Deep organisational learning or manipulative gimmickry? – Introducing drumming circles to management education and development

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Games, activities, experiences and metaphors are now regularly integrated into many management education and development programmes, arguably as a way of enhancing levels of engagement, ostensibly to develop insights and skills relating to key managerial abilities but probably also because of increasing competition in the field. This paper critically reflects on the use of metaphors, particularly those that use music, music performance and musical activities in management education and development. In highlighting one such metaphor it will explore to what extent such an activity can create empowered, active and positive management learning environments. The argument that such a learning technique and others like it might also be forms of deception and manipulation is examined in the light of a drumming circle experience.

The popularisation of concepts such as teamwork, collaboration and creativity has lead to a plethora of management interventions aimed at providing practical experiences where employees can learn more about how to work more successfully. Business is now turning to a range of alternative sources of inspiration (drama, poetry, stories and music) to help deal with complex management problems and challenges. The first half of this paper will engage in a critical reflection of the development and usage of music as a metaphor for business. Examining ideas such as those proposed by (Harvey 2002), (Barrett 1998) and (Sicca 2000) we will explore the use of music performance and musicians themselves to generate, clarify and develop insights about the world of work of management and of organisations. We will discuss how orchestras and their conductors have been used as metaphors to embody attributes of transformational leadership, and in the case of chamber music, as self-managing teams. The use of jazz as a metaphor for improvisation within a collaborative environment will also be discussed. We critically examine the nature and value of these metaphors, suggest reasons why they have become popular and explore whether they are more or less useful than other more organisationally based or non-figurative examples and case studies. In the context of this discussion we will critically analyse the use of metaphors in general and the use of musical metaphors in particular.

The problems associated with applying metaphors have been identified as those relating to over simplification, distortion, or inappropriate application (e.g. Trice and Beyer 1993). Moreover, many of the documented management learning and development metaphors risk being inaccessible themselves, thus running the risk of exposing employees to two unfamiliar arenas whose links and connections they are expected to explore. While the use of metaphors may indeed facilitate reflecting on organisations in different ways, (for example giving insights into group dynamics, diversity and leadership), a lack of first-hand experience on the part of most learners may give rise to a somewhat brittle understanding of the very concepts such metaphors were designed to elucidate.

Building on from our critique of metaphors, the second part of this paper will introduce a more participative music based management development intervention, "the Drumming Circle", which forms a possible antidote to some of the limitations highlighted. The basis for critical discussion of the value added of this experience will be the insights gathered from 26 participants of a drumming workshop, introduced to them as a way of gaining insights into the world of work. As part of this we will outline and analyse the context, processes, impact and outcomes of introducing a drumming circle to the participants. Intellectualisation of lessons was minimised during the experience, but students were asked, immediately

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1 Students on a MBS Masters programme in HRM (UL)
after the class to fill in a highly open ended questionnaire in order to capture some of their more immediate feelings regarding the use and value of the workshop, both at a personal and organisational level.

We believe that the value of this experience goes beyond that of a feel good group exercise (though the emotional dimensions of the experience constitute an important and energising aspect). The evidence provided by participants has shown that not only can a drumming circle have powerful transformative emotional effects, but that also a range of evocative and heuristic learning insights can be generated in a supportive and safe environment through a collective reflection on the lessons that it brings alive. However, the risks that individuals take to develop competence in the drumming circle by working together, should not be underestimated, but the willingness to uncover and articulate early feelings as part of the group remain an important dimension of the experience. In line with this, participant responses will be reflected upon further in order to consider the possibility that in an organisational context such participative experiences might also simply serve to manipulate emotions in a short lived de-contextualised way, without giving rise to more transferable learning and personal development in the long term.

These aspects will be illustrated at the conference in an interactive learning experience where delegates will have an opportunity to explore first hand the themes emerging from the use of a drumming circle as an active metaphor in organisational learning.

References:

