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## Clore Leadership-AHRC Online Research Library Paper *“What Makes Your Heart Sing”*

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**Supervisor/s:**

**Year paper completed:** 2012

**Leadership Content Theme/s:** Leadership Styles, Practises of Self Care, Sector insights,

**AHRC Subject Area/s:** Policy Arts Management and Creative Industries,

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# What Makes= =Your Heart = Sing?

**An inquiry into the impact of creative practice  
on leadership in the cultural sector**

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January 2012



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# Introduction

This research sets out to explore the connection between creative practice, well-being, leadership and organisations, and investigates if being creative makes people better leaders.

**Within this research I am going to refer to my own story, using it as a counterpoint to other journeys by cultural leaders and academic literature.**

Having originally trained as a fine artist, I have worked in the arts for more than 20 years. After graduating I began as a volunteer arts worker for ArtLink ExChange, a community arts organisation in Yorkshire, and worked my way through the organisation to become its Director for four years. As this was part-time for quite a while, I also worked for MIND, a mental health charity supporting people into employment and volunteering, and for Yorkshire-based universities leading and developing widening participation initiatives. A move to London gave me the opportunity to work within a local authority, leading the arts team for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and developing the first Arts Strategy for the borough. This role gave me a valuable insight into a different perspective of the cultural sector, which I took with me when I became Director, London, for Arts Council England, leading the work of the organisation on partnerships, diversity and education across the capital.

Since being awarded a Fellowship from the Clore Leadership Programme, I am now at a point in my career where I have brought together the experiences I have had and the knowledge gained from my career to date, and am working as a freelance consultant and coach within the cultural sector. I am also re-engaged with my creative practice again, and am enjoying what that brings me as an individual and a leader, as I will describe later in this research.

My experience of the cultural sector tells me that my journey is not unique and often people are drawn to work in the arts because of a passion, a vocation almost, a primal need to create or make. Often individuals start as artist or makers and then progress into administrative roles, moving into management or leadership positions over time. The research explores some of the motivations for this transition and considers its impact on our well-being and sense of self. It also raises the question of whether creative leaders can be more effective, and therefore able to lead more effective organisations and a stronger cultural sector.

## Hypothesis

This research is testing the interactivity of creativity or artistic practice and leadership, through the following four propositions:

- 1. Creative leaders say they need to be in touch with their creative practice.** The urge to be creative is present from an early age, and this is something to which we return throughout our lives or career journeys.
- 2. Creative leaders support their own well-being through engaging with their own creative practice.**  
The impact of being creative on an individual enhances and increases their sense of well-being and happiness.

3. **Creative leaders are more effective when they engage in their own creative practice.**  
Engaging in creative practice supports leaders' credibility, and helps them to identify and understand their place in the ecology within the cultural sector.
4. **Organisations are more effective where creative leaders have a high level of well-being as a result of their creative practice.**  
Thinking or working creatively develops transferable skills which individuals can employ in their roles as leaders, creating stronger organisations and a more effective and happy workforce.

## Methodology

To test these propositions I am going to use a mix of autobiography, academic literature and interviews.

I have interviewed seven leaders from the cultural sector who have either returned to their creative practice, or have kept their artistic practice active, often weaving it into their leadership journey. My interviewees have come from different artforms – dance, theatre, literature, music and the visual arts. Some have achieved a senior post in what might be called a traditional leadership model – that of running a large arts organisation – and one is a founder director. Others are demonstrating leadership through the work they do, for example as freelance consultants. People have been very generous with their time and honesty about their experiences, and I want to thank them for that.

I have also considered the relevant management and leadership theories about well-being and effective working, and have seen how these relate to the journeys of my interviewees and connect with the way creativity has impacted on their lives and their roles as leaders.

## Proposition 1

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**Creative leaders say they need to be in touch with their creative practice.** The urge to be creative is present from an early age, and this is something to which we return throughout our lives or career journeys.

### Beginnings

There is a photograph of me that I remember fondly from my childhood. I am in my grandad's garden, sitting at an easel, paintbrush in hand, daubing bright colours on a huge piece of paper, and I'm covered in paint. There is a look of intense concentration on my face, but also a great smile. I don't know what I was painting, but I can see that I was completely happy and at one with what I was doing.

Like many of my interviewees, the desire to create was inherent from a young age:

I always read and can't remember when I started writing, but I feel like I always have.

I became a dancer by chance, not choice, I was at art school, how to make was embedded in me.

I remember way back when I was 13 saying if I wasn't a dancer then I'd want to be a writer. That was something that was always there.

My journey began when I was very young – I can't recall a time when I wasn't making, creating or just getting my hands dirty. I remember being given an art set one Christmas and devouring its contents, delighted by all the coloured pencils. My parents came from a science background so there were some difficult conversations in our house when I dropped sciences to pursue art at O-level. These were amplified when I decided to go to art school and study Fine Art rather than a more traditional academic subject. Though supportive both then and now, I don't know if my parents ever fully embraced or understood my decision and determination.

I loved being at art school. It was four years of studio time, a chance to learn my craft and gain insights into a world that was very different from my own, but one that offered space to think and create. It was a very precious time for me and one where I felt completely at home.

### Times of change

What has come through clearly from the interviews and my own experience is that there have been moments of change, or triggers, along career journeys. These may have been away from creative practice, or back into it, and the reasons for this, as I explore later, were either pragmatic, for instance based on economics, or emotional, based on a personal need.

When I graduated, I was offered a rare studio space in a local artists' collective, but found myself choosing to take the option of finding part-time paid work to cover my bills, and not feeling able to take the risk of taking on a studio at that time. I suspect there was something in my mind about not feeling confident enough with my work to believe that this would be a serious proposal to continue. I was brought up with a strong work ethic, and I couldn't see how I could fit making work into a week where I needed to earn an income and preserve my independence.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow developed the framework for the hierarchy of needs to support his theory of motivation which proposes:

... that human beings are motivated by unsatisfied needs, and that certain lower needs need to be satisfied before higher needs can be addressed. Per the teachings of Abraham Maslow, there are general needs (physiological, safety, love and esteem) which have to be fulfilled before a person is able to act unselfishly. These needs were dubbed "deficiency needs." While a person is motivated to fulfil these basal desires, they continue to move toward growth, and eventually self-actualisation. The satisfaction of these needs is quite healthy, while preventing their gratification makes us ill or act evily. (Abraham-Maslow.com: 2012)

Maslow has depicted these needs in the form of a pyramid model which has five levels, from physiological needs at the base, progressing through safety needs, social needs, self-esteem, with self-actualisation at the top. His theory suggests that each layer needs to be in place and secure before progressing. This seems to me to be a simplistic view – the traditional stereotypical image of a penniless artist working to create their masterpiece counteracts this. It could be argued that in this scenario they are actively accessing their requirement for self-actualisation with less regard for the basic needs.

On reflection it is easy to see that I was addressing my basic physiological needs of shelter and food before being able to move anywhere near self-actualisation which would have been much

more about the capacity to think freely and be creative. This was a pragmatic choice for me, perhaps influenced by my upbringing.

My interviews indicated that I am not alone in making such a practical choice:

It was a conscious decision, based on economics to keep my daughter secure. A very simple pragmatic decision.

That was the beginning of fracturing away from being creative. I had to reconcile the fact that I needed to make a living and the fact that some people could pay and others couldn't.

I got into arts management and started to earn money, and I enjoyed it.

The part-time work I took on at that stage – working in bars, and in a cinema – involved low-level skills, but did what I needed then financially and it also gave me the flexibility to work at ArtLink initially as a volunteer.

In my experience it's not unusual for arts graduates to develop a working pattern like this. A lot of the opportunities for paid employment for artists come in the form of residencies or commissions – occasional and one-off contracts. It's no surprise then that figures from the Higher Education Careers Services Unit state that for Fine Art students who graduated in 2008, 56.8 per cent entered employment, but of those 23.4 per cent went into retail or catering work. They also note that 19 per cent remained within the arts, design and culture field (Guardian: 2009).

For other interviewees, the triggers or moments of change were back into creative practice, and the rationale for these was often emotionally based:

I knew when I got the idea for the work. I was so passionate, and wanted to do that more than I was doing. I was out of balance. I cared about that more.

About five years in I had a moment of thinking why am I here? Early 40s and thought didn't I start as a sculptor and here I am pushing bits of paper over my desk day in, day out. I was making other people lives creative and loving doing that in an arts organisation which was my home, but thinking I don't make anything any more, which is crazy – who am I? Where am I in the middle of all of this?

I was in the wrong place doing the wrong thing. I'd started doing the right thing, but this had changed...Why should we wear the same life without re-evaluation?

Sir David Attenborough recently described a time at the BBC when he was promoted to a senior management position responsible for programme output for the corporation, a large step away from making the natural history programmes he enjoyed creating:

Sacking people wasn't my thing, I went back to making programmes (Desert Island Discs: 29 January 2012. 30 mins)

In this scenario he made a choice to pursue a career doing the thing that he loved, that made him passionate.

Dr Eve Poole, a management consultant at Ashridge Business School, suggests that these triggers can take place throughout our careers:

It's stage rather than age because it's partly about what else is going on in your life and how in control you feel and how competent you feel. For example, if you're doing a lot of board level financial work that isn't really your thing then that can make you lose quite a lot of confidence. So you would gravitate towards doing something that would give you confidence back again... If you look across people's careers, there are peaks and troughs, whether it's new into a role or back from maternity leave for example... I imagine whenever you do an evaluation of where are you and what is really important to you then, at that point, you'll see that you've sacrificed quite a lot to get on and actually what you really like is getting your hands dirty. Then you might feel sad about that and want to correct it. On the other hand, if that transition is going smoothly and you are dedicated to the sector or this organisation and you can see how your contribution helps, rather than getting your hands dirty in the corner, then you wouldn't have that reaction. (Poole: 2011)

What isn't so easy to delineate is whether this is a gender-specific tendency, although women may be more resourceful when it comes to taking care of themselves as Poole describes:

I think largely because women are generationally newer to the workforce there is less patterning as to what a female career looks like. Often the guys get into the Neanderthal breadwinning journey and it's only when it hits really quite late on – when maybe the kids are growing up etc – and they suddenly think: was it worth it? And you can get men falling quite hard then, as they don't have the resources to fall back on. Whereas women have a more regular conversation with themselves about priorities - they have to because of their bodies and whatever else is going on in their lives, but I don't think it stops them from having the same feelings. I think that women have often more frequently a shallower aptitude. We're better at being a bit more self-aware. (Poole: 2011)

Some of the triggers that were shared with me were very pragmatic, others more emotional, and the small number of interviewees prevents me having a solid enough evidence base to make a judgement on the differentiation between men and women. But all of the triggers mattered to those experiencing them at the time they happened, and created a change in the career journey and practices of the individual.

## Ability

What the interviews did indicate was a desire to do well, and from that the sense of confidence in our abilities or the things we achieve. Confidence can also come from the impact of those around us, and receiving praise or constructive criticism for example.

In her exploration of the art world, critic Sarah Thornton observes the world of a crit, or seminar, in the California Institute of the Arts. Though its specific process is particular to each institute, the general principle of the critiquing process is common across art schools in the UK, and would usually follow a format of peer and tutor discussion and constructive criticism of a student's work. These are valuable moments where artists can test their thinking, and Thornton describes how it:

Prepares them for professional careers... art students need to understand their motivations deeply... you have to find something that is true to yourself as a person – some non-negotiable core that will get you through a 40-year artistic practice. (Thornton: 2008. p56)

This testing is important, but the pressure felt by a student can be intense. One interviewee described how:

Art school undid my confidence around my creativity. I was surrounded by people who were really good at it. I just had a desire to be good at it.

There is a risk that the academic structures we find ourselves in can set us up to fail – it is presumed that our destiny is to make a living as an artist, though there is evidence to suggest this isn't necessarily the path we all take.

It was clear that individuals' confidence levels about their ability varied enormously, and for some this could create a negative voice or self-perception:

Keep talking about giving it up but never do, maybe I do that as a defence mechanism in case I'm no good.

I was stopping myself making anything because I had this checklist about what being a professional artist was. It was all in my head.

For others it created a sense of determination:

I will do this to the best of my ability, I don't care if anyone else likes it.

I thought if I'm going to do this well then I need time to do it, so I gave up my job.

I used to think of myself as a second-rate artist, but now the creativity is through all I do.

What has been very clear is the level of honesty required with yourself when making a judgement about your own ability.

I can think of one person who went through a major crisis when he realised he wasn't going to be a first-class theatre director and that's something we all have to deal with at some point.

The decision to walk away from the opportunity of a studio was a difficult choice for me to make, and whenever I look back I wonder how my career may have turned out had I chosen the studio and had the time to further develop my work. If I'm honest I don't think that I was ever destined to be one of the few people who are able to survive purely on making work, as my work was not strong enough. I had already begun to consider what else my creative background could enable me to do, and chose to explore these opportunities.

Iwona Blazwick, Director of the Whitechapel Gallery, wanted to be an artist and trained as a painter. She has described how she had found an office day job so she could pursue her artistic practice in the evening, but one day realised that:

I simply wasn't any good. Everything I did was a pale imitation. I didn't have that spring of originality which is the artist's gift. (The Times: 2009)

Her move away from painting led her to develop a career as one of the key players in contemporary visual arts today, critically a role which sees her supporting and developing the artistic talent of tomorrow. While she gave up her ambition of becoming a professional artist she has remained in touch with her creative practice by painting on holiday:

"...which means I have about a hundred sketch pads with three pages used in each" (The Times: 2009)

The recognition of the role leaders can play in the wider cultural sphere by enabling the next generation was also talked about by one of the interviewees:

The transition from being obsessed with yourself which you have to be as a performer to actually giving your heart to a new generation is a big step.

## **Findings on proposition 1**

My conclusion for proposition 1, that creative leaders say they need to be in touch with their creative practice, is that this is true.

The need to do this is present, and integral to the leader, but what came through strongly was the level of honesty that people showed about their ability and their fears. The main rationale for returning to creative practice was an emotional one, with people wanting to find a balance and re-energise themselves by drawing on their fundamental need to be creative.

# Proposition 2

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**Creative leaders support their own well-being through engaging with their own creative practice.** The impact of being creative on an individual enhances and increases their sense of well-being and happiness.

## Sense of self

Ken Robinson, author and leader in creativity, innovation and education, has recently written about his theory of the Element. He describes this as:

...the meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion... (Robinson: 2009. p21)

Robinson argues that finding your Element can enable you to be more successful, and fundamentally happier. From his research he has noticed that when people are in their element they are:

Doing the thing they love, and in doing it they feel like their most authentic selves. They find that time passes differently and that they are more alive, more centred, and more vibrant than at any other times. (Robinson: 2009. p21)

This theory resonates with my findings, and my experience and my interviewees: Being creative – however that manifests itself – is their Element. It doesn't necessarily have to be the only one that there is, some interviewees talked about their children with an incredible passion. But for me, the connector across our sector is the need and ability to be creative, and the power that process can have:

What writing does allow me to do is consolidate my thoughts and reflect on the experience, the learning and the value of it... It allows me to communicate, which is something I'm passionate about.

The making of art is intrinsically bound up with you as a person and I think that's amazing.

I'd forgotten the absolute single mindedness of making... 95 per cent of my brain space was full of the work.

It felt totally brilliant – I didn't know what I was doing but I felt completely able to make.

I think I should drive my own work because that's when you come face-to-face with yourself as a maker.

The sense of self came through very strongly in the interviews, almost as if it is a core essence of the individual. My concern about this is what happens if that yearning is suppressed. In my experience I noticed that my need to create has started to leak out in other activities – through gardening, for example which enabled me to play and make albeit in a different form. I found this activity to be valuable space and time for reflection.

## A solo moment

It could be argued that taking part in a creative activity like visual arts indicates an introverted personality, one that needs time alone to think or process. In my experience this may be true to a degree, and I have certainly enjoyed the sense of time out I find when I have time to create. But I also think that the arts – especially when you look at more performance-based artforms, is a team-focused world, where working and communicating together effectively are essential to the creative process. Many senior roles require a high level of energy, and a keen ability to network. The demands to be ‘on’ all the time are high. However, many of my interviewees referred to how returning to their practice was a time to look inwards, to focus, and noted the need for a time of solitude:

Making, looking, experiencing any one of the arts keeps you in touch with that force within you that can be so eroded by all the practicalities of life.

Writing is a calming thing for me as it’s an introverted activity.

Respite from high-level high-pressure work.

I liked practising, it might have been about getting away from people... If I go in a room with my instruments it’s “me time”.

It allows me to be in my head. Allows me to investigate all the stuff that really interests me.

These comments indicate the need to find a time to regain a balance in our rhythms, and the benefits individuals gained from this.

## Well-being and happiness

What has been striking from the research is a strong correlation between engaging in creative practice and the sense of well-being. In the document “Promoting mental well-being through productive and healthy working conditions: guidance for employers” published by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), well-being is described as:

Mental well-being is a dynamic state in which the individual is able to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others and contribute to their community. It is enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and achieve a sense of purpose in society. (NICE: 2009. p6)

Given that the focus of the document is on the workplace it is not surprising that the definition refers to productivity, but I am pleased to see that it also refers to the balance in people’s lives between personal and professional. This echoes my own experience and the findings from my research.

The definition of well-being also refers to a dynamic state. Angela Whelan from Ashridge Business School has undertaken a piece of research about ego-depletion, suggesting a notion that as individuals we have a battery or energy reserve. She describes the premise of this:

Anything that requires any kind of will power or self-control will take energy from the brain. The self-regulatory function in our brain is a bit like an energy reserve, like a battery, a device with a limited amount of power. The implication is that when you have activities that require self-control, performance in a subsequent act of self-control is reduced – we have depleted the resource. You will have less energy to override the impulse to respond. (Times Higher Education Supplement: 2009)

In this example the research related to students and their ability to learn, but I would suggest that, building on the definition of well-being, the principle applies to all aspects of our lives and would broaden this to encompass the workplace. We all do things that push us out of our comfort zone, and while some of this can be interesting or challenging and bring rewards in other ways, it could also be seen as a drain on our natural resources.

Here the issue is about how to top up your battery, essentially ensuring good energy management – basics like sleep and eating properly would help all of us, but identifying what works on an individual level is also critical to ensure a balance. Dr Eve Poole has described how a simple emotional intelligence exercise which gives people an insight into self-awareness, can help to build a strategy for self-management:

I get people to do a “dementors list” which is all the things in their life that act as power zappers, like bad weather or traffic, bad colleagues etc, and get them to think of a “whiskers and kittens list” which is all about the positives. I then get them to look at their diaries and think about if there is going to be an awful day because of what is scheduled and how they can schedule something more positive in the week to manage it better. (Poole: 2011)

It could be argued that it’s an obvious solution. However, though simple, this is a really valuable tool for trying to ensure well-being on an individual basis and maintain time for creative practice, if that is what is needed to top up your battery.

I made a decision to re-engage with creative practice when I was working in the local authority. At this time, I was feeling very removed from the ability to be creative and, I realise now, my Element or sense of self. So I took up night classes, and for three precious hours a week I would go and create and make, and this had the impact of reconnecting me with myself again. My confidence in my ability as an artist had completely disappeared and the things I made were hardly aesthetically challenging. But I became more balanced, I was happier, and I was more confident in who I was and what I had to offer. Importantly this allowed me to reconnect with the purpose of my job again, and gave me a renewed energy and appetite for working within the sector and I made a career move to Arts Council England.

My sense of frustration was echoed by one of the interviewees who described the impact that engaging in creative practice again had on her:

I recognised a sense of getting quite depressed and possibly resentful in my job as I wasn’t expressing myself... I got reconnected to my job and really started to enjoy my work again as I got back in balance.

American academic Edgar Schein developed a concept based on career anchors which he suggested indicates what drew you to your career, or what gives you satisfaction. The anchors cover areas such as managerial competence, security or stability, service or dedication to a cause, lifestyle, and pure challenge. The anchor that seems to sit well with a creative background is that of Technical or Functional competence:

This kind of person likes being good at something and will work to become a guru or expert. They like to be challenged and then use their skill to meet the challenge, doing the job properly and better than almost anyone else. (Changing Minds: 2012)

Dr Eve Poole explained how the anchor works as an internal driver pushing for alignment so you can feel out of kilter if you don’t listen to it:

Schein would argue that if that is your career anchor then you would have to go back to it because you feel uprooted and destabilised if you aren't able to fulfil your dream career... there are quite a number of people who are drawn into the cultural sector as this is their anchor anyway. So in terms of career satisfaction, if that is what motivates you, then it's going to feel painful if you go into admin or management and lose track of that. It would argue that this may change as your life does, e.g. as you get older a family may change your perspective, but fundamentally they remain solid. (Poole: 2011)

I know how much this time matters to me because when the opportunity to be creative is taken away – for instance when a board meeting I was attending ran late and I couldn't get to my ceramics class, I became frustrated with myself and others around me. My sense of balance had gone – albeit temporarily.

Balance came through strongly as a theme in the interviews. This is something American academic Bill George explores in the context of integrating your life. He describes a model of four buckets – each representing different areas of one's life – personal, family, professional, and community and friends. In an ideal world these would all hold the same amount – representing how much time you are able to give them, and a balance would be present. However:

Leadership requires significant sacrifices especially during intense periods, when certain buckets get less time. (George: 2007. p140)

For me this brings back Whelan's notion of ego-depletion, and a recognition that there will be things across all areas of our lives that won't necessarily be enjoyable or energy-giving. This level of self-awareness was clear in the interviews, with people recognising how and when to address that need:

Make quite sure you know everything that takes your energy away and try to find the moment where you were just about to be drained out, and not go too far from the engine which was why we are doing this – the artform... Inevitably we all get to those places but it's knowing what to do about it.

I have increasingly realised that if I'm not making, it doesn't make me a very happy person and therefore not an effective manager, because to be a good manager you have to be happy inside. Learning is key to well-being.

What it's given me is understanding myself as a creative and imaginative person. I think that's a muscle that might have just wasted away.

There has been much in the press recently about well-being and indicators, and indeed the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has recently launched a 12-week consultation the purpose of which is to:

Investigate the 10 key themes or 'domains' of individual well-being. The findings are due to be published in the spring, and the goal is to create a 'happiness index' to complement other measurement tools such as gross domestic product, and allow civil servants to assess the effect that future policies may have on the public's well-being. (Institute of Leadership and Management: 2012)

The cynic may say this is simply a government initiative to try to create a positive attitude in what is a difficult economic climate. However, from my experience I would suggest that well-being and

happiness matters for many reasons, it impacts on our health, our effectiveness, our sense of self-worth, and on those around us.

The simple pleasure and impact of being creative was evident from the interviewees:

I was incredibly happy.

It was like flexing a muscle.

I'm here making and this is my playtime and I love it.

I feel incredibly lucky I chose to do this.

It's part of me – it's why I still breathe, there's something visceral about putting a clarinet in my mouth.

Happier person, more generous and giving.

Sense of stability, potential, pleasure and enjoyment.

I had to put some time aside to go and write, and I realised just how happy that made me.

It has been fantastic.

For me these words speak volumes about the impact that being creative can have on an individual, especially when that has been a thread that has run through someone's life. The research and interviews have indicated how important it is to maintain a balance and ensure our well-being as individuals. The people I have spoken to are all aware that being creative plays a vital role in this for them. What I would question is how we, as leaders, ensure that we enable and encourage the same opportunities for those who work within the cultural sector.

## **Findings on proposition 2**

The evidence for proposition 2 strongly indicates that engaging in creative practice enhances an individual's well-being and happiness.

The descriptions interviewees gave of the impact of being involved in their creative practice were often short, but heartfelt. It was at this stage in the interviews that individuals came alive, and their body language actively indicated their excitement at the thought of being creative. The level of energy and enthusiasm displayed accords with Robinson's theory of the Element.

The aspects explored in proposition 2 are very personal and introspective. Building on this, I want to consider what being creative can bring to a leader when looking at external factors, and how this level of self-awareness, and heightened well-being creates a more effective leader.

# Proposition 3

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**Creative leaders are more effective when they engage in their own creative practice.** Engaging in creative practice supports leaders' credibility, and helps them to identify and understand their place in the ecology within the cultural sector.

## Ecology of the cultural sector

The structure of the cultural sector has traditionally been quite hierarchical, with what was described as highbrow artforms occupying a perceived position of superiority. As indicated by an interviewee, this has a knock-on impact on the sector with the roles that cultural professionals moved into and were able to move between:

Trying to make sense of where you fit in the cultural ecology is really difficult because it's not like a profession with specific points in it like law. It's much more blurred and smudged in the arts which is why I think people get quite insecure.

Robert Hewison and John Holden have suggested a more intertwined structure for the cultural sector today:

There are now three spheres of culture: publicly funded culture, commercial culture and homemade culture. They are not separate or oppositional, they are completely interlinked. (Hewison and Holden: 2011. p12)

They describe how we are now in an era where we are able to travel around these spheres easily, taking on different positions and roles as we need or want to.

This theory is substantiated by the evidence I found, as it aligns itself to a concept of layers, or different strands of self that has come through clearly from the interviews. It allows for a greater fluidity and flexibility in the way that we work:

As an artist you shouldn't have to compromise, it should benefit the organisation but yet we've traditionally set up structures where you have to choose one or the other.

But I am an artist, I bring the same skills and attributes. The fact you're an artist over here if you're an actor, but not if you're over here in the finance department is wrong in my view.

What it also does is potentially remove the stigmas that have existed within our sector about working in what were perceived as high or lowbrow artforms. This is a welcome move, as it will also remove some of the barriers and inhibitions that people may have experienced about returning to their own practice after some time, recognising the confidence and leap of faith required to do so:

Wherever you sit in the hierarchy of the arts there are people who are better than you, people whose work you admire and respect and there are people who look to you.

I was making it but I didn't know who was who or what was what. I was ignorant to a degree that I still feel very embarrassed by and that catches up with me occasionally.

The notion of being a leader was a challenge for some – the traditional image of a figurehead running a major institution still prevails, although leadership can happen in many more subtle or creative ways than that:

Playing is like being in the playground. I think I'm a more playful director because of that.

I am now a thought leader, not an action leader, and I have far greater impact.

I don't see myself as a leader. I see myself as someone who has been around a bit.

## Credibility

Credibility is the capacity to be believed or trusted. From the research it was clear that this is vital in a leadership role, and that there was a link between credibility and being able to demonstrate a genuine understanding and experience of the artform, and the knowledge that people had been there and done it themselves – and in many cases still were doing:

That whole business of putting yourself on stage – you can never understand it unless you've done it. It helps me to relate to the students as I understand what they're doing and achieving.

I understand what makes a musician tick.

Leadership and management theorist John Adair refers to Socrates who taught that:

...a professional or technical competence should be a prerequisite for holding a position of leadership responsibility. (Adair: 2009. p7)

The rationale for this being that the level of competence justifies a more senior authority. While I don't concur with the hierarchical analogy, I do agree with Adair's conclusion that:

The tendency of people to follow a leader who knows what to do is strengthened in a crisis. (Adair: 2009. p7)

I've certainly seen scenarios where someone with a technical competence has been invaluable in an industry with the mantra "the show must go on". However crisis management is only one aspect of a leader's role. What is needed are people who have a balance of skills and can employ them appropriately, according to the audience or the task, as evidenced by the interviewees:

I can work with people on the business of making cultural products, and I can talk about it in purely business terms. But I absolutely know what their experience is as a producer, maker or artist.

Sponsors like the way I can talk about the artform, and I can do that naturally.

The name is useful in its credibility and to draw attention, but I know one of the strongest aspects of my artistic practice is how much I enjoy and engage with other people.

It's important you can command respect.

If the balance of skills isn't in place and a leader can't function effectively their credibility will be affected:

I have heard of one example where an artist was appointed to a senior position, who was actively creating and performing, but unable to actually deliver on the core functions of the role in terms of the organisation.

Swings and roundabout – having been a practitioner gives you a certain amount of DNA knowledge no-one can argue with, but you can be viewed differently if you've come up the ranks.

There's a lot of people who work in the cultural sector who have never made a thing in their lives and they claim to be experts but don't know what it's like to be an artist, and without the artist all this stuff would be nonsense. To trace everything back to the maker is really important.

The notion of power as an ability or capacity to do something also plays a role here. Social psychologists John French and Bertram Raven conducted a study of power in 1959 and identified five bases of power:

1. **Legitimate.** This comes from the belief that a person has the right to make demands, and expect compliance and obedience from others.
2. **Reward.** This results from one person's ability to compensate another for compliance.
3. **Expert.** This is based on a person's superior skill and knowledge.
4. **Referent.** This is the result of a person's perceived attractiveness, worthiness, and right to respect from others.
5. **Coercive.** This comes from the belief that a person can punish others for noncompliance. (mindtools.com: 2012)

They argued that the most effective leaders had a combination of referent and expert power – drawing on their charisma or charm, while still having the technical knowledge or ability. I can see that description fitting many of the leaders within the cultural sector.

It would follow that in order to keep that power base topped up there is a need to keep your expertise topped up which, indicates a need to engage in creative practice in the context of this research.

Through an action research project, David Rooke and William R Torbert identified seven ways of leading, or the seven Transformations of Leadership: Opportunist, Diplomat, Expert, Achiever, Individualist, Strategist, and Alchemist. They described how:

Different leaders exhibit different kinds of action logic – ways in which they interpret their surroundings and act when their power or safety is challenged. (Harvard Business Review: April 2005. p3)

They found in the research is that the largest category of leader was the Expert, although the most successful leader type was the Alchemist, a category that could be described as one with charisma.

When I began working in a local authority I found a real need to validate my theoretical knowledge about arts management and policy and undertook an MA. I think this was because all that I had done to date had been self-taught or learnt through mentors. I had a need to be able to prove that I knew what I was doing, possibly because I was working in a different environment where to be deemed a professional required the academic validation of my competence in management

theory, strategy or project development. It felt as if the skills and competencies I had developed through my creative practice were no longer sufficient in the world I was working within, either for myself in being confident that what I had learnt and was doing were right or good, or for those around me in that I could back up the practice with a strong strategic framework. I can now understand that my desire to do an MA came from an internal need to boost my confidence, and I was struggling with my credibility in a world where your credentials needed to look very different; as such I wanted to be able to prove my expertise in this new context. My background as an artist, and someone from an arts organisation was valuable though in building trust and gaining respect with other artists and arts organisation. By winning their confidence through an ability to talk their language and genuinely understand the issues they were facing, I feel I was far better at my role, and I could achieve a greater level of credibility.

While I agree that there is a confidence to be gained from having someone in a senior position that has an expertise, there is something very valuable about allowing the space for others to shine and share, and there is a risk of knowing too much. An honest approach about how much you know, and an ability to trust in your team or those around you whose knowledge and skills may be better is invaluable in a leader.

What did come through strongly in the research is that credibility is something you have to earn. It's not there for the taking and certainly not something to be complacent about. An element of risk is created by changing jobs or moving cities, or even experimenting with your creative practice. There was a sense of nervousness around the courage it took to take make changes and rebuild or maintain credibility:

I had to earn my credibility with the artists when I moved, not many of them knew who I was. I had to earn their respect.

I don't want to be recognised as a full-time professional artist. I would love people to buy or see my work but I don't have this great need to either be making a living out of it or have this great list of exhibitions... I'm not in that place but I still feel artistic and there's a massive amount of judgement made about you if you don't have that credibility.

The world of theatre has moved on and I was worried I'd produce something quite old-fashioned... I was worried I hadn't kept up with it.

The pay-off for making a change or taking the risk was also evident:

Credibility can be where you stay in a pattern and at a certain point I changed my stitching and had to refresh parts of my credibility which I found very valuable. It was frightening but once you've done it once you really can drop something off

Going back into it and making that show I feel credible with myself again.

### **Findings on proposition 3**

What these findings draw me to conclude is that leaders who engage in creative practice are able to better understand and own their place within the ecology of the cultural sector.

This in turn fosters their own sense of credibility and confidence therefore enhancing their effectiveness. A leader can subsequently utilise this effectiveness and impact on an organisation through their creativity and well-being.

# Proposition 4

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**Organisations are more effective where creative leaders have a high level of well-being as a result of their creative practice.** Thinking or working creatively develops transferable skills which individuals can employ in their roles as leaders, creating stronger organisations and a more effective and happy workforce.

## Creative thinking and skills

There is a subtle difference between making things and being creative. Being creative is an iterative process, a way of thinking of things, never to get to the end as it keeps open the possibilities.

The management academic Professor Jennifer Mueller, from the University of Pennsylvania, undertook research into the perceptions of creative people as leaders in the workplace. Her findings indicated that individuals who expressed more creative ideas were viewed as having less, not more, leadership potential and that coming from a creative background may be prohibitive to their progress.

In addition to visionary and charismatic, people also use words like quirky, unfocused and nonconformist. (Knowledge Wharton 2012)

However, she does also argue that businesses need creativity in their leadership to survive and thrive, citing examples like Apple as an organisation with a track record of nurturing creativity.

Those who have their own creative ideas are better leaders. Those individuals know how to recognize good ideas and are open to them and know how to get creative ideas through the organisation. (Knowledge Wharton 2012)

Apple has demonstrated itself to be an inherently creative organisation, so this is not surprising. My experience of working in an organisation outside of the sector would echo Wharton's findings of negative perceptions. The challenges then for us as creative leaders are how to get a foot in the door and bring our vision and flair with us, wearing it proudly, as the skill set and abilities that we bring are of value to any organisation.

The importance of trying to integrate creative ways of working into management thinking or organisational structure was highlighted throughout the interviews. This really did stitch together the two spheres of thinking and seems to have created more resourceful and effective organisations:

All the reasons for making the building came from an artist-led point of view, but I had to be able to explain that to persuade people to give me money and support.

When I'm working as a sculptor I'll start making something and hit the limitations of the materials, techniques, ability to buy a tool, or need more time. And I realised that relationship is not unlike that of a manager or leader where you want to do something but then have the reality of time, money, people, resources, fundraising – the reality of the world and that is a relationship you have to negotiate.

I've drawn on the very deep learning you have through a dance career. The idea that you learn through failure, the notions and qualities of leadership, the need to take the long approach, team work, discipline... these are the qualities that are very hard to teach – you imbibe them over a longer period of time.

The positive impact of this for the individuals was also evident:

When you know you're dancing through obstacles it's like being on a swing and it's a very rich and satisfying feeling.

This is what has increased my artistic practice, not only as a maker but as a commissioner of other works, as a connector of other artists to come together so they can make, as a connector of ideas, and as someone who is noticing other people and how those other people agitate us which can be fabulously useful.

I'm very good at problem-solving - I enjoy that and I think that's when my creativity comes.

Interviewees enjoyed the two-way benefits that creative practice brought for them on both a personal and organisational level.

### Leadership of people – mentors and the skills of a leader

What has been evidenced by the research are the ways that creativity had been harnessed within organisational structure or practices to enable it to flow around the organisation, supporting its effectiveness, and also allowing individuals to continue to learn and grow and touch into their Element.

John Adair, academic and author on leadership, has talked about an approach to team development, featuring three overlapping circles – team, task and individual. In this scenario it is useful to consider the element of human need, and the balance that is needed to ensure that all aspects are in harmony.

To achieve the common task, to be maintained as a team, and the needs of which individuals as such bring with them by virtue of being human. (Adair: 2010. p22)

The role of the leader in this is to consider the breadth of these needs across all three spheres. However, without paying due care and attention to needs of an individual it is likely that the task – or one could suggest, eventually an organisation – could diminish or fail.

US-based pollsters and consultants Gallup undertook a research project which identified the 12 questions that could be used to identify what employees needed to thrive in their workplace, and to work most effectively. While the questions cover things areas such as awareness of role, equipment, and relationships with co-workers, what is perhaps surprising is that the key finding is:

Talented employees need great managers. (Gallup: 2012)

Within this context the role of the manager is not just about setting out the parameters of a job, and providing initial guidance, but also offering praise and support. What was confirmed by my research is many of the interviewees have cited the importance of a mentor or support structure for them as they have progressed through their careers. Knowing where to go for help or advice,

and having the confidence to do this has undoubtedly been a key aspect of people's development. Indeed, this is something I have benefited from enormously at different points in my career:

An in-house mentor helped me to grow and develop, and I had a great finance person on the board.

I was aided and abetted by a champion and a mentor.

That was like stepping through a door and it showed me how meeting people along the way can be so important.

What helped me was not knowing a lot – clear vision and naivety was a great combination... I didn't even know what the pitfalls were. I knew I wanted to get over there, and there were some very good people who could help me.

The impact that the interviewees felt their creativity has had on their roles as leaders of people was mentioned frequently and sincerely with evidence showing a flexible or creative approach to those relationships:

What the arts can do is help develop an empathy – an awareness of people and how you impact on them... a characteristic of a good leader would be an ability to adapt their style or behaviour in order to best support the person they're dealing with.

It's this light and shadow – how I put my own thoughts sometimes under light or shade. Under light when it needs to be, and under shade when it might get in the way.

There was also a level of care demonstrated for the culture of an organisation, and the professional and personal development opportunities offered:

Try to instil the same kind of practice you have in your studio in your management structure... give people time to experiment, enquire, don't feel you have to use the common practice of arts management.

So many people get jobs on the basis of what they can do and then stop doing it. I'm keen my colleagues don't do that.

This echoes my own experience as I gained more senior roles, and became the director of an organisation, I found I had less time to create and make work. More time was spent in an office, in meetings and spent talking and thinking about how other people could be creative – what projects could be, how we could fund and deliver them, and who could deliver them. I think at this stage my confidence in my ability to create work started to fade. The prospect of getting out materials and making something was a daunting one. It felt as if the reasoning and passion for working in this field was slipping away. For this reason I created a policy for the organisation where staff, all of whom were arts graduates, would take the lead on delivering projects once a year. Though it was a simple policy to establish, the impact was significant with staff enjoying the opportunity to engage creatively with our audiences, as well as having the opportunity to play creatively themselves.

### Authenticity and knowing self

We each have a need to do that which we were "born to do"; A musician must make music, an artist must paint, and a poet must write. (The Guardian Weekend Magazine: 2009. p25)

I heard Chris Smith, former Director of the Clore Leadership Programme, talk about authenticity at Bore Place in 2008 from the perspective of the importance as a leader of knowing yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, and this really struck a chord with me.

I was once asked what makes my heart sing? This was the most valuable question anyone has asked me. It came at a point in my career where I wasn't happy, I was achieving, sort of, but had got fed up and wasn't shining – my spark had gone. I've since worked hard to understand who I am and, referring back to Robinson's theory of the Element – what those values are, and what really matters to me. This has taught me that I'm a better person and a better leader if I'm happy and if I'm being authentic. For me that requires me to do things that feed my need to make and create, and to support others to also find that balance in their lives.

Sarah Weir OBE, moved to the cultural sector from a post as a managing director in the City. She has worked hard to become firmly established as a leader in the sector, and is much respected by her peers. Her breadth of experience in different roles and sectors has brought a depth to her leadership style. She has described how her sense of self has enabled her to be a more effective leader over time:

Looking back, I think I was quite brittle. I certainly didn't want to ask for help... I think I have become more and more clear about myself: my strengths and weaknesses; what I am good at and what I am not; where my pressure points are and how to handle them. I no longer feel the need to know everything as I did many years ago...As a leader you need to know when to make decisions, to see the sometimes hidden opportunities or connections which others cannot. That means not always feeling you have to make everything happen, but keeping an eye out for the moment when your input or insight will help, leading from the front, sometimes from behind. (Cultural Leadership Programme: n.d. p63)

Daniel Goleman, leading thinker on emotional intelligence, described people with a high level of self-awareness as:

Realistic – neither overly self-critical nor naively hopeful. Rather they are honest with themselves about themselves. And they are honest about themselves with others, even to the point of being able to laugh at their own foibles. Self-aware leaders also understand their values, goals and dreams. (Goleman: 2010. p49)

For me these sound like the essential credentials of a leader, but they also feel like essential credentials for someone who is grounded and happy in themselves:

It's not separate, no delineation, absolutely integrated into my life and I'm much happier now than then.

The most brilliant thing for me is that I don't have to say I haven't directed a show for 15 years, I can now say I directed a show six months ago and I'm doing two more next year. It doesn't feel like I've left something behind anymore, it feels like it's there, it's current, and part of the language of my life... It's made me want to write again.

Don't want to work full-time as an artist, I recognise there's lots about my job I love so if I were just an artist I would lose that.

One lives inside the other. I am an artist at my core, always have been, always will be. But I am a cultural leader and that sits around that. Without the core it's me being rather flaky and not performing well... But with one inside the other it works brilliantly.

There's a lot to be said for reinventing yourself, maybe within your own area. It's a recipe for happiness.

Reaching this level of self-awareness isn't always a straightforward process though. For some it has taken a degree of soul-searching and hard work:

Had to learn how to reconnect and that's what I've been frustrated with – I've had to learn how to compartmentalise more.

There's a moment in which I love the energy of the work welling up. Now I have to discover it and dig deeper. It feels harder. On the plus side I have a massive enjoyment about people using the building. From the outside I see their euphoria, and I see them crouching on the sofa and I know they're the same as me, worrying.

Busy wrapping too many things around it, not just being an artist.

I suppose I've always thought of myself as an artist even when I wasn't making.

I now understand it's about authenticity about who you are, your practice and who you surround yourself with.

## **Findings on proposition 4**

The thread that has run through the research is creative practice, and the evidence has shown how it is a need that when it is nurtured can enable someone to find their sense of self, or Element.

In turn this builds the confidence for a leader to become more effective and develop and lead organisations that too engender a sense of creativity and offer a level of care for their staff to develop and sustain their own creative practice.

I would suggest that this can be a cyclical process, with the next generation of leaders evolving their practice and learning from the great examples other creative leaders have already established.

# Conclusion and final thoughts

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The original premise for this research was about career journeys and how many – or few of us – retain our creative practice as a professional career. But as a result of the research and interviews the findings about well-being and authenticity have carried far greater weight, and become the focus of the report. I am aware this partly reflects my own personal journey, but evidence suggests it is a far more fundamental question for us in terms of leadership.

So what are the lessons learnt from this? What can we do to support the creative people in our sector to be the most effective and happy employees or contributors they can be?

How can the impact of our creative natures be fostered? How can we as leaders in the sector harness this creativity and really benefit from its impact?

The answers to some of these come from the positive examples of good practice modelled by the interviewees:

- Recognising and celebrating the creativity inherent in us as creative leaders
- Understanding what our needs are as creative leaders and recognising the signs or triggers that indicate when we are out of balance
- Finding ways to sustain our sense of self by engaging with creative practice to ensure we are in our Element
- Being able to self-assess levels of well-being and understanding what is needed on an individual basis to support this
- Utilising the transferable skills that creativity can offer, such as creative thinking, in the workplace
- Creating environments that encourage creativity in thinking and working practices
- Understanding different types or volumes of leadership, and modelling these to allow others in an organisation to take the space or lead
- Being aware of the breadth and depth of skills and experiences that people may bring to their jobs, and how these can impact on a person's sense of self
- Recognising the value of mentor, or support structure, to ourselves and others
- Developing effective personal and professional development programmes that support individuals' well-being by encouraging them to pursue what puts them in balance
- Remaining authentic, honest, and respecting who we are as individuals

The research indicates the power of supporting someone's creative passion can bring benefits to an organisation and that there is a real value to knowing and understanding ourselves. As described by the interviewees, it can take time and a degree of courage to pause your journey. What you find may surprise, delight, engage, or terrify you. The magic happens when you engage with what is there and nurture it so it can play a full role in what you do and how you lead.

And this, in turn, can make the journey much richer for us all.

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## Interviewees:

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Deborah Bull, Creative Director, Royal Opera House, dancer and writer

Siobhan Davies, Founder and Artistic Director, Siobhan Davies Dance Company, choreographer and dancer

Alan Dix, Founder of 509 Arts, Consultant and theatre director

Colin Lawson, Director, Royal College of Music, and musician

Bev Morton, Founder/Director, The Art of Possibility with a heart set on living

Dr Eve Poole, Associate, Ashridge Business School

Sarah Preece, Executive Director, Battersea Arts Centre, and visual artist

Samenua Seshar, Writer

