitchen' (Marsalis)

insights from past experiences to anticipate future directions. These insights would then help them marshal resources and prioritize them according to how the situation is presented. Astute leaders, being fully aware of the power of myth to mobilize the public, as famously practiced by Rudolph Giuliani (in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre), can help garner support for those in the most desperate need, which in the case of New Orleans included the poor, disenfranchised through racial and economic polarization.

Human creativity has an important role to play in disaster situations, even if those catastrophes begin with natural events like typhoons and hurricanes. How we respond to these events can be guided by astute and aesthetically-attuned leaders. The ability to confidently make instant judgments, and to offer rationales that rouse the public's imagination, are tools that the aesthetically-aware leader is able to use by being sensitive and responsive to the moment.

Our case analysis of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath is a dramatic illustration. Today we are faced with similar trials in deciding how to respond to global financial crisis. This crisis has implications beyond policy makers and bankers, to firms at the local level struggling to make sense of the current environment, and to plan for ways of at least holding onto their businesses. Artful leadership has a centre-stage role to play in this drama, and not merely as a fairweather bit player in the day-to-day managing of uncertainty. In this article we have endeavored to show that aesthetics can assist leaders in developing potent insights, which expand their repertoire of artful competencies, especially when confronting unpredicted events.

Thus, the aesthetically alert leader continually holds the three-fold focus contained in the epigraph at the start of this article, that 'it is people, it is people, it is people' who are the greatest thing in the world. The sacred task of leaders, from the level of the firm through to

government, is to consider the creative life-force, the energy that resides in the world through people and the land which they share in mutual partnership. Neither the land nor the people within it are commodities that may be taken up and discarded at our will. As we consider the aesthetic dimensions beyond instrumentality and ethics, our hope is that artful leaders may once again become more sensitized to the importance of this *place* and the *people* who live within it, thereby offering a pathway to renewal that is sustainable and creative.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Ngahuaia Whiu for help with interpreting Māori cultural values.

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Fonte: Leadership, v. 6, p. 311-330, August 2010. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <<http://online.sagepub.com>>. Acesso em: 16 ago. 2010.

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