

Peter Moolan-Feroze on how art can liberate thinking within organisations

Relocate

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Art and drawing can change the culture of an organisation, enhance collaboration, solve seemingly intractable problems and offer new creative insights, says Peter Moolan-Feroze, artist and business consultant.

He invited participants at the Festival of Global People to **Get Creative**. The objective of the sessions – which were run at regular intervals throughout the Festival – was to help people experience the power of art to solve business problems and discover their own creativity.

“I am essentially a Renaissance thinker,” he said, “and I believe in the power of cross fertilization between subjects.” In his work with corporations and individuals, he shows how art can help teams find solutions by looking outside normal parameters.

As an introduction, he started the session by asking delegates to collaborate on a drawing – inviting each individual on a table to add their interpretation of a picture of a whale. The result – after six or seven people had contributed to the sketch – ended up being colourful, exuberant, and a way of connecting everyone who had added their marks to the paper.

“It’s about accessing and releasing the unconscious,” he explained. “Perfumery does this too. It’s about how to make your thinking more multi-dimensional. Why we only use verbal language, I have no idea.”

Peter trained as an artist at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, the Slade School (1979-1983), London University and then post-graduate at the Royal Academy Schools (1984-1987). For the last fifteen years, he has been an external consultant at the London Business School. He has designed creative learning programmes for companies including Deutsche Bank, A.T.Kearney, Givaudan, M&S, McLaren Automotive, Unilever, Estée Lauder and Jo Malone.

Creating and defining strategy through art

He explained that drawing can help to create a different work culture, tackle difficult or intractable problems and come up with new strategic initiatives.

“You can change the atmosphere in a business meeting by changing the activity,” he said. Incorporating art and drawing is a way of exploring how you can make thinking more multi-dimensional and find new solutions to difficult issues.

He quotes from TS Eliot’s poem, *Little Gidding* to explain the nature of creativity and finding a new perspective:

***We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.***

“What artists do is see different kinds of reality within the same subject,” he said. “You are placed in a position of inexperience. It’s about stepping into an unknown space – in an empty space you can imagine a language that is completely different.”

This has implications for business, where being adaptable and creative is even more important in a world of constant change.

“From a position of inexperience, you can discover new things about yourself,” he said. “When you are an expert in something then it becomes like castle walls and it can be frightening on the outside. Knowledge is a wonderful thing, but it can inhibit us from coming at it from a different angle.”

He cited a case study where he had worked with the managers of Boots the Chemists, looking at how to reach out to mothers with new babies. The brief was from two managers who wanted to examine store layout and behaviour.

“During the session, they came up with a drawing of an abstract bird – gentle and wave-like – to represent what they wanted to achieve,” he explained.

“One of the managers said: ‘That is how we want the mother to feel when she leaves the store. What are the emotions she is walking away with that make her feel like this?’ Drawing can foster innovative thinking. If you are drawing about ideas, you start seeing connections.”

Changing the prevailing culture

Drawing helps to level the hierarchical structure, gets people collaborating and communicating in a different way, sparks new ideas and creates new perspectives, and engenders innovative thinking, he said.

“I have been working with NHS staff on a project called Our Space where we took time out to think about ideas and creativity,” he explained. “We were trying to establish a culture of behaviours that was parallel to the prevailing culture, with the objective that the team would then begin to bring elements of that culture across to the workplace.”

If you are drawing about ideas or concepts, you start seeing connections between different drawings, and can start to bring those concepts together.

“The genius of the Harry Potter stories is how the children move between the wizarding world and the human world – they go back and forth,” he said. “We all have the capacity to be massively more creative than we realise – this can lead to personal and professional insights and greater job satisfaction, and exchange of ideas.”

Creativity helps you to stay open minded – something that is essential in order to maintain a competitive edge in today’s business environment.

Freeing yourself – and your organisation – from limits and boundaries

Many people feel insecure in organisations and feel unable to express themselves creatively, he said. Sometimes this is because of the culture, and sometimes it is due to internal barriers.

“Often at school we are told we can’t do something, that we are no good at it,” he said. “I was a twin and at school my brother had a place in the choir, but I failed the choir test and ended up turning the pages for the organist.

“Ten years ago, I decide to run an experiment to see if I could teach myself to sing. To begin with I thought I couldn’t – I was inhibited. A decade later, I have written 100 songs and recorded and posted some of them on YouTube. I proved to myself that it was possible. It is wrong to say to a child that they can’t do something.”

How creativity can enhance business “outside their own skill base”

He said that in terms of Renaissance thinking, the power of cross fertilization means encouraging managers to realise that solutions can occur by employing subjects outside your own their own skill base.

Creativity can solve seemingly intractable management or systemic problems. Approaching the same problem in the same way will not create a way through – coming at the problem from a different angle can be very fruitful. Businesses need to embrace creativity and innovation because the world is changing so fast that only the fleet of foot will survive.

On a personal level, executives may find their work life more fulfilling if they enable and embrace their creative side – it is something that is often forgotten in business among the profit and loss figures.

Ambiguity is now a fact of life, he said. For an artist, this is inspirational, but for many employers and employees, it can be frightening.

“As an artist, I couldn’t live without ambiguity,” he said.

He explained that he has worked with teams and executives using the power of art and sketches to overcome challenges, design new ways to tackle difficult problems and come up with new strategic initiatives.

For example, he arranged for professional ballet dancers to come to talk to executives at a high performance car company about the process of movement and fluidity.

“By the end of the session, the ballet dancers had shown that there is a whole new language with which to talk about movement and flow, and that by using a new vocabulary, new opportunities can arise,” he said. “By taking a completely different approach to solving problems around car design, exciting new possibilities opened up.”

Using art helps to inject an ambiguity, an uncertainty and create a space for unanticipated opportunity to arise, he says, something that is not often found in business, where planning and certainty used to be prized.

“Businesses can no longer plan five or ten years ahead, as they used to,” he explained. “If you tried to do that, you’d be dead as a business. It’s all about responding to rapidly changing environments and adapting to a world in flux. A lot of progress comes from solutions outside your own environment.”

His experience with business leaders is that while they may be looking for new ideas, they often underestimate how important a fresh perspective can be.

“The issue with expertise and leadership is that sometimes you need to find an answer to a problem from a place of inexperience and openness. That can be hard thing for leaders to do.”

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