

# Aesthetic Leadership

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*Maya Lin, from the film A Strong Clear Vision*

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Aesthetic leadership concerns the manner in which artists, and other aesthetic workers, perform leadership functions within groups, communities and culture, often outside established positions of authority. Aesthetics has generally been concerned with questions of beauty and the notion of universal tastes. Kant argued that human response to art is disinterested, which led to an ongoing debate about the relationship between aesthetics, judgement and visual culture. Others have argued that there is a distinct aesthetic realm, which allows people to respond to beauty in terms of colour and form. Aesthetic leadership implies expanding the notion of leadership to include aesthetic endeavour. In this sense, aesthetic leadership also connotes attainment beyond the insularity of particular aesthetic fields, such as art or literature, by gaining attention within a broader cultural or political arena.

Recently, artists have been called upon for aesthetic leadership in management – as leaders, practitioners, visionaries, and inspirers (e.g., Austin

and Devin, 2002; Hatch, Kostera and Kozminski, 2004; Schroeder, 2005). Thus, aesthetic leadership need not refer merely to creativity or vision; rather aesthetic leadership may emerge from insight into cultural, political, or interpersonal issues, aesthetic statements on social injustice or crucial cultural concerns, or, at a more general level, providing alternative ways of seeing problems, history, or received wisdom. In this way, aesthetic leadership may either complement or contradict more traditional leadership forms, such as politics, religion or management. It may be that aesthetic leadership draws some of its power from the position of the aesthetic producer outside conventional leadership positions.

Well-known examples include painter Jacques-Louis David, whose famous work, *The Death of Marat* (1793) catalyzed support for the French revolution by shrewdly mixing fine art with propaganda. During the bloody 18<sup>th</sup> century revolution, David reorganized the Académie, an important national institution, critical for authenticating and disseminating cultural and political opinions and trends, and he produced many spectacular propagandistic events, eventually being imprisoned for his political views. Another iconic aesthetic leader, Nobel prize winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, drew attention to repression in 20<sup>th</sup> century Poland, and helped spark the Solidarity movement's success. A final example concerns the Asian-American

sculptor and architect Maya Lin, whose haunting Vietnam Veteran's memorial in Washington D.C. helped a nation – especially Vietnam veterans and their families – begin to come to terms with a tremendously debilitating and divisive epoch in American history. Lin won a national competition with her austere black marble proposal for the memorial, which listed the names of each American soldier who died during the Vietnam War. Lin, as an undergraduate university student at the time, steadfastly refused to compromise her aesthetic principles during a bitter battle over her minimalist design, as she held to her strong, clear vision, as described in an Academy Award winning documentary of the rancorous debates about how the war should be memorialized (Mock 1995).

Research and thinking about aesthetic leadership spans several disciplines, and often encompasses management studies, art history and sociology. Aesthetic leadership represents one strand within the growing field of aesthetics and management. Stephen Taylor and Hans Hansen provide a useful review of this emergent field, focused on aesthetic inquiry (2005). In the field of organization studies, Rafaël Ramirez's *Beauty of Social Organization* inspired many scholars in an aesthetic turn (1991). *Organization and Aesthetics* by Antonio Strati (1999) has become well respected, its contribution resting on applying aesthetics to understanding organizations from a psychologically

informed organizational theory point of view. Heather Höpfl and Stephen Linstead's edited volume, *The Aesthetics of Organization* (2000), offers a useful, well-conceived introduction to the issues surrounding aesthetic leadership. Guillet de Monthoux's *The Art Firm: Aesthetic Management and Metaphysical Marketing from Wagner to Wilson* provides several case studies of aesthetic leadership, providing a useful genealogy of aesthetics within the economy (2004). Guillet de Monthoux suggests that aesthetic leadership occurs in the liminal zones between management and art, structure and chaos, or work and play.

Aesthetic leadership may emerge from leadership qualities such as charisma, interpersonal skill, and vision, yet remain elusive, and difficult to categorize or cultivate. Often, aesthetic leaders have trained in areas somewhat distant from typical leadership or management disciplines – literature, art, or theatre, for example – and this training may offer a capacity for innovative insight (see for example Schroeder, 2005). However, creativity, insight or vision alone remains insufficient; aesthetic leadership requires a rare combination of desire, determination, and drive, along with a prodigious aesthetic gift acknowledged by a community, culture or group willing to embrace the aesthetic dimension.

## References

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