



**Age of  
Artists**

Interview

# **Philippe Rixhon**

London/Dresden  
July 31, 2014



This text represents a transcribed and copy-edited version by Melissa A. Visintin from January 10th; 2015. The interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy on July 31, 2014 over phone.

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## Introduction

“Impoliteness means challenging any ideas and convention.”

Philippe Rixhon, thought leader at the junctions of art, business and technology says you cannot manage innovation. Innovation isn't about management; it is about creating an environment that nurtures innovation. This speaks to why corporations repeatedly try to manage innovation and repeatedly fail and why some large conglomerates are maybe better off not even trying. As provocative as this viewpoint may sound the same as exciting are the insights, perspectives and stories Philippe provided during the extensive interview Age of Artists was able to conduct with him. Supported by decades of practice and scientific research in the creative sectors of art, engineering, technology, leadership and business Philippe talks about his experiences through stories and anecdotes that make learning about creativity in business a fun experience.

Note: Throughout the conversation we reference two documents, a presentation on creative leadership and a paper on innovation leadership: best practices from theatre creators. Both can also be found on our page.

## Interview

**AoA:** What is your background and experience at the intersection of business, engineering and the arts?

**Philippe Rixhon:** All of that happened through a series of happy accidents. I had my first contact with the arts when I was 14, in secondary school. My school engaged with professional actors and dancers, the elite of the Belgian art scene. I did not envision any type of career in the arts at the time, but I was captivated by how those people were working together - the team spirit of the theatre and dance companies. What attracted me, even though I was only 14, was the way they worked, more than the thing they were doing. That ambiance was captivating.

I completed secondary school in the humanities. I wanted to enter the engineering school, which was quite a challenge if you had done only Latin and Greek. I did one year of mathematics preparation. I started the engineering school, and utterly failed. I failed among others because I was not excited by the way engineering was taught in that university. My tremendous luck was that they changed their teaching method that year. I reapplied to the same university. The entire system was new - it was more practical and based on teamwork. I did very well under this new scheme of engineering teaching in Louvain-la-Neuve. Parallel to my engineering studies, I studied philosophy and got an MBA. I came to where I am now because of a series of accidents - and all those accidents were linked with teamwork.

I became team member, one little cog in a huge wheel of people preparing the Global Positioning System. That was an amazing experience because I could see exactly where my little cog was, where I sat on the huge wheel, and the network of institutions. It was not one institution doing the job, but several interrelated, and

each institution had a specific scope. I was working at the Royal Observatory of Belgium, with astronomers. Their job was astronomy and they were working with outside mathematicians who were doing work for outside institutions. That was very interesting learning.

I did my military service, again in a team, doing great things at the top of IT.

And then I had a “classical” career. Soon, I received a PC on my desk and was obsessed with the possibility of putting a cable between a large mainframe and a small PC to avoid having to re-enter data. That’s the moment I decided to do something about it.

AoA: Did you leave your company in order to do so?

Philippe Rixhon: I left after one year, because they told me I could become a bright star at the company if I stayed, but I should not be bothered with IT as – they said – it had no future. IT had a tremendous future, but I didn’t know at that time. So in 1983 I created my company, and I’m still running it to today. During those 31 years, I only worked for third parties. Sometimes I was an employee of other companies like Zühlke Engineering, a top engineering company in Switzerland, and Accenture.

AoA: So what happened?

That’s maybe the crucial moment I became an “collaborative innovator”, because it was my problem to find the people to help me succeed. I found a product that was originally meant to connect a mainframe to a PC, but was abandoned at that time. I was convinced that it was close. I thought maybe it was abandoned because something was faulty in the system, which was a mix of hardware and software. I came close to finding the mistake, and with the help of a different company we fixed the product and realized the first connection between a mainframe

and a PC. I continued that style of work; I was always looking for new ways to do things.

The first big thing I did was a complete computer integrated manufacturing solution. It was realized with three different types of computers that covered all the needs of a factory. Then I started to publish because I was invited to do so. You have seen one or two of my articles, but normally I'm not a writer. If I write an article, it's because a good friend of mine asked me to. That's how I started to publish my results 30 years ago. And when you start publishing, more people start asking you to do so, that's what happens with high-tech innovation.

11 years ago, I decided to continue that type of work, but instead of being primarily concerned with high tech, I wanted to be primarily concerned with the performing arts. To do that, I went back to school and studied acting, set design and directing.

AoA: Do you think that innovation was in your DNA because you engaged yourself so early with the arts or is it the success with the connection between mainframe and personal computer that encouraged you to do more?

Philippe Rixhon: Well, I'm definitely not an expert of DNA or genetics, but some months ago, I was wondering who in my family was always trying new things? I found an uncle who's still alive and few others who were really doing and trying new things; people who were engaging in teamwork and breaking patterns of how things are "usually" done. What struck me is that very early I've been a member of teams. I was a Cub and then a Scout. I joined that organization when I was 9 and I left when I was 18. Most of what we did was mainly teamwork and problem solving, like cooking food or building a tent. Reflecting back, those were tremendous lessons for me - the work, the leadership and doing new things together, I've been doing that all my life.

If I came back to art because I was exposed to it at a young age? That could be true. When artistic companies try to build new audiences, they put importance on reaching out to young people, thinking they will build the organization for the future. In my family, my mom, my aunt and my sister are amateur artists. Yes, I grew up with the arts, not as a principle profession of the family, but as a very important secondary occupation.

AoA: You told me when we met earlier that you are planning a Shakespeare project for 2016. What is the direction of your company and your work, going forward?

Philippe Rixhon: If I look at the company, in 1983 when it was created, it was exclusively high tech. Then, in 1991, it continued to deal with high tech, but started to deal with business, not necessarily linked to high tech. In 2003, I did the transition to the arts, high tech and business. Almost everything we are doing, and that includes my associates, is always at the junction of art, business and technology.

Currently, I am doing a project at that junction. My first role in this adventure was to translate a Dutch play with a team of English actors. My next role in this project is to be one of the co-producers. We have a team of artists: a sound artist, a stage director, actors for the artistic part; and also co-producers. The co-producers and I are facing a financial and commercial challenge, because subsidies are reduced now. We want to produce in Flanders and tour in English-speaking countries. We have a high-tech element with the sound artist, a German fellow who is currently doing a PhD at the University of Manchester in acousmatic music. This is a new domain of acoustics, sound and music creation. Even for that project, high tech, art and business are together.

AoA: Regarding some of the pieces you have written or your presentations about art, innovation and business leadership I

would like to understand the meaning of some of your key points. Many of the things you describe are things a person can do: the action, making, acting; but what about the thinking aspect?

Philippe Rixhon: The presentation was a lecture I gave in Utrecht, for a friend of mine who is teaching art management and human resources. He asked me to give a lecture from a practitioner's point of view. I had to put the story into context so the students could see where I was coming from. I started with the governance, which is an important issue for artistic companies as well as business companies. I wanted to clarify and show where you are more a project leader, an operational leader, what is the domain of business administration, of governance, etc. By doing that on a slide, you can see that those are all linked to resources and time. The left part of the slide, which is about innovation, is outside of time [constraints]. I believe that you cannot push innovation through time, because there are too many things happening in the innovation process that are outside your own scope of control. That is the original concept of the first slide in my lecture on human resource management for art managers.

Parallel to that lecture, I was asked to speak about the innovation process in big business. I was in a discussion with choreographers, and one of them delivered a keynote speech in New York on the art of collaboration. Those were topics I was discussing when I created that slide deck, it's about managerial theory.

In the second concept, I started to distinguish between individual and contextual forces. I had a conversation with someone who deeply understood the distinction between passion and dedication. The thing about passion, a soft factor, is that it becomes an attitude. Dedication comes at one moment from a decision to dedicate oneself to something, and I think it's conscious. The article I wrote about lessons learned from theatre directors was about self-sacrifice. We said dedication occurs when you give up your personal ambition for a cause. There is not a line between

yourself and the objective. Many people are in their own way, they are their own obstacles to serve their cause. If there is a team member who thinks they are more important than the thing, the cause, the project will fail. The thing has to be what motivates you, and it cannot be your career, a profit or your reputation - the total strength of a team comes when all the people give up their personal ambitions to realize the project.

I was discussing and reflecting on the question: Is it the role of a large company to innovate or to produce affordable, reliable products and services? Big companies mean most of the time a pyramid organization and "careers". One of the motivations of people in large companies is "career". And the joke is, once you enter a large company, your career is over because you've almost reached the end-point. If you follow a career, then a career is about you, and everything you do is limited to you and a career. You can't have a career in a small entity because there's no way up, but in large companies you can. I feel that small entities are more conducive to being focused on WHAT you can DO, not WHO you can BE.

We were convinced that you cannot manage innovation, so innovation isn't about management; it's about creating an environment that nurtures innovation. There's a slide called Creative Leadership, and there are 4 terms within circles that were defined by two choreographers. The words that came to them had to do with attitude. It's the whole thing - the play, the whole.

AoA: What does "impoliteness" mean on that slide?

Philippe Rixhon: Impoliteness is contrary to political correctness. Political correctness in the domain of innovation is a handicap. You have the right to be impolite with people and things.

AoA: Our research shows that critique is very important, but that equally important is that critique is directed to the thing, and not the person.

Philippe Rixhon: If we start to be rude to people personally, that team wouldn't last long. That's not what I'm speaking about, being aggressive towards other people. Impoliteness means challenging any ideas and convention. It's refusing systematically to do something a certain way because it has "always been done that way."

AoA: What does bio-logic [on your slide] mean?

Philippe Rixhon: It is about mechanical thinking as opposed to biological thinking, and it is important to many things. For example, I'm working on a project that is planning a Centre for the Arts, and we have to think about the building being made for humans. It's not primarily about mechanics; it's about how you feel in the building. Those buildings are sketched and computed mechanically. But when we integrate more natural things like life and the movement of people, we can make a totally new type of building that is more conducive to togetherness; we make decisions that aren't mechanically obvious.

AoA: The second-to last step [on your slide] is about tension and conflict.

Philippe Rixhon: There isn't any meaning in the sequence of the terms, that's not the intention. We are sure that innovation will not come out of an environment where everyone is agreeing with everything. If there is no tension, nothing new will come out of it.

AoA: Dedication, Passion and Inspiration – would it be OK to say it is linked to “commitment” in business?

Philippe Rixhon: If it is committed to the thing and not to you, the company, or the customer, yes. Many years ago, I was working in Telco mainly motivated by the projects, not the suppliers or the customers; that wasn't the case of most people. They were taking the side of the client or the supplier, but not of the projects. During a project, something amazing happened to me: at one point the project was going very poorly, with tremendous delays, and I was the leader on the supplier side. There was a huge rift between supplier and client, precipitated by my bosses. A week after that huge clash, the client came to my company, and they said that they would remove their project leader on their side, and not replace him. They asked me to be also the project leader on their side, and it seemed like it would not work, to be the project leader of the supplier and the client sides, but it did. The client suggested that, because what motivated me to do that project was the project itself, and not the players on either side. After all that, the project went extremely successfully. I was reporting to my boss, and to my client's bosses. That is the best example I have about this concept and what happened because I was motivated exclusively by the project, not by my position at the supplier.

At one time I was an advisor for all Telco companies in Switzerland, and they trusted me that I wouldn't share delicate information among them, but they also insisted that the members of my teams couldn't work for two companies at the same time. What motivates me is the thing. I could do the best for two different projects, and not from the point of view of each customer or supplier, but for the projects themselves. I am convinced more and more that this is a crucial component to innovation.

Dedication and self-sacrifice are not really about suffering or being a martyr, they are about priorities, and giving up personal ambition. It is not an accident, it is something that you decide, to give up your personal ambition to a cause.

I did an MBA, and there was a course about human resources, that's when I discovered Maslow's hierarchy of needs. At the top of the pyramid, it is about self-actualization: you, not a family or a cause. Years later, I found an unfinished article by Maslow where he started to write about transcendence. This struck me because it was the explanation about why an artist is motivated about something other than himself. I started to share this with others, and we concluded that this was the missing piece. The thing about being a transcender is that it is not a comfortable place to be, and I am not sure someone chooses to be one. I do not know if I can say I tend to be one, I do not specifically choose to be motivated about the project rather than about the players - that is not conscious. I do not know how the attitude I have comes to fruition since it is not conscious, but I observe how it works.

When you take the liberty to just focus on the thing, you do transcend past money, house, etc. You have to have freedom and liberty to do what is required.

If we look at the topics of Creative Process and Creative Leadership (slides 3 and 5), I speak about why we need liberty. We need it because of time and altruistic motives. Altruistic motives are directly related to transcendence. You start to do something for others, outside yourself. That is a clear relationship between liberty and transcendence. Recently, I was wondering where this dedication comes from. A few times in my life I've been dedicated to a project, an objective, and it appears to be accidental.

I had a conversation in the world of music with a choir conductor, and I noticed this altruism - the impact the choir conductor had on the lives of many people. I wondered if that impact could be amplified. Could those types of activities impact more people? That is how we started that discussion, and it was about transcendence. It's what I am trying to formulate now, and it comes from the tension between me, and something that is not me. I believe it's the tension between contextual and individual

forces. Maslow said, “What a man can be, he must be,” that’s linked to philosophy or religion, and I grew up in that kind of community. I heard this when I was extremely young, that if you can be someone you have to be that one.

AoA: What is the answer to the amplification?

Philippe Rixhon: I discovered the impact the choir conductor had with the music, and the connection with corporations. He is working with a large corporation and with CEOs. I could understand that world and the impact of choral music. I asked him how many people he touched and he said a few thousand. I asked what about a few million. He was very serious and said, “Yes, I should have an impact on a few million people, as a choral conductor.”

I asked about impacting hundreds of millions of people. He said, “Theoretically, this is what we must do, but I do not know how. I don’t know how to start working on a challenge like this.” I told him that I also had no idea, but I would try. I made a little sketch that I left in a drawer for two months.

My associates and I had an important meeting where we put things on the table that we had thought of in the last year. We saw everyone’s ideas, and picked the ones we wanted to pursue. This was 2008. Someone in the room saw my sketch and said we have to do it. That person was working with UNESCO at the time. We had a conversation and agreed to keep this as our number one idea to pursue.

We discussed this idea with lawyers and accountants because it was way too big, and we did not know how to start. We began by creating a foundation, but instead of defining what it would do, we went to people in that field, and told them our idea about having hundreds of millions of people singing. We said we didn’t even know what we needed to have people do this. We went to

hospitals, schools, etc. and all of them told us the same thing: we cannot justify why people should sing.

We said fine, that's what we have to do; you told us this is what you are missing. We will do that. Then we convened a scientific committee and planned scientific reviews. That was one track, the Scientific Track. This track was not enough to get hundreds of millions of people singing. So we built another track that would bring back singing to the cities. We started to answer the question "what is a singing city?" with four cities: Berlin, Brussels, Gateshead and a town in Norway. We started to envision that in 30 years, many people will be singing. We are getting traction now, in year five. We had events in Brussels, Berlin, Namsos (Norway) and Newcastle Gateshead; the next one will be held in March 2015 in Berlin. (<http://www.aarya.org.uk/singing-cities.html>)

AoA: Regarding your creative process, why didn't you choose "imagination" as a word?

Philippe Rixhon: The ability to put something in front of you that doesn't already exist - that's imagination. But the craft to realize the image is more important to me. I call this - freely - "Vorstellungskraft". I'm practicing taking something which exists, reducing it to pieces and then reconstructing something new with those pieces. I call that - also freely - "Auseinandersetzung". A recent example of this is when the client of the Centre of the Arts came to us. They had a point of view, and we had almost the opposite point of view. Each one of us had - metaphorically - a castle made of Lego blocks. The client started to defend their little castle and destroy mine. I stood up in the large room and in defending my position; I destroyed the client's castle. Then I sat down, and one member of the client team said, "everything is destroyed and now all the pieces of both castles are in front of us."

Then the client stood up and went to one of the whiteboards and started to rebuild the castle. Then he sat down, and I stood up and

I continued to build on his thing. This happened six or seven times. All the whiteboards were covered with a new combination of both of our castles, and we had a joint construction.

If we think about the domain of creative leadership, and some of the words like play, equality and impoliteness, we are children who are playing. The image of little boys playing was a conscious image. We knew we were impolite: he destroyed my castle, and I destroyed his castle. This was very early in the process, and we came to a joint vision. After months of work, we started to deliver the final report during a meeting, but the same client stood up and destroyed it. He did that because he was facing contextual forces from his company and the city in which we worked. We didn't know that, and the report was all deconstructed because it was facing a new context. 24 hours later, we had a new construct through astonishing work with this client. We practiced amazing creative leadership in this case.

AoA: I'd like to ask you about your perspective on the overall aspect of time. What do the words serendipity, necessity, fortuity, practicing, and maybe luck mean to you?

Philippe Rixhon: Serendipity. An interesting example is how I came to meet that famous choral director - I wasn't looking for him, I was looking for someone else in London, who was very hard to reach. I went to New York, met him finally, and nothing came out of that. However, because I was in New York, I met the other guy, whom I didn't know existed. I was in the mood to find somebody, and I found somebody else. That's pure serendipity. It's not my business but some pharmaceutical companies take serendipity very seriously and study it. There are more and more companies now that are trying to understand serendipity.

Sagacity. Let's assume you're a researcher in a pharmaceutical company looking for a cure for a certain disease, but instead you find a cure for something else. You have to be able to recognize

that you've found something else, and what that can be used to do. I knew that this is something that's in a person, the fact that they can recognize patterns. I found that the broader your education, the higher chance you have for sagacity. If you go back to the renaissance, where people were everything at the same time: engineers, doctors, philosophers and artists, those people had a very broad education. Because of this they could recognize things and practice lateral thinking.

I've had the privilege of an extremely broad education, and I am convinced more and more that this is the origin of why I can recognize things very, very quickly - my memory is weak, but my comprehension is strong. I don't think it's because my brain is special, it's because I've been exposed to so many disciplines. This is the connection between serendipity and necessity.

Necessity is a very interesting topic for discussion. In my case, the discussion was triggered in 1994 when I started a personal research on innovation. While they were doing some work about customer focus, a company asked me to do work on innovation. I collaborated with the ETHZ. I remember the very beginning; there was a textile professor who told me to read a book about the Swiss textile industry in the 19th century. I read the book, and it surprised me because it said that the factories were engaged in a boom and bust cycle, producing textiles in an extremely short lifecycle. For me at that time, the concept of companies having short lifecycles was relatively new, and I had the illusion that - in the 19th century - companies had a much longer life. That was an interesting discovery.

I also learned that the French on one side, and the English and the Scots on the other side, in the 18th and 19th centuries, were inventing almost the same things, but they were not in communication. This puzzled me because not too long ago there was literature pretending that innovation was linked to traits,

characteristics, certain countries, the climate of regions, et cetera, and I couldn't find anything to back up these claims.

I wanted to understand how it was possible that the French, English and Scots were developing the same things. I understood how the Industrial Revolution took place in the British Isles and not in France, and this had to do with the objectives that people and companies had on the British Isles. They were inventing things to get rich, and they had to attract clients. There was a dialogue between users (clients) and suppliers (inventors). The French were not trying to get rich, they were content to discover things for the pleasure of discovering things. I understood that, but I didn't understand why they were discovering the same things at the same time without communication.

In 2010, I had a discussion in Hollywood about a television format with a TV producer. The producer told me to do the new format because, even if I did not speak about this new format, if I did not do it someone else would. Every type of TV format that can be done will be done. That's what he said. I remember about a month after that meeting I met with a Chinese philosopher and we got on the subject about people discovering the same thing at the same time without communicating. He said that the thought doesn't need the thinker, and that is the greatest declaration on innovation I have ever heard - things are just waiting to be discovered, and that's about necessity. If it can be done, it will be done. That's interesting, it's obviously outside yourself, and you can't manage that. Because you can't manage it and you are outside time, we cannot speak about innovation management, so we have to speak about innovative environments or attitudes, but not about the mechanical sense of management.

**AoA:** Are there any other topics that we didn't discuss that you feel are important on the topic of art, science, innovation and business?

Philippe Rixhon: One pressing thing is the question about happiness. On my slide titled “Creative Leader”, Maslow attributes cosmic sadness to transcendence. Some people say that the objective of mankind is not to be happy. But some people, like Thomas Jefferson, said that happiness is one of the goals of mankind. The place between happiness and dissatisfaction is interesting. Some literature claims that dissatisfaction is a means to innovation because we have to be dissatisfied with something to want to change it.

I’m not too sure about all of that, because maybe I’m very happy to do what I’m doing although I may have cosmic sadness or appear permanently dissatisfied to people around me. Somehow I must find some personal advantage – even unconsciously – to do what I’m doing but I’m not sure about dissatisfaction.

I think it’s ok not to be satisfied all the time, or to feel cosmic sadness when we hear news from Israel and Palestine. But we can separate the news from ourselves, like when we are a happy member of a family and enjoy time with friends. But if I’m by myself, I’m sad about the history, the present and the potential future and this is why I try to do something about it. We want to develop to the next step. I don’t see a contradiction between personal happiness and cosmic sadness at all.

I see a convergence when we speak from our own different experiences. I’m almost 60 and around me are people of the same age. As practitioners, when we reflect on the phenomenon of innovation, we all generally tend to agree. We use different words and we misuse words but basically we tend to agree, and if we had the time, we could try to describe a bit better what we practitioners have done and learned through huge mistakes and few successes.

Innovation processes are one thing, but the more research I do, the more I see myself merging innovation and art. Can a design studio

atmosphere be established in large corporations? We have to be careful with what we do, because if we put the arts into business maybe there's a chaos that's created. If we do this to only create a little efficiency improvement in an organization we will miss the point. There is huge truth and significance to that. Why is a large company I've worked for not able to innovate anymore?

Those things that can be innovated will be innovated, maybe by machines, 20 years from now.

I don't think that innovation is good by essence - it can be good or bad.

I don't think innovation is better than operations. To run the planet with seven billion inhabitants we probably need a few innovators but we need many more operators. I don't think it's the role of a company that has to produce reliable and affordable computers to be so dramatically innovative. When I started to reflect on innovation vs operations, I saw that mankind needs things that are better done in pyramid structures because we need that type of organization. This structure was defined by the Roman army 2,000 years ago. They defined that for a purpose, and it's still correct for the moment, when doing operations. We can't run the London Transport system that carries 3 million people a day in the same way I run my company.

We need to not judge with good, bad, better, worse in what we are trying to describe. We have to be very careful when we speak not to judge anything.

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