

The Art of Leadership

Tina Dörffer Hones Managers' Leadership Skills Applying Art as an Asset

art
DAS KUNSTMAGAZIN

One person says “beetles”; another chimes in “chaos”. A woman in gray wrap dress associates the object with “a treasure”. Yet another person, in a red jacket, thinks of a crumpled-up space blanket. A group of executives sitting in a circle is staring at the floor, which is covered in relatively small, glittering, gold-colored “nuggets”.

Tina Dörffer, who has

invited the participants to her introductory seminar called “Art of Leadership”, explains “It’s an artwork ...”, and she encourages them to employ their power to associate. As a former BCG management consultant who commenced her career at the European Commission and later worked for the Bertelsmann Foundation and other organizations, Dörffer knows the mechanisms and

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automatisms of large corporations. The Harvard Kennedy School in Cambridge, MA, was the venue where she developed her training methodology.

There are numerous seminars and workshops at which executives are supposed to acquire awareness and creative thinking from the visual arts. In some, artists explain to the managers how they come up with their ideas - and sometimes the participants even have to pick up a paintbrush! In Tina Dörffer’s sessions, they regard a work of art on the floor.

In this particular case, the work is a scaled-down replica of a floor piece by the Cuban artist Félix González Torres (1957-1996). It suits Dörffer’s purposes perfectly because it is a confounding work whose meaning is anything but manifest.

The participants fumble around in a fog. Is it a grave - or perhaps a pile of pills? The attendees are well acquainted with training seminars; however, none of them has

ever had to deliberate bonbons. Dörffer passes on information about the artist and his work to the convened in carefully dosed dribs and drabs. When they finally learn that the work of art that looks as if it’s composed of bonbons wrapped in gold-colored foil actually is bonbons wrapped in gold-colored foil, some of their facial expressions go slack. An exasperated blond-haired manager complains to the group, “This isn’t getting us anywhere!” And when Ms. Dörffer prompts the participants to eat one of the bonbons, she encounters bewildered gazes. “A work of art you’re supposed to eat!?” blusters the blonde, who has now gone ballistic. “What the hell makes it art?”, he demands furiously - but he will not find out this evening. At this event, art is a means to an end. Through the medium of the discussion of the candy, the participants enhance their understanding of their own social and leadership behavior. What the artist was trying to achieve with his art is a matter



A The seminar leader and former management consultant Tina Dörffer

< First the managers interpret the scaled-down replica of a floor piece by Félix González Torres; then they eat it!

of secondary significance.

In the second gathering, they learn that the roles they had assumed during the brainstorming session followed a typical pattern. There's always at least one skeptic - and one know-it-all. Some people jump in with both feet; others prefer to sit on the sidelines. They also learn that there are "silent factions" at every meeting, i.e., all participants bring their own individual backgrounds and hidden agendas.

They hear, too, that one makes more progress through questions than assertions, and that a certain demanding level of stress must be maintained in order to promote productive results. They also learn that a secure space is necessary in which thoughts can be freely expressed without fear.

These findings, arrived at by observing art, are perhaps nothing new, but they are quickly forgotten in everyday life unless, as Dörffer sees it, one connects the insights with an experience that makes a lasting impression. An example is being confronted

with something not readily understood and - in an unguarded environment - simply saying whatever crosses your mind. Tina Dörffer terms the procedure "experiential learning", which she also offers in in-house training programs. Upon request the specific agenda can be developed using the client's own corporate collection.

The above-mentioned blond manager is impressed. He stared at the glittering bonbons for nearly three hours wondering what the whole thing was about - this situation that he now realizes has been ingrained in his memory.

"Now forget the whole theory" Ms. Dörffer requests with all seriousness. "At the next meeting, simply think about candy, and this evening's experiential learning will be right there again."

// Sandra Danicke, translation by Joe Greenman