

# The artistry creating

## what if

**the best artists are also  
leaders, and the best  
leaders are also artists?**

Kevin Asbjörnson poses this question to a group of executives, managers, and professionals from all fields who are gathered around a grand piano at The Banff Centre on a fall afternoon. They are there attending The Banff Centre program "Leading Innovation"; part of that experience is an innovative leadership development session entitled The Artistry of Leadership™. Leaders and artists face many of the same challenges, asserts Asbjörnson, and great leadership involves not only skill, but artistry. Asbjörnson, a composer, contemporary pianist, and recording artist who also has an international MBA and 10 years of international business experience, is uniquely positioned to draw connections between the seemingly disparate worlds of art and leadership.

Circling the grand piano, around which the attendees are seated, Asbjörnson engages his audience in informal dialogue to introduce the analogy between artists and leaders. Then he asks them to listen with intention: he plays one of his original contemporary piano solos and the audience is asked to notice which images arise in their minds, then decide what title they would give this song.

Asbjörnson moves to the piano, and a powerful, articulate musical composition pours out – music that is emotionally expressive yet highly crafted. It pours literally into the laps of the participants who sit around the piano. They listen raptly, clearly affected by the music that has entered the room like a royal presence. When it ends, one participant reports seeing an image of a young humpback whale swimming away from its mother and coming back. Another imagines a paper bag drifting against a brick wall. One participant suggests a title: "Birds in Blue Octave." Within minutes of arriving, workshop members have listened deeply and begun to generate creative responses to what they've heard. They are practicing the artistic competencies of reflection, insight, and intentional listening.

*Think of your desk as a piano*, Asbjörnson suggests, observing that as a composer, "I could just stay back here on my piano bench making music, but then I would never know what my audience was hearing." He asks, "What happens to a leader who never asks for



By Jane Hilberry

# of leadership :<sup>TM</sup> meaningful connections

feedback on the message he or she is putting out?" Participants toss out responses: "Your isolation limits your ability to think in different ways." "You don't know if people are getting it." "You get disconnected from the people you're trying to lead." Effective leaders, then, must get out from behind their desks and discover what Asbjörnson calls the *actual vs. intended impact of one's voice*, the first of five points that he'll highlight in his hour-long session in Leading Innovation.

"People don't get a fresh metaphor for their work every day," observes Chuck Palus, co-author of *The Leader's Edge: Six Creative Competencies for Navigating Complex Challenges* (see page 32). Amid the worn-out sports metaphors that dominate leadership discourse, to think of your desk as a piano is a radical change. "Who knew that you can share a piano?" Palus asks,

hall to listen to classical music. The business realm is also formal, so this setting alerts participants to the fact that what they're about to undertake is on the same level as their business enterprises. Asbjörnson spends the rest of the time, Funk observes, "deconstructing the formal world he set up. He now sets up and moves into a very human space. We not only get informal, we get vulnerable." But this is a serious informality, one that serves to connect participants with their humanness. "Rather than ice-breakers and fun games that give us a buzz, Kevin's work helps us access deep character," notes Funk. Another authority in the field of leadership development, Lynne Levesque, author of *Breakthrough Creativity: Achieving Top Performance Using the Eight Creative Talents*, comments on how quickly Asbjörnson moves people to probing questions: "Within one hour,

"It was the first time we've released the plan to each and every associate in the division," she comments. Because they wanted to write a document that could be easily understood by anyone in the corporation, the team produced a crisper document, "and the associates embraced it from the moment we released it." Cathy Wilson, VP Sales and Marketing/NPD Group, Chicago, also notes that participation in Kevin's module at The Banff Centre "made a huge impact on me and on the way I will do things going forward."

Asbjörnson's module in The Banff Centre's Leading Innovation program incorporates the unique self-assessment survey, Change Style Indicator, to explore the three Change Styles and the ways in which they correlate with stages of the artist's creative process. As Chris Musselwhite, Ph.D., President, Discovery Learning, comments, "Great artists have to be able to conceptualize, but must also make choices about what they will actually create." Successful artists cultivate the flexibility to work in all styles, in order to see projects through

## of your desk as a piano

explaining that "if you can share a piano," as Asbjörnson does in his workshops, "you can have that kind of dialogue across your desk. It's not just 'sit there and listen to what I have to say.'"

In addition to knowing how to listen, leaders who are highly effective have rich character, points out Colin Funk, Director of Creativity for Leadership Development at The Banff Centre. Skill, knowledge, and character all are required, but character is "tough stuff to lay out in a PowerPoint presentation." That's where artistry enters the equation. "Artists connect us with the human story, taking us well beyond the skill and knowledge set," notes Funk, "the best leaders do the same."

Asbjörnson leads people to that deeper level by a route that invokes the formal aspects of music only to dismantle them afterwards, Funk points out. Assembling around the grand piano creates an air of formality, as if one were in a concert

incredibly, he brings you to deep insights."

Yolan Williams, Senior Staff Consultant at Verizon Communications, Inc., observes that insights come quickly using this approach because music is the vehicle: "Music incites the affective domain, and we're more receptive to learning."

But the story doesn't end with insight. Action is also required. As Williams points out, Asbjörnson's work "provokes you to both think about and do."

Tammy Edwards, Director of Program Management Office, Sprint Communications IT division, has put Asbjörnson's communication principles into practice in the workplace. Shortly after she attended an Artistry of Leadership<sup>TM</sup> session, Edwards says, "it was time to start the annual planning process, and because of what Kevin taught us, I approached the planning session totally differently." Instead of developing a strategic plan directed at executives, the planning team wrote it with all of Sprint's associates in mind.

from conception to execution to completion. Ideally, leaders develop a similar flexibility to move among styles. Astute leaders will also be aware of their own Change Style preferences and hire others who can complement their strengths.

Asbjörnson's pioneering work provides leaders an interactive stage to practice and expand the leadership competencies of Inspiring Others, Facilitating Innovation, Creative Thinking, Listening with Intention, and Balancing Action with Reflection. Contact The Banff Centre for information on programs featuring Kevin Asbjörnson's Artistry of Leadership<sup>TM</sup>, or visit Asbjörnson's Web site at [Kevin.Asbjornson@PianoOne.com](mailto:Kevin.Asbjornson@PianoOne.com) or [www.ArtistryofLeadership.com](http://www.ArtistryofLeadership.com).

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