

Julia Romanowska · Anna Nyberg  
Töres Theorell

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# Developing Leadership and Employee Health Through the Arts

Improving Leader-Employee  
Relationships

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# Counteracting Destructive Leadership with the Power of Arts

## Introduction

We live in a historical period characterised by political and economical changes. The world has rapidly become more exacting, more complex and uncertain. Political, cultural, ethnic and religious polarisation, conflicts and extremism have increasing importance. We can see the unrest in many parts of the world – the financial crises in Southern and Eastern Europe, the wars in the Middle East and Africa. Communication has been facilitated by recent enormous technical progress, which means that marketing is more competitive than it has ever been. Globalisation is a fact, and producers of goods and services are not only competing with a graspable number of competitors in the neighbourhood, country or nation but also with producers in other countries and on other continents.

This new complexity creates a profound feeling of insecurity and the demands on leadership in our workplaces may be rising. Managers are, however, not always well equipped to handle the high demands and complexity of their leadership roles; inabilities that may lead to destructive group processes develop within work groups and organisations. In such a period, we may lose not only our feeling of security but also our cultural context. There is accumulating scientific evidence showing that cultural experiences (regular participation actively or passively, for instance, in music, visual production, theatre, dance and writing) could be beneficial for individuals in general and for workplaces in particular. In the workplace, experiences that the employees have together may stimulate creativity (unexpected ideas arising) as well as a feeling of togetherness and willingness to collaborate at work.

However, in this book we want to take that area of research even one step further and discuss the potential significance of cultural experiences for managers as a power, which could counteract the destructiveness of leadership and prevent suffering. Facing cognitive, emotional and ethically demanding complexity requires an increased power of moral judgement and stress resilience to maintain reality-based decision-making. Many of us have an experience with bad managers and the negative influence they exert on us. How can we help leaders to develop the ability of

ethical and emotional responsibility to withstand and cope with highly complex, extraneous situations, uncertainty, ambivalence or anxiety? To what extent may aesthetic experiences change leaders' ways of thinking and behaving? If managers are stimulated to take part more in cultural experiences than they presently do, could this be of benefit for the health of the employees and perhaps also for the effectiveness of organisations?

In Chap. 1 (Theorell), the general basis of our research questions will be discussed. Firstly, the historical perspective is introduced. Secondly, a scientific discussion is presented on the potential of cultural interventions in general for the improvement of health. This is framed in modern stress theory and has a biological basis. It is followed by a description of the scientific literature on stress prevention in the workplace and how that could relate to the previous themes. The chapter ends with a case description, which combines the perspectives. A fictive manager participant tells the reader how she experiences the participation and consequences for herself and for her employees of such an art-based manager development programme.

Chapter 2 (Nyberg) starts with a fictive case illustrating in narrative form leadership and group processes that could be encountered in real life. A manager who seems to be very good at start turns out to develop problematic behaviours. Destructive leadership processes and its consequences are discussed from several points of view, where the case is used as a starting point for reflections. The reader is introduced into modern theory on destructive leadership and followership, and the chapter could be read as a discussion regarding what we need to do in leadership interventions. What are these needs and how could we define the basis for improvement?

Chapter 3 (Romanowska) brings together the various threads of this book in a concrete example presenting a possible solution to the problems previously discussed: arts as a power to prevent destructive leadership and the employee's health. A new, art-based concept for leadership development, called Shibboleth, is presented. Scientific evaluation of the Shibboleth concept is described in detail and discussed. This is probably the first interdisciplinary research aiming to elucidate a chain of connections between the effects of aesthetic experiences on leaders' responsibility and stress resilience and, further, transferred effects on psychosocial and neurobiological resilience in co-workers. Exploring what kinds of values art-based methods can generate for leaders, followers/employees and for organisations/businesses may contribute as inspiration to future actions.

The three chapters form a unity but they could also be regarded as separate pieces that each author takes responsibility for.

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We, the three authors of this book, are in the same group of researchers and have been working together for many years. We have all been involved in research on stress, working conditions and leadership. All of us have an interest in leadership

and cultural activities. We can see the potential importance of cultural experiences in relation to the world of working.

Anna Nyberg, occupational psychologist, PhD, has published epidemiological studies relating leadership and work environment factors, including conflicts between work and family roles, to employee health. She has also been working practically in the recruitment and development of managers.

Julia Romanowska, M.Mus, PhD, has a background as musician and music pedagogue. She developed a new, art-based leadership concept and published her doctoral thesis on the use of this concept in leadership development. For several years, she has worked in leadership development and also designed her own programmes including performance art as a component.

Töres Theorell, MD, PhD, has a background as physician, stress researcher and professor of psychosocial medicine at the Karolinska Institute. His stress research publications relate to the epidemiology and biology of stress and also to the role of cultural experiences in health.

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# Arts, Health and Job Stress

Töres Theorell

**Abstract** In this chapter the foundations are laid for a discussion regarding the relationships between working conditions, leadership and cultural activities in relation to employee health. The first part is about cultural activities in the history of leadership. This is followed by a scientific review of cultural activities and their possible role in public health – what is the evidence for a relationship? In the third part the stress concept is discussed in relation to stress prevention in the workplace. It is emphasised that long-term reactions to adverse job conditions arise in a balance between energy mobilisation and regeneration. Cultural activities (such as music, writing, dance, theatre and visual art) could have a role both in strengthening regeneration and in lowering energy mobilisation. Leaders could play a central role in these processes and they could also be activated to become engaged and empathic leaders by means of cultural activities.

**Keywords** Dance • Music • Writing • Theatre • Visual art • Stress • Regeneration • Leadership

## Historical Perspectives on Cultural Experiences and Leadership

Throughout history, leaders have been using cultural experiences in order to please, stimulate or educate their subordinates. There are many examples, and they may illustrate both evil and benevolent processes.

Music, dance and painting could be regarded as ‘social tools’ that may have been used throughout the history of mankind. They may have had functions of survival value such as, for example, increasing group cohesion. Findings of flutes made from bones have been found in remnants from Neanderthals who may have lived 200,000 years ago. On the basis of such findings, Mithen (2005) has speculated that these people have been performing music and perhaps dancing. 10,000–30,000 year old paintings on cave walls (for instance in Altamira, Chauvet and Lascaux) indicate

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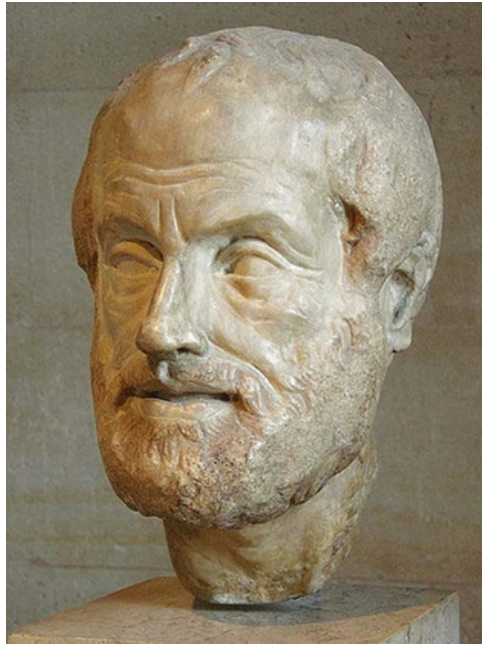
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that painting has been important for a very long time in the history of man. There is a long lasting scientific debate regarding the role of art in the early history of man. Some authors (Lewis-Williams 2002) argue that the cave paintings indicate that modern man had arrived and that the Neanderthals were unable to produce this kind of art. Aiken (1998) has emphasized that art early became a powerful tool for social and political manipulation. It became 'conditional to fear leaders, nations, gods and ideas'. Benzon (2001) believes that music evolved as a means of 'brain coupling', i.e. a social tool for increasing cooperation between individuals. This is certainly a powerful analogy which is highly relevant for the role of cultural experiences in the relationship between management and employees! Promotion of musical communication may have been utilized due to evolutionary pressures when human beings were living in small groups in a threatening environment. It was necessary to create tight groups whose members would help one another in crisis situations, for instance at night when one of several members had to stay awake and promise to wake the group when dangers were approaching. Again we could use this as an argument for cultural experiences in workplaces – companies with a strong cohesiveness may have a better chance of survival in an increasingly competitive world of working today. For our early ancestors cultural experiences may even have been important to evolution in a Darwinian sense: Those who were unable to relate to dance and music, for instance, may have had a poorer survival chance than others. An illustration of this – albeit speculative – is that less than 4 % of normal populations could be regarded as 'tone deaf' (Peretz et al. 2007). Tone deafness means consistent inability to differentiate the high from the low note when these are played randomly in pairs.

When Aeschylus wrote the wellknown drama *Orestes* it was on surface a drama illustrating repeated blood revenges in Agamemnon's royal family. As such it functioned very well as a popular theatrical drama. However, there was also a political intention. Before the change of century between 500 and 400 BC, the politician Pericles instituted a radical reform of the law system in Athens. He was trying to get away from a primitive justice system based upon blood revenge. Instead, conflicts should be solved by means of a third party, a jury elected by the people. The idea was that the jury would be more able than the involved parties themselves to objectively analyse and solve the conflict. The drama helped Pericles "sell" his political idea regarding conflict solution.

Aristotle (Aristotle, translation 2006) who lived between 384 and 322 BC has had a profound influence on thinking in the whole world ever since. His ideas about leadership and the complicated relationships between ethics and leadership seem quite modern. His work represents the importance to good leadership of reading, writing and thinking. He developed specific theories regarding "imitation" of poetry. Of course his guidelines for informed dialogue should be a cornerstone for any civilised culture.

It has often been assumed that William Shakespeare was purely artistic in his approach to drama production. A recent scientific debate (Asquith 2005) is about Shakespeare as a subversive who embedded dangerous political messages in his work. In particular the flamboyant conflict between catholics and protestants (and in parallel processes between competing royal family fractions) during Shakespeare's life may have been an important theme hidden and coded in his plays.



During the process leading up to Hitler's seizing of power and later "selling" of violent and radical solutions of political problems, cultural productions had major importance. For instance Leni Riefensthal's movies, such as *Triumph of the Will* (1934), had a significant facilitatory role. Richard Wagner's music, although composed long before Hitler's political life, was used for facilitating the seduction of people's thinking about the moral rights of the Aryan race. One example is that the overture of "*Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg*" was used on many meetings of large crowds of people to create proud feelings. Wagner himself could not be blamed directly for this since the first performance of that opera took place in 1868 and Wagner died in 1883. However, he stated antisemitic views and his second wife Cosima Wagner who was 20 years younger than the composer and lived until 1930 was actively anti-Jewish. There were also close links between one of Wagner's sons and Hitler.



For subordinates, cultural experiences have often been important because such experiences have helped them accept harsh conditions. The fact that huge sculptures of heroic workers were favoured in the Stalin era in the Soviet Union could of course be regarded as an upgrading of the importance of labourers' work while at the same time it could also be regarded as an effort to facilitate the employees' acceptance of bad working environments. Conversely, employees may feel that they are taken care of if the environment is well decorated. In our preparations for this book we heard a chief executive of a large international company state that he organized the purchasing of fine art for wall decoration in his large company and that this made the employees feel that they had been well cared for.

That important cultural experiences may arise spontaneously when employees are exposed to endless extremely hard conditions has been described in multiple historical examples. Part of the black music culture arose as an important survival factor during centuries of slavery. Part of that culture production spilled over on white “fine” culture. One example is the song *Old Man River* (lyrics Hammerstein/music Kern) from the musical *Show Boat*, which is about the hard endless non-rewarding work of a black man who has to fight with the river Mississippi. Similar songs produced by the slaves in North America have provided emotional support in a difficult life. Another example is the spontaneous prison university described by Nelson Mandela from his many years on Robben Island (Mandela 1995). During pauses the prisoners were lecturing to one another about their areas of expertise.

In medieval churches we can see how devils and executions on the walls send two messages to the members of the municipality: (1) Behave well or you will be punished even after death! and (2) There are evil forces everywhere! But a third message displayed on the church walls is that there is a chance for everyone who behaves well to enter paradise after death. And one could perhaps add: And therefore it makes no sense to complain about your conditions now, you should accept them as they are.

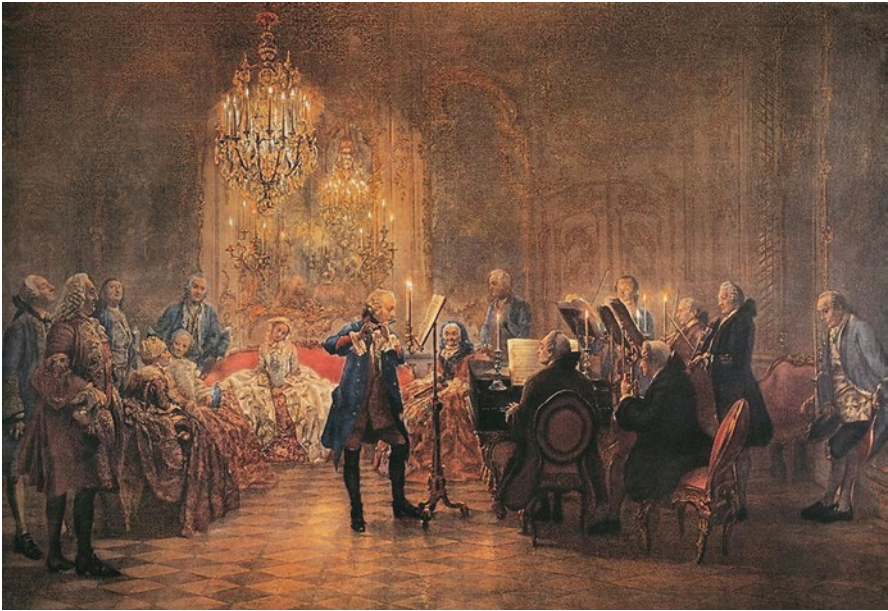


The Last Judgement: Hell, detail  
(Fra Angelico, 1431)



All of these examples illustrate that those in power have used cultural expressions evoking strong emotions such as hatred, pride, joy and anxiety as well as more complex emotional processes such as empathy and cohesiveness in order to support their rule.

But how does this relate to the management of companies? Political leaders could not be equalized with managers in companies and agencies. But first of all it could be speculated that companies have been managed in the same way as societies. That is to say, if the king or the emperor uses sculpture or music in order to show citizens how to behave or what a desired behaviour should be, it is likely that those in charge of companies do the same albeit on a smaller scale. Secondly, cultural experiences were a prominent part of the education for those who were to seize power. For instance, princes and princesses learnt how to play an instrument and there are several examples of kings (such as Frederic the Great of Prussia) who were skilful musicians. Our Swedish king Gustavus III was a playwright and he also performed as an actor.



*The Flute Concert of Sanssouci* by Adolph Menzel, 1852, depicts Frederick playing the flute in his music room at Sanssouci. C. P. E. Bach accompanies him on the harpsichord





William Shakespeare

These examples all show that there have been close ties between ruling and culture and also that cultural manifestations have been important in the institution of societal changes. Let us speculate about parallels between these historical examples and how cultural experiences can be used in companies today.

The parallels between dictatorial managers favouring a harsh atmosphere in the workplace and dictatorial regimes such as those of Hitler and Stalin are obvious. The parallels are less obvious when monarchs (such as Frederic the Great of Prussia

playing the flute and being featured as a man who interviewed and supported Voltaire) are “enlightened” and affected by cultural experiences but still prepared to use their executive power effectively and even with cruelty – emperor Frederic was a successful military. However, the mere fact that Frederic allowed “enlightenment” (also happening during approximately the same period in Austria) was important for the development of Europe in a longer perspective. The parallel with the company manager could be that a manager who is autocratic (not recommended for a manager!) but allows the employees to be stimulated by creative cultural experiences does something good for the future development of the company. The Shakespeare example is just one of very many showing that the drama art is a strong power for revealing hidden and forgotten truths and for overthrowing destructive rules. This could be applied to companies as well. It could even be a reason why managers fearing change are against cultural experiences among the employees. There are many examples from history showing that cultural experiences have strengthened national identity and cohesiveness. We think of Beethoven’s symphonies stimulating heroic feelings, communistic paintings of labourers and male choirs singing war propaganda. Also large companies with a long history try to facilitate feelings of togetherness by means of history writing, poems, songs and poems. Some of the smaller nations in Germany had sovereigns that played an instrument in their own court orchestra. The other musicians in the orchestra might have been employed as gardeners or barbers. This surprisingly democratic arrangement in an organisation at the borderline between nation and company could certainly be applied to modern workplaces as well. This means that the managers should participate themselves in the cultural experiences organised for the employees. One of us (TT) had a father who was the director of a large biochemical institute during the 1950s and 1960s. Twice every year (once in the winter and once in the summer) all the staff including janitors, animal carers, professors, laboratory secretaries, research students, secretaries, spouses and children from all over the world gathered and had a party together. The director played the violin while the adults and children were dancing. In the summer there were competitions on the lawn, with adults and children participating on the same conditions – for instance running as fast as possible with a raw potatoe on a spoon without dropping it. The active playful participation of everyone who wants to is an important component in this. Some companies organise a choir of their own and in other companies an annual theatre performance mocks and describes what has happened in the firm during the past year, with employees performing on stage.

If we relate these historical examples to what we know today about the effects of cultural experiences on the brain’s structure and function we understand that the use of cultural experiences by those in power has not been random and innocent. In addition it is likely that these activities have been of immense importance to history. Unfortunately, the processes that cultural experiences start could give rise not only to social and emotional support to the rulers but also to overthrowing of power. This may explain why many rulers have feared cultural manifestations. A recent example is the Taliban rule (Waldman 2001) that prohibited all cultural manifestations.

This is a perverted interpretation of the Quran which states that believers should abstain from music and those distracted by music are banned.

Perhaps the only conclusion we can draw from history is that writing, music, theatre and paintings have been of great importance in history but that these connections have sometimes served evil and sometimes good purposes. What cultural experiences do is that they amplify and evoke feelings of pride, anger, anxiety, joy and togetherness in populations. Therefore creative activities (be it passive consumption or active production) are not per se “good” or “bad” but they can be used for good purposes. This knowledge can be applied on a smaller scale on workplaces as well and it has a profound importance for the relationship of the manager to his/her company. In the next chapter we shall discuss managerial behaviour in a more detailed way, on the basis of current scientific knowledge.

## Cultural Experiences and Health

Cultural participation can be defined in several ways. We are not referring to the broader cultural concept which includes belonging to an ethnic group or, in general, practicing group habits determined by a group. We are defining cultural activity as creative activities (both *passive*, such as listening, watching, reading, and *active* such as playing, performing, writing, painting) in areas such as music, dance, theatre, visual arts and writing. Although there is a clear difference between active participation and passive consumption of culture we are discussing both kinds of cultural experiences – the border between them is not clear.

Participation in cultural experiences shows enormous variation between different national populations in the world and also varies strongly between different areas and different groups within populations. For instance, managers may not be interested in the same areas of cultural activity as their employees. But whenever we can in the workplace organize cultural experiences that are of interest for both managers and their employees, a strengthened sense of cohesiveness may arise. Therefore, participation in cultural experiences, even in the limited sense that we have chosen to discuss, has often been analysed within a broader theoretical context, as part of social capital and social network (see Hyppää and Mäki 2001; Putnam 2000).

Clift (2012) has discussed various kinds of evidence in the field of culture and health science, emphasizing that there is a hierarchy of evidence. The studies that are based upon observations in populations provide necessary evidence relevant for policy makers, but controlled intervention studies have a higher position in the scientific hierarchy since they may provide evidence not only showing ‘what works’ but also ‘what does not work’.

Before we discuss the role of culture experiences in the work place we need to analyse whether cultural experiences in general, regardless of which arena they are taking place on, have any effect on health. Do cultural experiences such as singing, playing music or singing, writing poetry or going to the theatre in the population

somehow influence standard epidemiological outcome measures such as longevity, mortality or morbidity?

### ***Cultural Consumption in the General Population***

In some countries there is epidemiologically based information regarding the extent to which citizens participate in cultural experiences. Sweden is a stable and relatively secularised society, with a high level of education in the population. Statistics Sweden performed interviews on cultural experiences (Survey of Living Conditions, Kulturrådet 2008) with randomly selected men and women (age 16–74) in the general population. Statistics have been published showing the development of the prevalence of various cultural experiences between 1976 and 2006 (with data from the years 1976, 1982–1983, 1990–1991, 1998–1999 and 2006). In 2006 some interviews were performed by telephone whereas during the preceding waves all interviews had been face to face; this created some methodological difficulty; the differences between face to face and telephone interviews are small but in the few cases where there are differences we have presented the average. Taking some examples from the surveys (quoted from Theorell and Ullén 2014), these statistics show that in 1976:

- (a) 37% of Swedes had been at a concert or a theatre performance at least once during the past year. In 2006 the corresponding percentage had increased to 65%; 6% had done so at least five times during the year preceding the interview in 1976 and in 2006 this percentage had increased to 8%;
- (b) 51% had visited a museum (art or other) at least once during the past year. In 2006 this percentage had increased to 53%. However, the corresponding percentages for visits to a museum at least five times during the past year had decreased from 12% in 1976 to 6% in 2006;
- (c) 44% and in 2006 65% had visited a library at least once during the past year. Visits to a library at least five times during the past year were reported by 24 and 25% in 1976 and 2006 respectively;
- (d) 46% and in 2006 66% had been to the cinema at least once during the past year. 16% in 1976 and 15% in 2006 had done so at least five times during the past year and;
- (e) 77% and in 2006 79% reported that they had been reading a book at least once during the past year. The corresponding percentages for having read a book at least five times during the past year was 39% (1976) and 38% (2006) respectively.

These numbers show that the consumption of fine arts is extensive in Swedish society. During the 30 years when these statistics were produced the education level of Swedes increased considerably and it was also a period of relative affluence. This development was interrupted in the first years of the 1990s, but the financial crisis with increased unemployment did not markedly influence the culture