



Provoking Flourishing Not-for-profits

Call forth your best, then play above that

You Are All Improvement Artists

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The phrase in the title – ‘improvement artists’ – came to me as I was re-wording the website for this new focus on provoking flourishing not-for-profits. Here are some thoughts on what it means to me.

Artistry, according to Rotman School of Business adjunct professor Hilary Austen, is “the ability to harness originality and mastery to enhance performance and help solve today’s most demanding problems.” In her recent book, *Artistry Unleashed: A Guide to Pursuing Great Performance in Work and Life* (2013) Austen draws creatively on Donald Schon’s work. He’s the expert in professional education who alerted me to conversations being a form of jazz.

Schon, especially in his classic, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (1983), argues that artistry is at the heart of complex professions that require practitioners to be unusually adept at handling situations of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict. That describes perfectly the context for all the practitioners of nonprofit leadership and management that I know.

My own take on leadership/management artistry, shaped by the model of jazz, is this:

Artistry is a promising level of mastery in creatively combining the instincts and insights of a team to generate a performance that benefits all who are touched by its impact, then learning how to improve that mastery for the next performance.

Practitioners of not-for-profit leadership/management all need to be developing this kind of artistry in improvement, one conversation after another. It’s the only way flourishing organizations are developed.



Here are four of the most pressing problems I’m hearing from my not-for-profit colleagues:

- uncertainty about funding sources and stability
- unprecedented challenges in the design and delivery of services
- unrest among board members around the clarity of success factors
- unchallenged assumptions about staff positions and responsibilities

Improvement artists will be realistic about the negative potential in these situations, but will not stay stuck there. They will, instead, be adept at recalling quickly their positive aspirations for their not-for-profit and be agile in forming questions that open up enhanced and expanded possibilities for overcoming these challenges.

Here is a process for practicing improvement artistry that you might try this month. Invite your three most valued colleagues to lunch one day and invite them into a conversation focused on these questions:

1. What aspiration is most important to nourish in our organization in the next month?
2. What possibilities can we imagine in the next twenty minutes of conversation for nourishing that aspiration?
3. What possibility will we work on together in the next month?
4. What will I do to further that possibility and what support would benefit me most?

This process builds on the power of curiosity to expand your intellectual horizons, engage your emotional commitments, and draw on your instinctive strengths.



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