

REVISITING THE PHENOMENON OF ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT: AFRICAN ART, AND WHY IT MATTERS

Abstract

While organizational management was originally theorized from a scientific point of view, Peter F. Drucker's thoughts and ideas have recently generated liberal reviews and critical debates among practitioners, experts and consultants. This essay is a contribution to the later. Its designed to offer a radical and philosophical reconceptualization of management by asking a series of perennial questions while at the same time laying out the intellectual and pragmatic framework for Drucker's idea of 'management as a liberal art' within the wider context. The aim is to deliver on an entirely new way of thinking about art, and its role in contemporary management.

Introduction

Creativity and innovation while synonymous with the arts are hardly ever linked to organizational management theory and practice. This is because the practice of organizational management is not an aesthetic activity in the 'typical' sense. But of course organizational management is in many ways artisan. As an artisan activity, organizational management has some proper features which when employed skillfully can be helpful in managing complexity. Peter F. Drucker's thoughts and ideas have played a key role in shaping this discourse. In fact, they have by and large influenced many practitioners to aspire towards achieving creativity and innovation through the use of art. Scholars on the other hand are increasingly inquiring how art and aesthetics work, and how they can foster a fundamentally different way of approaching organizational change.

Consequently, a move *beyond* conventional logic and rationality, *toward* specific adventurous processes and approaches is increasingly being realized today – than ever before. Indeed, it is increasingly becoming apparent today that the world needs Drucker's holistic and ecology-based approach to

management, especially his conceptualization on management as a liberal art. Drucker's thoughts are becoming magnificent orientations and possess very real consequences for today's world that gyrates around rethinking our approach to management as a profession through innovation and inspiration. They hold substantial bearing in as far as enriching and amplifying organizational development and effectiveness are concerned.

To this end, this essay is an attempt to examine the extent to which art and metaphor inform the theory and practice of management and organization. The essay examines the arts from a management perspective and asks the questions: what can be learned about the art and aesthetics from a managerial perspective? Is it reasonable to assert that organizational meaning can more easily be found through art? Is management through art a more equitable style for embracing and developing organizational development and understanding? How does art through the process of imagery – still or moving – contribute to the stimulation, of performance when produced and used by management? What can we learn from African painters, photographers (and even more recently) filmmakers' use of metaphor and imagery? And how does this knowledge enhance the conventional ways of organization and management? In the sections that follow, I scrutinize these questions further by laying out the intellectual and pragmatic framework for Drucker's idea of management as a liberal art.

Drucker, on Management as a Liberal Art

While it is apparent that research on management has traditionally taken creativity and innovation for granted, largely focusing on technological novelties and intellectual capacities, Drucker's conceptualizations inspired new approaches to theorising the discourse and practice in the context of complexity. In one of his articles, Drucker argued that management was not culture-free. According to Drucker, management is part of the world of nature (Drucker, 1986:19). A social function and therefore both socially accountable and culturally embedded (Drucker, 1986:19; 1985:5). He further argues in *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, that any institution exists for the sake of society within a community. Drucker was later to amalgamate his thoughts in his 1989 book, *The New Realities* in which he describes management as a liberal art. This idea was reiterated in his later book, *Management*, in which he notes:

Management is thus what tradition used to call a liberal art: 'liberal' because it deals with the fundamentals of knowledge, self-knowledge, wisdom, and leadership; 'art' because it is practice and application. Managers [should] draw on all the knowledge and insights of the humanities and the social sciences – on psychology and philosophy, on economics and history, on ethics as well as on the physical sciences. But they have to focus this knowledge on effectiveness and results (2008: 25).

Writing on Japanese paintings in *Adventures of the Brush*, Drucker wrote that they are 'dominated by [...] empty space [which] organizes the painting.' He defined them as 'creative imitation' and 'copying to perfection'. And so he saw the Japanese industrial and managerial approach (Purge, 2009: 6-8). His conceptualizations predisposed the debate on art as an innovative and creative means of addressing organizational problems and facilitating change. However, while he saw an important relationship between the art and management, he was sometimes uncertain about the manner and bearing of such a partnership. In *Teaching the Work of Management*, Drucker writes:

We do not know yet precisely how to link the liberal arts and management. We do not know yet what impact this linkage will have on either party – and marriages, even bad ones, always change both partners.

He was nevertheless certain about ‘the wisdom and self-knowledge’ that ‘liberal arts would bring to the discipline and practice of management’. His conceptualizations have moved the debate on management away from the mere technological novelties and intellectual capacities toward management creativity and innovation which was hitherto taken for granted. The idea of how ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices inform every aspect of management theory, for instance is the benchmark of Drucker’s teachings on ‘management as a liberal art’.

Drucker was therefore able to influence standout contributions to the field of management, with literature emerging today from budding scholars on management creativity, aesthetic innovation, and the like. Stefano Harney for instance, argues that the convergence of aesthetics and management is apparent in the idea that management is in itself a form of artistic expression that results from an individual leader’s progressive self-development and commitment to post-materialist goals (2010). Reckhenrich, et al (2010), note how he has become a guru of sorts for a *Business Strategy Review* precisely because of his ‘radical’ conception of creativity. His words provide the epigraph for the piece: ‘Only from art can a new concept of economics be formed, in terms of human need, not in the sense of use and consumption, politics and property, but above all in terms of the production of spiritual goods’ (2010).

Sarah Brouillette, in her article on *Academic Labor, the Aesthetics of Management, and the Promise of Autonomous Work* narrates how German artist Joseph Beuys’ ‘famous insistence’ that ‘every human being is an artist’ has now become a mantra for creative-economy enthusiasts like Richard Florida. Also, some scholars like Taylor and Ladkin have even gone further to identify key processes that they consider to be ‘particular’ in the way in which art and metaphor contribute to the development of individuals: i.e. through the transference of artistic ‘skill’; through ‘projective techniques’; through the evocation of ‘essence’; and through the creation of artifacts which they call ‘making’ (2009). Such trends in the discourse are not simply reminiscent insignia of the impact that Drucker’s conceptualizations on the convergence of management and aesthetics have taken. They are also constructions on the premise that ‘good’ management decisions are indeed *aesthetic* decisions. In the section that follows, I explore the seemingly eccentric and unorthodox alliance of art and management – precisely of African art, aesthetics and metaphor, and how it can be embraced as a means of enhancing the performance of management practitioners through providing a different perspective.

What can be learned about Management from African Art

African art differs by region in form and material. In Eastern Africa, its elements include a combination of influences from Africa, Europe, USA and Middle East. In Western Africa, art includes lost wax castings in brass, cooper and bronze. Southern African art includes mostly the daily objects as opposed to masks and sculptures. Northern African art on the other hand is rich embroidery of preserved paintings made out of rock, nomadic tribal objects, as well as Islamic art. Despite the marked diversity, however, aesthetic elements provide common ground for understanding ‘African’ art. One could in fact argue that at the general level, African art is intended to portray ideas, beliefs, prominence and workmanship. What

follows is an outline of some of the key elements of African art and aesthetics – some of which are captured by Vogel, 1986 – and how they can be used as groundwork for organizational development and change.

Resemblance to human being: Artifacts are intended to be ‘like’ their living subjects, but then again, recognizable for what they are. A carved figure would thus be praised by saying that it ‘looks like a human being.’ This form of identity designation which is a portrayal of mirror images or ‘likenesses’ to people and form of invisible spirits conveys the idea of a system with sufficient identity to classify itself. This is imperative since organizations are engulfed in questions about identity construction, and innovative creativity. Questions like: how can the identity help ‘us’ create a culture of lasting innovation; how can ‘we’ use such identity to create a cutting-edge that would not only keep our customers on the edge of their seats in anticipation, but as well as creating new customers through innovation and creativity?

Radiance: The radiant smooth surface of most African figural artifacts often embellished with ‘shiny surfaces and sharpness’ and ‘decorative scarification’ indicates beautifully shining and healthy skin, and is intended to make the piece ‘appear nice and morally sound’ (Vogel, 1986). It is important to understand how best organizations can thread together their processes, brands, products, features, and communications to create a tapestry of elegance instead of a train-wreck. In other words, asking questions like how best can organizations organize complexity to give it resonance; and how best can organizations appreciate radiance for the sake of increasing customer ‘experience’?

Reserved demeanor: African art is meant to portray reserved demeanor – such a person is perceived to behave in a measured and rational way; is controlled, proud, dignified, and cool (Vogel, 1986). Management leaders and experts of all kinds grapple with this issue, but so do organizations. Often times, in their longing for steadiness and balance, they’ll ask questions like: how should various parts of our organizations relate to each other ‘controllably’; when is it strategically sound to be out of control; how do we know if we’re investing the right amounts in the right innovations; and how do we know such innovations are not actually conflicting concerns so we don’t necessarily lose control unnecessarily?

Youthfulness: A youthful appearance connotes vigor, vitality, fertility, productiveness, and an ability to labor – illness and deformity are rarely depicted because they are signs of evil (Vogel, 1986). Youthfulness creates a sense of trajectory that suggests growth and motion for an organization. Where is the organization headed? What might (or should) this year’s performance say about next years or so?

Fine workmanship and mastery: African artists place a high value on fine workmanship and mastery of the medium (Vogel, 1986). In management, this can help you appreciate wholeness with a sense of aesthetic visionary. A good leader must be in position to see a view in space and time as a whole – like a painting; and as one shot. What’s the problem we’re trying to solve? Where do we draw the edges of our organization?

The above breakdown provides a lens on the plausibility and applicability of African art and metaphor towards management. It provides a reasonable approach for more managers to be extra creative and see *more and more differently*. It is rather unfortunate that while African artifacts do appear in ritual contexts

that deal with the vital moral and spiritual concerns of the human condition, they are barely emphasized or even portrayed with reference to management practice in illuminating what's 'good' and 'beautiful'; although such an approach would in effect be consistent with the practice and conception of African management. Even international scholars that have devoted their studies to examining the convergence between management and art since Drucker have largely ignored the beauty and richness of African culture in regards to its philosophies regarding upholding moral values.

But the question to ask is *why*. *Why*, and yet even the most internationally recognized artists like Matisse, Picasso, and other artists were influenced by the geometric qualities and abstract forms of African sculpture? And if such richness has resulted into the advent of brilliant music genres such as jazz, blues and reggae which find their roots in African art, *why* hasn't the same taken effect in other fields such as management and leadership? Isn't African art and expression a manifestation that African culture has in itself reached high levels of cultural aesthetics in relation to style and technique? And if so, then surely it must have the potential to influence domains that are classically not aesthetic in practice – more so, universally. I wish to expound this scrutiny further with the help of a typically African philosophy and belief system that I am more aware of – *Ubuntu*.

Ubuntu, as a Metaphoric Representation of African Art

Closely associated with the greater mandate for the potential for being human, *ubuntu* is literary translated as 'in existence with and through others'. It champions an interconnectedness expressed for example in the isiZulu maxim 'Unmuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu', translated as 'I am because you are, and you are because we are'; or the Sesotho expression 'Batho pele' which means 'people first' (Guma, 2012; Kuk and Bolden, 2006; Mangaliso, 2001). Putting 'people first' in the practice of management has to account for the fact that we all are very definitely social beings, in which case the question shifts beyond *whether or not* we live socially, towards *how* we live socially.

As is indeed the case, these philosophic statements are questions of *aesthetics* – especially when designated as philosophical lexicons – and they are part of the world-view of some three hundred sub-ethnic groups that use variations of Bantu languages on the African continent. The Zimbabwe concept of '*Ubukhosi*' for instance expresses itself metaphorically in the *ubuntu* philosophy. In Senegal, the concept of '*Teranga*' is used to express the spirit of collective hospitality between people. The Baganda in Uganda believe in the culture of '*obuntu bulamu*,' literary meaning 'good humanness.' In the same vein, the ideas of '*ujamaa*' in Kiswahili, Tanzania are synonymous with those of *ubuntu* (Guma, 2012). Nyerere described the '*ujamaa*' philosophy as a full acceptance of our 'Africanness' and 'a belief that in our past there is very much which is useful for our future' (Nyerere, 1967).

As an authentic and metaphoric representation of African art and aesthetics, *ubuntu* has attracted widespread attention among African scholarship with a growing number of literature on the subject. Kuk and Bolden (2006) argue that *ubuntu* must be treated as a point of reference and guiding principle for inquiry and enabling organizational culture and set of skills and competences. Mangaliso (2001) asserts that incorporating *ubuntu* principles in management holds the promise for superior approaches to management organizations. It is important to recognize therefore that *ubuntu* and its ideas and idea-spaces as an intellectual and aesthetic expressive can shape (and have indeed shaped) the way we think about

organizational management in Africa, albeit unintentionally. In fact, a cursory examination of modern practices on the continent will reveal that it is becoming more pronounced now than ever before.

This is proof that African art can and does have vast implications on management and life altogether – it is not simply something created to be hung on a wall and viewed from a distance. It is utilitarian and an integral part of daily life. It's not art for art's sake, but rather art for the purpose of living a deeper and more meaningful life with a greater understanding of the world. Notions underlying African art are what give the art its intrinsic and extrinsic values. African art is so tied to people's daily lives that most art is actually embedded in the very ground they walk upon.

Afterthoughts

The preceding sections of this essay are based on the supposition that if Drucker's appreciation for Japanese art was able to inform his worldview on a different range of issues, then surely our own indigenous forms of art and cultural aesthetics (most of which are highly unexplored) can as well be magnificent doors for a worldview that we might not entirely be aware of. It is important to understand, however, that *art* is only a means that can lead to an end and necessarily an end in itself. Merely adopting indigenous metaphoric notions and dropping cultural and traditional artworks into work spaces is insufficient for achieving real change and development. Organizational managers must also be seekers (for success), crafters (of innovation), and activists (or doers) for sustainable change and development to occur. What this means is that management is not just not an art, but also as experience that is essentially and fundamentally dynamic.

It is imperative therefore not to squeeze organizations between two artificial positions: art, rejecting *science*; or science, rejecting *art*. Because of the limitations in both positions, managers, scholars and consultants need not to focus debate on deciding which of the two positions is more valid, but on attempting to integrate both in a synthesis model in lieu of a middle ground. Of course, such a notion is likely to be viewed as a confusing paradox, which is why it is increasingly becoming imperative to further scrutinize management alongside Drucker's point of view of in present day organizational contexts.

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