Art as Leadership and the Art of Leadership OR

“All I want you to remember is: CANDY”

In “Art as Leadership and the Art of Leadership”, contemporary art is used as experiential encounter and metaphor for exploring the challenges of leadership. Leadership learning is transposed into the business and organizational context. The artwork provides a key to cognitive and experiential knowledge about leadership. It serves as a bridge from knowledge to action and makes leadership frameworks uniquely available in real time within a business or organizational reality.

The artwork "Untitled" (Placebo – Landscape for Roni), 1993 by the Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–96) serves as the starting point. Known for his minimal installations and sculptures, Gonzalez-Torres used ordinary materials such as stacks of paper, candy, light bulbs, and bead curtains. The arrangement of a candy piece by the collector who owns the work is flexible—spread out like a carpet, piled in a heap, in the corner of a room or out in the middle. For the artist, viewer participation played an essential role. Gonzalez-Torres invited the viewer to take part in his artwork by taking a piece of candy—or a piece of printed paper from the “paper stack” works—with the stipulation that the collector (often a public institution, like a museum) may replenish the supply to an “ideal weight” of candy, or an “ideal height” of paper. “Placebo” not only relates to “anything lacking intrinsic remedial value, being given or done to replace another,” it also shares a root with the medieval Latin word “placere” (to please)—here, the future-tense form “I shall please”—and is also invoked in the Roman Catholic vespers for the dead. The gradual disappearance of the candy is a poignant metaphor for the process of dying and fading way, one with particular significance in Gonzalez-Torres’s oeuvre. Indeed, it is no coincidence that some of the candy installations are designed to have an “ideal weight” that is equivalent to the body weight of a specific person, or of a couple—most famously, the artist and his partner, Ross, who died of AIDS in 1991. (Gonzalez-Torres would also die of AIDS in 1996.)


1 In his lifetime, Felix Gonzales-Torres’s work was represented by Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, and was shown nationally and internationally at many museums and galleries. A retrospective was organized by the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 1995, and posthumous exhibitions have included the Venice Biennale in 2007, and in permanent collections such as The Museum of Modern Art, New York and the Hoffmann Collection, Berlin.

2 Nancy Spector, Felix Gonzalez-Torres (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1995), page 106
The key part of the sixty-minute exercise is to use a discussion of Gonzalez-Torres’s art as a case-in-point situation combined with concepts of the adaptive leadership framework. In this exercise, participants gather around a replica of “Untitled” (Placebo – Landscape for Roni) by Gonzalez-Torres. It consists of an arrangement of several pounds of candy wrapped in golden cellophane, spread out like a carpet (see figure 2). The group is invited to assemble around the replica, and to observe and share their impressions. To get the discussion going, the author prompts participants with a few basic questions: “What do you see? What is going on?” Focusing on the gold-wrapped candy, participants utter words such as “simply beautiful,” “wonderful.” The group observes further. Silence. Some people seem curious; others appear unsettled by the void of the unknown, or perhaps by the open encounter with an art piece (replica). In small increments, the group is given pieces of information and posed questions by the facilitator: “How would it change your perception if you knew that the artist invited you to take away a piece of candy? Or that...the installation can be arranged in any form, shape or setting...? Or that the amount of candy in some works equals the body weight of the artist and his partner Ross...? Or that the piece is called “Untitled" (Placebo – Landscape for Roni)?”

Different groups start to crystalize. One faction is openly curious, engaged and asking questions. Members of another group occasionally contribute with deep knowledge about contemporary art. Others, in a third faction, express their discomfort by ferociously unwrapping and hurling the naked candy back into the pile, angrily exclaiming, “This is bullshit!” Or, somewhat more productively, they raise the question: “Why is this art? At least Da Vinci knew to paint!” Last but not least, a fourth group simply tunes out, checking their Blackberries or going to the restroom, or test the group provocatively asking “Who else has tuned out?!” Thirty minutes can be a long time—a painfully long time—to look at and discover a work of art. And yet, within this situation it is possible for emotions and aesthetics to move the observers and free them of pre-conditioned thinking. Dynamics unfold. At the end of the first, interactive part, participants are asked to sit down to start the debriefing.

The debriefing is a vital bridge from experiential learning to a cognitive approach to the underlying leadership framework (see figure 3). It provides the necessary structure for sustainably anchoring the experiential learning with a cognitive map. Key aspects are what is on, under, who is around and at the periphery of the table.

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On the table, visible and beautiful, is the gold-wrapped candy, an everyday object. We might call this the factual or technical part, the mere description of the art piece: people can take candy; it will steadily disappear. We could even assign the “art piece” a certain dollar value, to give it a kind of factual economic reality. Drilling deeper into the issue and looking under the table, the participants discover the root cause or adaptive challenge of the art piece. Amongst others, it is about decay, dying, the problematic of individuals and a whole community suffering from AIDS in the early 1990s. The image of body weight fading away is often as striking to the audience as the varied meanings of “placebo.” Around the table different groups or factions crystallize: the expert faction—knowing all about the art piece; the participant group—engaged, questioning, open; the op-out or bystander group—tuned-out, disengaged in silence as a form of open absenteeism; and last but not least a group of saboteurs—simply trying to take apart the piece, or loudly voicing their disapproval. But also on the periphery of the table voices of constituents are indirectly influencing the debate. One participant suddenly steps forward in the midst of the turmoil, and — with a thoughtful and striking voice — shares how deeply the piece resonated with him. This was exactly about what happened in his community of gay men.

The debriefing maps out each of these different perspectives and factions. The image of the on/under/around/periphery framework is visually diagrammed in a power point presentation against the background of the familiar candy spread (see figure 3).

Switch to the next slide. The same framework diagram is shown, but on a different background: a beautiful mahogany boardroom. The audience is challenged with the hypothesis that the dynamics they experienced earlier in the session are exactly the same in the boardroom of any organization or business, while discussing a budget or strategy. Murmurs and whispers are heard.

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This framework is then applied to the business and organizational reality: on the table is the visible, often the technical issue—a budget, a strategy on the agenda. Under the table is what is really going on, the root cause or adaptive challenge, often hidden beneath the surface facts. This can range from political to operational issues—for example, an organization that is incapable of operating due to an oversized board of directors, on which every donor has been given a seat, but which lacks a clear, implementable mission. Around the boardroom table the expert faction is one party. This faction knows all about the particular issues and is at times able to communicate remarkable expertise, but at other times may be imprisoned in its own jargon. Another easily identified party is the participant faction, taking part by engaging actively and asking open, genuine questions about the topic. Third is the saboteur faction, which tries to take an issue off the table for its own reasons: “Haven’t we already discussed this in our last meeting?” And last, but not least, the bystander or opt-out faction, present in every meeting and organization, which has tuned out completely while checking their Blackberries, playing on their iPhones, leaving to go to the bathroom or simply skipping the meeting altogether. On the periphery of the boardroom are the “boss” back in the office, the shareholders, and the board members, all of whom will soon ask, incredulously, how anyone, having taken part in this issue or meeting, could have agreed to or negotiated these conditions.

Collapsing these two settings—art experience and boardroom—the facilitator culminates the session by asking the participants to forget everything theoretical taught before. “All I want you to remember is candy.” Next time participants are in a business meeting, observing the various dynamics and factions emerge and unfold around them, candy is the only reference to bear in mind. “Candy? How about leadership?” asks one irritated participant. The answer is simple, even if not evident at first sight: the piece of candy serves as a key to memory and knowledge. By remembering “candy,” one can unlock this space of cognitive and experiential knowledge and actually tap into it in real time, as the events are unfolding. It is much better than just passively downloading cognitive knowledge as taught by someone else. “Candy” becomes a stumbling-block reminder. It’s like trying to remember the next morning a thought you had the night before—you are more likely to recall the thought if you put a book or some other stumbling-block object in front of your bed, thereby attaching the thought to this object. “Candy” becomes the glue between cognitive and experiential knowledge, and the bridge from knowledge to action. In this spirit, the session closes with an invitation for the participants to take home as much candy as they want in zip-lock bags. Set on the office desk, the candies are not only decorative, they are also a daily reminder of this lesson, of what leadership is about: observing what is going on, understanding the issue’s technical face and adaptive root cause, noticing the
different factions and roles, and lastly, by asking questions and mobilizing people, providing leadership. The session closes with a quote from the artist Felix Gonzalez Torres:

"I need the public to complete the work. I ask the public to help me, to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in. I tend to think of myself of as a theater director who is trying to convey some ideas by reinterpreting the notion of the division of roles: author, public and director."¹⁵

Next time you go to a museum or gallery and find an artwork inaccessible or off-putting, maybe it’s worthwhile to give it a second chance. Curiosity: isn’t this what both art and leadership are about?

Figure 5: Photos and graphics by the author.

This class is being taught by Tina Doerffer, MPA, among others, as a session in the Executive Education “Art and Practice of Leadership,” and as study group for graduate students at the Harvard Center for Public Leadership. Tina@Doerffer.com, www.tinadoerffer.com