

Leadership and Art: A Subjective Self-Portrait

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Calling myself “leader” was initially a very difficult thing to do. It seemed an arrogant proclamation. It was many years ago and I had moved halfway across the country and determined that I was going to survive...and realized that simply surviving wasn’t good enough. I was a single mother in graduate school and involved in the design and implementation of the first Wisconsin Rural Leadership Program seminar series. I stood before a group of young men and women and proclaimed myself a leader. More presumptuous than the leader label was the fact that I was involved in leadership development!

Fast forward twenty-five years. I’ve moved beyond survival to a successful career in academia. Not wanting to wait until I retire to take up a hobby that has intrigued me for many years, I began taking watercolor lessons with my oldest grandson. Writing an “artist statement” to accompany my first foray into exhibiting one of my watercolor paintings in a public show was, for me, a daunting task. Again, I asked myself just who I thought I was kidding. After all, I’d only been painting for a little more than a year. An artist statement indeed...people would laugh, I was sure. Even more embarrassing, I was expected to put a price on my work because all of the paintings in the show would be for sale.

It seems that, in both instances, the title might be subjective. Who decides who leads anyway? Who’s to say what art is in this day and age? In Wisconsin, I didn’t have a title, but I was leading anyway...I had a reason for leading and I was passionate about what I was learning and doing. When I first entered a watercolor show, I didn’t even have a studio but I was painting anyway...I had a reason for painting and I was excited about what I was learning and creating. Over time, I’ve grown comfortable with the subjective nature of these titles.

When Michael Harvey asked me to contribute a reflection piece for this year’s *Building Leadership Bridges* volume that explored and linked these two elements of my life, I began to think about the parallels and intersections. Earlier, I had responded to a similar invitation from cohorts at Ohio State University to write a newsletter item that spoke to the similarities evident in the language employed by one of my early watercolor instructors and the words I use often in my teaching of leadership. Now I’ll take that a bit further and

mingle what I know of learning, doing, and teaching leadership with my current understanding of learning, doing, and teaching watercolor.

Learning...

Both artists and leaders need to acquire the basic skills necessary to accomplish their goals. However, in both cases, the tool box of skills is not enough. One cannot expect success to follow automatically once a skill set is mastered. In fact, both leaders and artists must continually hone their skills. I've never known an effective leader or a successful artist who does not actively work on learning new techniques and trying different approaches.

A key skill for both leaders and artists is communication. Leaders must be able to communicate effectively, to organize their thoughts and deliver a coherent message that encourages others to become involved. Artists must be able to communicate effectively through visual media, to create art that engages the viewer and invites interpretation or simple enjoyment. It goes without saying that the required communication abilities are quite different and, further, they vary with the nature and purpose of the leader as well as with the type of artistic endeavor. Collaborative leadership employs a communication style that might not be useful at all in a military leadership setting. Some of the skills and techniques used by a watercolorist simply don't work for those who paint with oils.

Decision making is a skill that takes time and experience to develop fully. Whether leadership is practiced collaboratively in a community or monopolistically at the top of an organizational chart, decisions must be made. Small decisions are often made quickly and without angst, while larger decisions that may be absolutely critical are more apt to be pondered and carefully scrutinized prior to making the final choice. Some decisions can be revisited with no harm done while others become permanent immediately.

Artists occasionally approach decision-making collaboratively if, for example, they participate in a small group of watercolorists who paint together and critique each other's work. However, it is more likely that decisions will be made individually – whether the format will be tall and narrow or square, whether the approach will be soft and transparent or bold and abstract, or whether to tear up a painting and start over or try to save it. As is the case with decisions made by leaders, some artistic decisions can be revisited with no harm done while others become permanent immediately.

In addition to learning the skills required to be effective as a leader or proficient as an artist, becoming familiar with the concepts contributing to a successful outcome is essential. Consider the notion of ambiguity and its converse, predictability. Ambiguity is certainly present in the process of leadership (probably even for those who govern by Roberts Rules of Order) as well as in the development of a painting (with the possible exception of those who do the paint-by-number kits.) Without an understanding of the need for tolerance for ambiguity, leaders expectations when dealing with a diverse group will be sorely tested. After all, moving a group of people forward is not a simple linear process, but fraught with stops and starts, and changes in both speed and direction. People just don't always behave as expected.

The watercolorist who expects paint and paper to behave in predictable fashion will experience frustration because mixing water with pigment and then applying it to paper presents a wide range of possible options. Too much water and a back run is produced or pigment runs off the paper. An interruption takes the artist away from the painting briefly and, lo and behold, there's a hard edge that was totally unexpected. If the slant of the work surface is too great, the colors can run together and make an unattractive muddy splotch. Because it is the nature of watercolor as a medium to produce surprises, it is important for the artist to develop a tolerance for ambiguity.

Composition is a concept that is important to both artist and leader. A leader will need consider who is included in a project group and how the people are organized to do the work when designing team-building activities and developing a successful organization. Paying attention to compositional elements will assure that the structure of an organization suits its vision and mission. Care must also be taken to design teams in a manner that will produce results on assigned tasks. One needs only a rudimentary understanding of personality typologies to recognize the need for balance in team composition.

There are design elements to consider in the composition of a watercolor. Certainly, the artist's vision as well as the purpose of the painting play into the composition. Structure and balance are important, but I would hasten to add that balance is not necessarily synonymous with symmetry. Instead, the focal point will almost always be away from the center of the painting but will be balanced by means of other design elements. For example, repetition of a shape can help to harmonize a painting while careful attention to

values (light to dark) adds interest and draws attention to that aspect of the creative piece the artist wishes to emphasize.

Doing...

Leaders must deal with an array of problems that are associated with group dynamics, organizational issues, and specific events. This is where both the learned skill set and a knowledge of leadership concepts comes to the fore...an understanding of people and how they interact, the ability to clarify (and simplify) the key aspects of a complex issue, and a willingness to explore alternatives and consequences of actions taken before making a decision. Artists deal with a whole different set of problems that need to be solved, but like leaders, they must employ skills they have developed over time as well as draw upon their knowledge of artistic concepts...an understanding of pigments and how they interact, the ability to clarify (and simplify) the elements of a complex design issue, and a willingness to anticipate consequences of brush strokes and application of paint to paper as they make decisions in the development of a watercolor painting.

Both leaders and artists make decisions in the process of implementing a plan or creating a watercolor and they do so drawing on both acquired knowledge and personal experience. However, I would posit that both artists and leaders rely on a deeper level of knowing that resides in the subconscious. Mackenzie (1999) makes this point quite earnestly when he says to aspiring watercolorists:

“Put intuition in control. Let your imagination and intuitive sense of composition assume control. The hardest part about this is believing in your ability to do it. The second-hardest part is shutting off that little left-brain voice that says, ‘this is stupid. It won’t work.’ It takes courage to step into the unknown and trust what you find, particularly when the unknown is within you.” (MacKenzie (1999) p. 114)

In *Leading from Within*, I make a similar case for intuition in a discussion that differentiates leadership and management, saying that leaders may engage in a change process without a clear picture of what the outcome will be, but knowing intuitively that they are on the right path. When one learns to tap...and trust...intuition, it becomes a valued resource. It is difficult to call up insight and intuition at will. However, as leaders and artists engage their work with an eager sense of openness and possibility, the flow of ideas increases as innate wisdom and creativity come into play.

Both leaders and artists tend to develop a particular style over time. For most people, it is a function of both time and experience as well as a predisposition to approach the process in a way suited to individual personality and to the anticipated outcome. Another influencing factor is the context within which leadership happens or painting evolves. As examples, military leadership operates in a context that is not the same as rural community leadership. Similarly, studio artists approach their art in a way that can not readily be duplicated when painting *en plein air* as outdoor conditions may vary widely, even in the same day.

Another element that shapes the approach taken either by leader or artist has to do with control. Some leaders are not comfortable with minimal control and might be thought of as micro-managers while others are more collaborative as they deal with solving problems and charting a course for the future. In like manner, one does not need to be an art expert to recognize painting styles that are more controlled and iterative, easily differentiating them from those that are impressionistic and suggestive in their content.

From my own work, compare the two paintings below. The subject matter is the Sonoran desert sentinel, the saguaro. "Saguaro Solo" is a carefully crafted representation of a single cactus bloom. "Sonoran Snow Mist" is more of an impression of a sunny morning following a rare Tucson snowstorm and depicts a pair of saguaros against a misty background and the Catalina mountains appearing as a "sky island."

Paintings inserted here:

The realistic painting perhaps reflects my need to be more in control because of my insecurity as a novice watercolorist while the free flowing rendition represents an increasing comfort level with the process...letting the pigment and water do its own thing to some extent. From my own leadership, I would have to say that those times when I have felt the need to try to be in control were uncomfortable for me but were good learning experiences...just as a more controlled, precise painting provides an important learning opportunity. However, I am much more at ease in a less structured and spontaneous environment as both leader and artist!

Teaching...

There is a significant element of subjectivity in how I understand both leadership and art. Long ago, I struggled with trying to define leadership and concluded that leadership has a personal (subjective) meaning for all of us. I leave the struggle for a universally acceptable definition of the term to others. For me, leadership is a shared responsibility for creating a better world in which to live and work. It manifests in our passion to engage others in bringing about purposeful change (Huber, 1999). More recently, I've thought about art in terms of its personal meaning. For me, watercolor provides an avenue to explore and express beauty and meaning in the world. It manifests in my passion to engage with others in learning and creating artistic interpretations of what I see and seek to understand more fully.

In large measure, my approach to teaching leadership is grounded in what it means to me although I take my responsibility for broadening the students' perspective quite seriously. That is why I purposely encourage them to come up with their own definition and develop a personal philosophy of leadership. Additionally, I teach leadership as a process, one that is collaborative and driven by a purpose – leadership for what reason and with whom because it doesn't happen in a vacuum. To that end, my lectures are brief if they occur at all! Just as one can not learn to paint expressive watercolors without actually getting involved in the process, I believe it is impossible for one to truly learn to exercise effective leadership without actually 'doing' leadership.

Over the years, I have come to realize that there are some aspects of leadership that I can teach people about, but that is no guarantee that the knowledge will be incorporated into the way they lead. I believe that being passionate, authentic, credible and ethical are essential characteristics of effective leadership and so they are frequent topics in my teaching. However, I do not view these as skills to be learned; they are attributes and they represent choices to be made. For example, I can teach about ethics, but that doesn't guarantee that my students will be ethical unless they make that choice and act accordingly.

As for teaching a watercolor workshop, I really am not qualified to do so after just a three-year learning process! But I can say a bit about some of the teaching I have experienced. The Southern Arizona Watercolor Guild of which I am a member sponsors several workshops each year and offers demonstrations at the monthly meetings. The demonstrations are interesting and get the creative juices flowing. However, gaining

hands-on experience in a workshop setting is much more valuable. I am an advocate of experiential education as a professor and, as a learner, I am very much predisposed to experiential learning.

To date, I have studied with a half dozen different artists, developing painting skills while becoming more familiar with watercolor approaches and concepts. One instructor has exhorted me to paint what I am most passionate about while another says that there's no point in painting unless you have something to say. Much to my dismay, I have been told that I can't be successful as an artist unless I learn to draw first (it's not something that comes easily to me). More encouraging is another teacher who tells her students to just play – to explore and have fun. The workshops have been very much hands-on and I have toted my palette to Mackinac Island, Michigan, as well as to several workshops here in Arizona. I confess that I still hesitate to call myself an artist, but it is not as an embarrassing proclamation as it once was!

Living up to the title of either artist or leader is, for me, much less daunting if I employ an adjective in each case. I know myself to be a collaborative leader and feel no embarrassment saying so. For me, it is very much in keeping with my belief that leadership is a shared responsibility and often only marginally related to carrying a title. I know that I am becoming a watercolor artist and that I will become more proficient with time. Clarifying that watercolor is the medium I choose for artistic expression relieves me of having to be competent in the many avenues open to those who pursue art professionally or as a fulfilling hobby. Both leadership and painting are important in my life, but the balance is beginning to shift as I approach that point when my career in academia is past and retirement is what the future holds.



“Saguaro Solo” by N. Huber



“Sonoran Snow Mist” by N. Huber

References:

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MacKenzie, G. (1999). *The watercolorist's essential notebook*. Cincinnati, OH: North Light Books.