

# The impact of an art-based experience on leadership development

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*Art-based leadership experiments have gained a foothold in leadership development research. However, few studies have investigated their effectiveness. These studies have included music, drama, art, and performance to develop the dimensions and mind of a leader. This paper describes an experience that measured the impact of an art-based intervention in four dimensions: (1) disorienting dilemma, (2) creative self-efficacy, (3) self-awareness, and (4) sense-making. The art-based experience highlighted participants' need for leadership development to unleash their creativity and increase their self-efficacy and self-awareness, and demonstrated the usefulness of the experience in the process of transforming the mind-set in the classroom, which may also translate to the workplace.*

**Keywords:** leadership development, coaching, creativity, creative self-efficacy, art-based, phenomenological study, disorienting dilemma, transformative learning, coaching, workplace learning.

### Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and examine the application of an art-based activity to leadership development in an MBA program and to apply the research to the field of leadership development and its implications to workplace learning. Leadership

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development is used in multiple organisations, including but not limited to: the workplace, academia, and executive coaching settings.

Students enrolled in an MBA leadership class at a small private university were asked to create a painting of their own choosing during a designated class experience. Class groups were able to enjoy this experience at the beach. This event allowed the researcher to gain new insight, perspective, and understanding about leadership development, and encouraged the students to discover new feelings while experiencing or living the phenomenon of the painting activity. By reviewing reflective journals written by students, the researcher discovered key implications of how an observable phenomenon, such as this art-based experience, can shift an individual's perspective and provide insight on how to incorporate the shift into an increased understanding of leadership development. From this experience the researcher gained a better perspective on how to design an experiential MBA leadership curriculum that enhances leader development, which can translate to the workplace.

The process has been tried with over 150 students. This paper reflects the experience of a self-selected sub-group, who responded positively to a request for permission to use their papers in the research.

Block (2010) stated that regardless of whether or not artists decide to engage us, making art more central to our lives presents some challenges. Most of us are imprisoned by the idea that art is a specialist's domain—that it is for exceptional and certain occasions. We have, sadly, de-emphasised the arts in our schools and it is now relegated to special performances. Based on Block's (2010) position, this research experiment utilized art to engage and transform individuals' minds, and invites leadership educators to rethink how art can be used to create a greater sense of self-awareness and creativity.

***Definition of theoretical transformative thinking***

The research began with the question: What do participants learn from their experience at the beach, when immersed in a creative leadership development exercise? To answer this question the researcher explored whether transformative thinking theories could be identified when the students experienced an art-based exercise in a leadership class. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning became the cornerstone of the research, and expanded to other scholars who further developed adult development theory.

Transformative learning is defined as 'a theory of adult learning that utilizes disorienting dilemmas to challenge students' thinking.' (Mezirow, 1991). Further, transformational self-directed lifelong learning does not occur simply as a result of having life experiences and resolving cognitive dissonance. In self-directed lifelong learning, the onus is on learners to take personal responsibility and manage themselves through obstacles and challenges encountered on the life journey (Mingsheng, 2016). Learner self-awareness, self-leadership, and self-directedness are used to determine what additional information and resources are necessary. Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory posits ten phases that lead to transformative learning; not all need be present, and they may be experienced in random order. The phases are: (a) a disorienting dilemma; (b) self-examination of assumptions; (c) critical reflection on assumptions; (d) recognition of dissatisfaction; (e) exploration of alternatives; (f) plan for action; (g) acquisition of new knowledge; (h) experimentation with roles; (i) competence building; and (j) reintegration of new perspectives into one's life (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) further believed that reflection and discourse with others is an important ingredient in transformative learning. He posits that transformative learning involves 'critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaningful perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experience' (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi).

The following concepts and theories were considered in the learning experience, as a theoretical framework, to evaluate the transformative thinking of the students after completing the exercise. In the results section of the paper these words became themes, which were identified from the students' reflective journals and the narrative analysis. What makes this

important to the research is (1) the possibility that these key theories were transferable, a point which is highlighted in the section on the implications to leadership in this paper, and (2) that it confirms the need to create safe spaces in order for people to develop.

The first concept analysed was disorienting dilemma, which is an experience that serves as a catalyst for the transformative process. The learners' current views are found to be insufficient or incorrect (to the learners) after they gain a new understanding of different viewpoints (Mezirow, 1991).

This kind of incident or experience is outside a person's control, and thus triggers transformation (Mezirow, 1978). From this experience, critical reflection and transformation can happen all at once ('epochal' transformation), or gradually over time ('incremental' transformation) (Mezirow, 2000). When faced with a troubling situation or disruptive event, individuals not only engage in self-directed critical reflection but also often reach out and communicate with others as they attempt to internally resolve the issue (Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Yukawa, 2015).

This led to the next analysis finding on self-awareness. Self-awareness is having a clear perception of your personality, including strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, beliefs, motivation, and emotions. Self-awareness allows you to understand other people, how they perceive you, your attitude, and your responses to them in the moment. This concept comes from Duval and Wicklund's (1972) work that self-awareness is focusing on the self, which then enables self-evaluation. Self-focused people compare the self with standards of correctness that specify how the self ought to think, feel, and behave. The process of comparing the self with standards allows people to change their behaviour and to experience pride and dissatisfaction with the self. Self-awareness is thus a major mechanism of self-control.

The next theory examined is sense-making, a term introduced by Weick (1995), which refers to how we structure the unknown so as to be able to act in it. Sense-making involves coming up

with a plausible understanding, a map of a shifting world; testing this map with others through data collection, action, and conversation; and then refining, or abandoning, the map depending on how credible it is.

The moment in which an individual has an ‘ah-ha’ moment of seeing what possibilities *could be*, is called a sense-making moment. This moment is usually spontaneous and emotionally charged. After this moment occurs, we begin to see new action or motivation in the individual.

Another applicable theory analysed is that of perceived self-efficacy, which is defined as ‘people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave.’ (Bandura, 1994, para. 1).

Lastly, reflection was critical. The exercise of self-reflection is thought to be the most significant learning experience. It involves reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting.

*Reflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem-solving.*

*Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built. Learning may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action. What we perceive and fail to perceive, and what we think and fail to think are powerfully influenced by habits of expectation that constitute our frame of reference, that is, a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences. It is not possible to understand the nature of adult learning or education without taking into account the cardinal role played by these habits in making meaning (Mezirow, 1990).*

### ***Methodology***

*Introduction to methodology*

The purpose of this paper was to describe how students experienced a certain phenomenon through art-making and present research that explained the transforming experience of students, some of whom went through an overwhelming, spontaneous, and emotionally charged experience or a disorienting dilemma. This experience led to the students changing the way they felt and thought about themselves after going through the experience.

The research attempted to identify similarities and differences of various experiences the students had, where each personal transformational experience was unique. The study endeavoured to answer the questions: (1) what impact, if any, does an experience of art have on an individual, and (2) how could it possibly transform him or her to integrate personal values into his or her life with the outcome of personal transformation?

The research used a qualitative methodology following the narrative approach of storytelling. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) described the characteristics of a qualitative approach to research:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 2)

The students used journals to tell their story of their personal transformative experience. Storytelling is inter-textual, with each element of the tale, a line in the inter-connective web of stories and more stories (Boje, 2001a). Stories give a sense of connection between networks of storytellers, each crafting their own variation and fragments. But storytelling leadership is not a simple process. One story must be coaxed to win out over another (Boje, 1991b, 1994) and the official story can cover over many other voices (Boje, 1995, 1999c, 2000g).

The phenomenon came from observing the world around us, the experiences we have, the curious patterns in people's behaviour, and the social problems we would like to alleviate (Sansone, et al., 2004). The focus in this study was only a small part of the phenomenon filtered through the researcher's construal process. The researcher, utilizing the phenomenological method of study, identified the human experience concerning a phenomenon, as described by the students in the study.

Corbin and Strauss (1990) explained that theory cannot be developed from observations or incidents using raw data. From these student experiences, the incidents, events, and happenings were taken as-is and analysed as indicators of phenomena which were given conceptual labels. Theory is created when other like phenomena with the same term or label are used to form the basis of the theory, inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents; that is, when they are discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, the research did not begin with a theory; rather, it began with observations of phenomena, and transformational learning was allowed to emerge. As a result, the data were gathered, core theoretical concepts were allowed to evolve, and a natural link between the theoretical concepts and the data developed the grounded theory. The final result is a core concept or category that is central to the research (Trochim, 2006).

#### *Methodology and design*

At the end of the ten-week long class, students were asked to attend an art session in an outdoor setting, usually a local beach. Students were not told what they would be doing at the beach beforehand. A local artist spent approximately 20 minutes showing students how to mix paint and providing rudimentary instructions on how to paint with oil. The great majority of students reported that they had never painted with oil, and reported not having engaged in any creative art activities since childhood.

Students were then provided with a blank canvas, brushes, and oil paint, and were informed that they would be sharing their finished product with each other at the end of the allotted time. They were asked to disperse by themselves to different areas alone, and instructed to paint whatever they wanted for the next 1.5 hours. If they asked, which they inevitably did, students were informed that there would be no judgments on their final grade based on the aesthetic portion of the assignment.

After the allotted time, students gathered back to the predetermined spot to briefly show each other their finished painting and debrief the experience.

Subsequently, students were asked to write a reflective paper where they engaged in discussion of the experience. For their reflection, they were asked to answer two questions: (1) What did you learn from the experience? And (2) How will you use what you learned from the experience in the future?

The next section examined the catalyst for where the individuals experienced a shift in perspective, sensing a new self-awareness, increasing self-efficacy, and beginning to believe in their own individual creativity through the use of art.

### *Ethics*

The relationship and intimacy between the researcher and participants in qualitative studies can raise a range of different ethical concerns, and qualitative researchers face dilemmas such as respect for privacy, establishment of honest and open interactions, and avoiding misrepresentations (Warusznski, BT, 2002). This research paper took these ethical concerns into consideration by carrying out anonymity and confidentiality and by obtaining informed consent.

Confidentiality means that no personal information was revealed to create any harm to the student. For researchers, the duty of confidentiality is less clear and involves elaboration of the

form of outcome that might be expected from the study (Richards HM, Schwartz LJ, 2002 & Guillemin M, Gillam L., 2004).

When highly sensitive issues are concerned, students are highly vulnerable individuals and the researcher took this into account by obtaining their written consent and informing students how the data would be used after they had written and turned in their paper.

### *Reflective papers*

Once the students turned in their journals, a description of the research process was used to eventually identify universal themes among the participants. The research process began with the reading of the student journals. Secondly, the researcher coded and categorized the results, and made written interpretative notations using the journal transcripts. Finally, an analytical report was completed, identifying universal themes among the participants.

### *Participants*

Those who participated were students enrolled in an MBA leadership and creativity class (as part of their degree requirements), which included a day at the beach painting. The great majority of students had never painted before nor taken any painting classes.

### *Finding Themes and Writing an Analytical Report*

Finding common themes among the participants was not an easy task. However, the final analysis yielded four universal themes among the participants. To determine what these themes were, a four-step analysis evolved; (1) coding, (2) interpretative notations, (3) categorizing, and finally (4) selecting the themes.

### *Coding*

After the students' journals were read, key words or phrases that were common among the group were identified by the researcher. Key words or phrases chosen were based on whatever images would stand out, or highlighting groups of phrases that described similar models, desires, styles of action, and so on (Ochberg, 2003). For example, if a student shared, 'I was radically changed,' this prompted a highlighting of this phrase because the research model asked how the student was impacted or transformed by the art experience.

After key words and phrases were highlighted, codes were given to each identified key word or phrase in the journals. The process of coding helped to eventually develop larger clusters and distinctions (Ochberg, 2003). When a key word or phrase appeared, an interpretative notation was written to begin the discovery process for identifying universal themes among the participants. When writing the interpretative notation, the researcher observed that the students' stories evolved into meaningful narratives, and individual themes emerged in their journals where each story took on its own plot, characters, unique circumstances, and specific issues.

### *Interpretative notations*

The reason for the interpretative notation process was to distinguish between ambiguous passages (which could be seen as illustrating one category or another, or perhaps both) and those that seemed to clearly illustrate a given position. After key words and phrases were coded, passages were classified in terms of epistemological position (Blythe, et al., 2003). From the interpretative notations in the text, appropriate categories were established and under the heading of 'interpretative notation' a brief explanation of each category was established providing grounds for classification (Blythe, McVicker, & Clinchy, 2003). The interpretative notes changed the view about the person from a static entity to one who is evolving. The

outcome from this process forced the addition of new passages and reshuffling of old ones. Therefore, the notations sheet was a place for thinking rather than having thought (Blythe, et al., 2003).

### *Categorizing*

After completing the process of coding words and phrases, and writing interpretative notations, the next step was categorizing (Ochberg, 2003). After the list of codes and interpretative notations from the journals were reviewed, several broader categories were named that would pull together the codes and the interpretative comments (see Table 1). After the coding process had been worked through, four broad categories or ‘sub-themes’ evolved and all codes were sorted according to their category. After the categories were determined, a brief summary paragraph was written describing each.

[Table 1 near here]

Reflecting back on how the categories were designed, it became apparent that the categories provided a glimpse inside the minds of the students. This provided insight into the emotions of the students’ experience, as well as the post-event impact on the students.

### *Themes*

Theme development from the student reflection journals was designed using Ochberg’s (2003) example in the writings of Josselson, Lieblich, and McAdams (2003) on the teaching and learning of narrative. Ochberg's (2003) research exercise used a four-step process to interpret the narration of an individual's story. Working through the process, reflective observations were made from the narrative of each person's story, which became the interpretative notation. The steps Ochberg (2003) proposed were as follows:

- (1) Phase One: Reading for Individual Images
- (2) Phase Two: Clusters and Distinctions
- (3) Phase Three: From Clusters to Psychodynamic Conflict
- (4) Phase Four: Bringing in the Counter-Evidence

Using Ochberg's (2003) method to analyse the coded journals and their interpretative notations, four themes emerged that were similar to all participants even though each story was unique. Although many issues emerged from each participant, only those that were common across many of the journals were chosen as themes.

## **Results**

After completing the art exercise at the beach, students were asked to write personal reflective journals about their experience. The journals were gathered and reviewed using coding, interpretative notations, and categorizing; finally, four themes were identified (see Table 1). What follows is an explanation of each theme using what students actually discovered in their transformational thinking.

### ***Theme one: disorienting dilemma***

Disorienting dilemmas occur when a person's thinking is challenged. In the art exercise students were encouraged to use critical thinking and questioning to consider if their underlying assumptions and beliefs about the world were accurate. As students went through the art exercise, they used their journals to express their feelings and emotions and how their beliefs were challenged, and eventually how their thinking was transformed.

As discovered in the interpretative notations, students expressed in their journals they did not think this exercise would challenge their personal and professional life. One student stated:

'To be sincere, I did not think that this class would help shape me in my personal or professional life. Even though this class was short, [...] I truly feel that it has

changed my perspective and it has taught me so much about myself that I never knew I had. I began to realize that I had misjudged this course, myself, and the basic ideas about being creative. Once I began to paint, I quickly began to tell myself that I cannot paint and I am not a painter. After observing my class and seeing how relaxed they were and knowing that nobody was going to judge me, I let go of my inhibitions and began to paint.'

A second student journal expressed:

'With this exercise, we were not learning how to lead others; rather, we were learning how to lead ourselves.'

A third student had a similar experience and expressed:

'This process for myself was about learning how I make decisions, how I face struggle, and most importantly, humility.'

As a result, these students were sharing thoughts that affirm Mezirow's theory (1991) that experiences are often at the beginning of the process where individuals question their understanding and views and then enter into a transformative learning process that changes their views and beliefs (1991).

The catalyst for this perspective of transformation, in this case the art exercise, usually occurs when people have experiences that do not fit their expectations or make sense to them and they cannot resolve the situation without some change in their views of the world. This fits Block's (2010) discovery that we have moved from the dehumanization of the person, because of technology, to a better understanding of our gifts that were dominant.

Finally, these comments in the journals relate to Mezirow's (1978) theory that an incident or experience outside a person's control can trigger a person's transformative thinking. Critical reflection and transformation can happen all at once ('epochal' transformation), or gradually over time ('incremental' transformation) (Mezirow, 2000).

***Theme two: sense-making***

The second theme was sense-making, introduced by Karl Weick (1995), which refers to how we structure the unknown so as to be able to act in it. Sense-making involves coming up with a plausible understanding, a map of a shifting world; testing this map with others through data collection, action, and conversation; and then refining or abandoning the map depending on how credible it is.

After the student journals were reviewed, the concept of sense making became clear. There are moments in which the student has an 'ah-ha' moment of seeing possibilities, after doing the exercise, which is called sense-making. This moment is usually spontaneous and emotionally charged. After this moment occurs, we begin to see new action or motivation in the individual. Following are statements from the student reflection journals that concur with this theory.

One student made the following statement:

'I perceived the idea from a financial perspective by being a waste of money... however, the experience was relevant to my life.'

A second student described it this way:

'Life tends to be much more enjoyable when you do what makes you happy. By being yourself and painting your own life picture your final portrait can be something you are proud of, something you can call your own.'

Finally, another student summarized it this way:

'I never saw myself painting and wouldn't imagine that through painting I would tap into myself to create a work of art that inspired me and others. Through this experience I saw how creative I am and realized that everyone in the class was truly creative.'

After going through this experience, what students realised was that their personal possibilities and innate creativity could move them forward to achieve other tasks that could be life changing and hopefully point them towards their career opportunity.

***Theme three: self-awareness***

Another key element to transformational learning is self-awareness. Self-awareness is having a clear perception of your personality, including strengths, weaknesses, thoughts, beliefs, motivation, and emotions. Self-awareness allows you to understand other people, how they perceive you, your attitude, and your responses to them in the moment. This is a critical factor to student learning because it helps the student begin a self-discovery of their capabilities.

A student described it this way:

'It helped me to not shy away from new things and to realize that everybody has their strengths and weaknesses.'

A second student shared:

'The experience at the beach was both exciting and intimidating. At first, while watching the artist do his demonstration, I thought I can never do that.'

The biggest fear for a student is failure; one student stated it this way:

'Since I don't usually take risks without some sort of knowledge or skill, this was a rather unique experience for me.'

Finally, a student described it this way:

'The painting session taught me that as leaders we need to take the initiative to be experimental in a similar way that we force ourselves to find solutions to our unexpected workplace problems.'

Reading these journals, it became evident that students began to gain a new self-awareness that helped them discover new capabilities, which led to self-efficacy, which is the last theme.

#### ***Theme four: self-efficacy***

A sense of self-efficacy is a key element to a person's creativity (Bandura, 1994, 1997). Creative self-efficacy has been defined as the belief that one has the knowledge and skills to produce creative outcomes (Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Creative self-efficacy may also reflect intrinsic motivation to engage in creative activities (Hennessey & Amabile, 1998; Gong, et al., 2009).

Based on the responses, it was concluded that the experience led to transformative learning, growth, and development of students enrolled in the class. Students reported that they felt safe to be themselves in the environment and feeling a sense of relief when they learned that they would not be graded on the aesthetic qualities of the project.

It is also assumed that a sense of safety and comfort was provided in that students knew each other beforehand, and had participated in small group settings throughout the academic term where a number of topics were discussed, sometimes using the Socratic method of teaching which would have put students on the spot. The time spent together in discussion and reflection with each other would have led to a sense of comfort and safety by the end of the term when this activity took place.

This theme seemed to be the one that most students identified with in their journals. This led to a key word: 'freedom.' One student stated this:

'We were allowed to paint whatever we wanted ... which added another layer of comfort because of the freedom to express ourselves...'

This freedom comes from self-discovery when a student sated:

'I now understand that you don't always want people to know up front what is at the deepest core of yourself, but there is still the need to get it out... I also learned that sometimes it is enough that you know what you mean, and in that context often it is vitally important that only you know what you are truly expressing.'

With self-discovery there is a risk for these students, but the risk helps the student begin to become more creative. As one student stated:

'When introduced to the idea I was quite nervous and skeptical ... I was finally able to appreciate and be confident in what I created. I was able to see beyond what was in front of me and paint something soul inspiring.'

And this led to an interesting perspective by this student:

'The experience taught me that I have a hard time being creative when I'm put on the spot, [but I] get more creative as I work through something.'

The journals kept pointing to fear and feeling safe, but breaking through this barrier led to a shift in the perception of risk. One student stated it this way:

'I am not a creative person. I fear mistakes and I preferred to do things that made me feel safe. Before this painting experience, I thought the safest way to paint was to imitate. That day totally changed my mind...'

A great discovery in the student reflection journals was the idea stated by this student who saw creativity coming from being put under pressure:

'It's hard to portray a creative mind when you're put on the spot, but after comfort sets in, we're fine... this class allowed us to feel comfortable enough to express ourselves.'

And then this student began to believe in him/herself:

'I had never painted any pictures like on that day. So, I had never believed I can do that. Actually, I did it, also my friends said it's great.'

Learning about self-efficacy came through this project as students stated:

'... through this, I learned an important lesson on getting past mental blocks and committing to a decision....The experience contributed... to self-discovery.'

After evaluating the students' journals and identifying the themes, the next step was to see how these themes could be transferred to leadership development in our organisations to improve the capabilities and self-awareness of leaders, where they gain new confidence to take on new challenging tasks.

### ***Implications for leadership development***

The purpose of the research began with a desire to better understand leadership development through the examination and the application of an art-based activity. Leadership development, by definition, refers to activities that improve the skills, abilities, and confidence of leaders. Development programs vary greatly in complexity, cost, and style of teaching. Coaching and mentoring are two forms of development often used to guide and develop leaders (Bolden, 2005). This research provides a leadership development tool that can be used in group corporate settings and individual executive coaching.

### ***The need for leadership development***

Throughout the activity, students self-reported a new sense of confidence in their ability to be creative. Beyond that, students reported a sense of being creative. In order to create, people must have confidence, and on a deeper level, know that they are creative (Bandura, 1997).

The final outcome of this study resulted in linking students' stories about their engagement with an art-based activity to leadership mind-set development in a classroom setting that led to their belief that they were creative. Not only was this activity applicable to the classroom setting, but it can also be applied to executive coaching, corporate leadership development, team building activities, and life.

This research supports the need for more learning in the workplace. Organisations are creating new job models, which are reconfiguring the business world; because of this, lifelong learning has become an accepted imperative. Eighty per cent of CEOs now believe the need for new skills is their biggest business challenge (Bersin & Zao-Sanders, 2019). For employees, research now shows that opportunities for development have become the second most important factor in workplace happiness (after the nature of the work itself) (Bersin & Zao-Sanders, 2019). At the most fundamental level, we are born with an instinct to learn throughout our lives. So it makes sense that at work we are constantly looking for ways to do things better; indeed, the growth-mind-set movement is based on this human need. Thus, the art experiment has demonstrated that leaders have the capacity to learn and transform how they feel about their creativity and capabilities to become successful in the workplace.

The need for leadership development has never been more urgent. Companies realise that to survive in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment, they need leadership skills and organisational capabilities different from those that helped them succeed in the past. There is also a growing recognition that leadership development should not be restricted to the few who are in or close to the C-suite. With the proliferation of collaborative problem-solving platforms and digital 'adhocracies' that emphasise individual initiative, employees across the board are increasingly expected to make consequential decisions that

align with corporate strategy and culture. It is important, therefore, that they be equipped with the relevant technical, relational, and communication skills (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019).

It should be noted that organisations that say leadership development is critical to their success are 29 times more likely to have a successful transformation than those where leadership is viewed as not important (Harvard Business School [HBS], 2018). Millennials surveyed want to see significant improvements in leadership development programs. The under-36 set expressed the strongest agreement about the need for innovation in leadership development. Respondents in this age cohort identified poor content, insufficient thinking and expertise from outside sources, and a failure to make a compelling return-on-investment case are the biggest barriers to L&D program effectiveness in their organisations (HBS, 2018).

Since we have established the need for leadership development in organisations, what are solutions? In the concluding section the research using an art experience provides solutions for leadership development in the workplace.

### **Limitations and recommendations for future research**

The study was conducted in a classroom setting, which may or may not be transferable to the workplace. Prior to the exercise there were readings and discussions in group settings online and in the classroom, which certainly influenced some of the outcome. In addition, the reflective papers were written shortly after the exercise, while the effects were still fresh in the minds of the students.

Future longitudinal studies would add strength to the findings, particularly to the belief that one is creative, and the effect of that belief on workplace outcomes. Moreover, the definition of creativity and its uses in the workplace were not defined for purposes of this research paper. Future research should involve quantitative measures to establish not only whether actual mind shift occurred, but also to measure the subjects' use of their new-found creativity and

confidence from the art-based experience in the workplace. Finally, measuring the development level of the subjects, in terms of life and work experience, prior to the exercise seems primordial. Not surprisingly, many of the students who participated in the exercise did not have an ‘ah-ha’ moment. An instrument to measure a person’s openness to be influenced by such an experience would be useful to organisational leadership development programs and coaching.

## **Conclusion**

The outcome from this research provided a useful tool that can be implemented not only in the classroom, but in organisations of all types and in the coaching world. After reading and studying the reflection journals from the students in this experiential exercise, it became apparent that by creating environments where leaders are put into an unknown situation and allowed to become creative, transformational thinking begins to bring on self-awareness and personal discovery towards new capabilities.

The steps proposed for leadership development using an art-based exercise in the workplace are as follows:

- (1) Create safe space in the organisational structure and have leaders engage in an art-based experience.
- (2) Provide very little structure and allow the leaders to come up with their painting and story.
- (3) Have the participants journal and reflect on the exercise, asking probing questions, such as: What did you learn from this exercise? How would you describe your abilities, creativity, and skills after going through this exercise? What did you discover about yourself? What areas would you want to improve in your life when faced with an unknown environment?
- (4) Form a roundtable discussion among the participants and have them work through a reflective exercise discussing what happened.

As organisations begin to evolve and the need for sense-making by leaders to create a map for the future becomes imperative, these ‘ah-ha’ moments will begin to happen, taking the organisations to new levels. Art-based activities, under the right circumstances, present a safe space for processing and reflection not otherwise available in the workplace (Lewin, 1951).

The urgent need is for organisations to create opportunities to allow leaders to experience a transformational activity, such as an art-based activity, to develop the leaders’ skills, capabilities, and confidence.

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