



**Age of
Artists**

Interview

Edgar Schein

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The interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy and Raoul Pilcicki on October 5th, 2016 via Video Conference.

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Opportunity to Reflect

Introduction

Edgar Schein is a well-known author and former professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management. Schein has made substantial contributions to the fields of organizational development and organizational culture. For people interested in understanding how companies really work, Schein's model of organizational culture developed in the 1980's represents a major piece of the puzzle and influenced generations of professionals dealing with organizational transformation and change. Less known but not less exciting, Ed Schein has also thought about the relevance of art to other elements of society like business or government and why managers should learn about it. Our conversation with Ed Schein started from the question of how the artist is trained and works can produce important insights into what is needed to perform and what it means to lead and manage.

Interview

AoA: In [one of your papers](#) you came up with six aspects about the role of the arts and artists in an organizational context, and we are particularly interested in the fifth one: the analysis of how the artist is trained and how the artist works. Can you describe what you found there with regards on how artists perform their work and what we can transfer to other disciplines?

Edgar Schein: Let me start with a preamble to that. I won't forget that question but I think it would be useful if I briefly told you about some different ways of looking at the role of the arts. In that paper, I tried to think in terms of all the functions of Art. What I would like to throw into the pot, before we get to that, is several different ways where I have seen Art used in the last decade that kind of links to this question. For example, there is a growing trend in business schools, particularly stimulated by Danica Purg in Bled [IEDC, Bled School of Management]. She has a program of not only persistent display of art in the school but bringing in resident artists, either a painter or a piano player. It encourages the students to get to know that person and see what similarity there is between themselves, learning to be businessmen, and what this artist does in his life. That is one connection and that seems to be growing. More business schools are beginning to think "well maybe we should have resident artists in our school meet with the students". But it is not clear exactly what the nature of the learning will be.

A second connection, that I find very intriguing is something that I actually encountered on a visit a few years ago in Switzerland where there were some consultants, a couple of them from Germany, who told me about two different ways that they were actually using Art in business. The one that was the most interesting was a trio of musicians, I think cello, violin and percussion, who offered themselves to a company, to live in that

company for a week, and then at the end of the week, bring all members of the company together and “play the culture.” They would then perform for a half hour expressing what their experience had been for that week to the entire company audience, and then talk about how the music reflected the actual culture that people experience. I found that very significant because music has such a different way of entering our consciousness than, say, vision. I think the ear is connected to a lower part of the brain than the eye, so the whole role of music versus visual arts becomes an interesting question.

A third connection is how Tina Doerffer uses the art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres with his piles of candy. He had AIDS and tried to use Art as a way of connecting people to this very serious illness. Tina brings a big pile of gold wrapped pieces of candy to her workshop. The pile is maybe five feet by five feet and maybe three feet high. People are brought into the room and just allowed to react to it. Tina has done this with a group of leaders at Harvard Kennedy School and has developed a kind of typology of what happens. There are some people who are just made anxious by it. They don't know what to think of it. Then of course, it is one of the things that I understand to be what artists in a way want to make you feel-- something that is a little bit out of the ordinary. There are some people who immediately want to interact with it. They would say “can I have a piece of the candy?”, then unwrap it and eat it. Then there are the critics who say this is a whole bunch of crap, you know, “this is not art”, “this is nothing”. And then there are the by-standers, who are afraid to admit that they are kind of intrigued but they don't know what's going on. So I think that is a very interesting approach to do something that is out of the ordinary in a way.

There is an exhibit, here, in Palo Alto, that is called TEAM Lab. It comes out of somewhere in Asia. You go into a series of rooms, which are wired electronically to give you very different visual and auditory experiences. Very elaborated, very stimulating, almost over-stimulating in some of the rooms. Then, at the end, there is a

very large room where on the wall on each side you see vivid moving images. You are handed a piece of paper to make a drawing and then put the drawing on a computer screen which scans it and converts it into the next moving piece on the huge wall next to you. The interesting thing was that I brought my twenty-year old granddaughter. She immediately drew a pastel fish, which then was scanned into this huge wall and her fish was suddenly in the wall, as one of the many moving fishes. So every kid that drew something got their fish into the action. On the other side, you could draw something and the scanner turned it into a 3D object, which you could then take to a 3D printer.

Then, finally, maybe the most significant connection, I am on an advisory board of a group called “Path with Art”, based in Seattle. They bring recovering prisoners, alcoholics, drug addicts, homeless, who are now halfway to trying to recapture some segments of their life, and they bring them into an arts program that can be painting, Japanese art, poetry, singing, and so on. They hire teachers who are willing to work with these groups and have some classrooms for each activity. I visited a couple of these and what I saw was the birth of a human being. It was a profound experience. These people in their insecure inner selves are sitting around the table, they are given a sheet of paper, and they are told “today, we are going to do a landscape”. They are looking very blank and scared, looking at each other “we don’t know how to draw, what are you talking about?” So this teacher says “let’s draw a line across the paper”, and they do. “There, you have got the horizon. Take your green and put things around here and there. Now you have got trees”. You can see them following orders. That is easy, they don’t have to be creative, but they start to see something in front of them. They look at each other. “Mine is better than his, but it’s ok”. Doing this in a group is very important in this program. You cannot do this individually with a teacher. It is not the same as art therapy which is of course another thing, but this is Art as humanization.

At the end of an hour and a half, they have a rudimentary, really pretty good landscape and you can see pride. You can see interest. It is like they are coming alive! This is to me the most profound interaction that I have seen with Art and Life. To actually use it as a life giving force rather than something that you do as an extra. That leads me to the idea that the programs in the business schools that are the most interesting are not the ones where an artist comes in, but where they have studios and they ask students to take some portion of their time to actually go to the studio and do something, to access the art inside yourself. The fact that you can't draw and you can't do anything does not count. You have to somehow find some creative something in you, maybe it's ceramics, maybe it's who knows what! But get involved! That's the thing! So I have been thinking about this and I want to make part of this interview a review of what I have seen in the last years of different ways that art is used, because I think that a lot of people see it too simplistically. People go to the museum for art appreciation and they stop there.

Another related thing: I remember years ago, there was a Mexican company, in Monterrey, Mexico, that had hired a French director of Human Resources. He was a really creative fellow. The first thing he discovered was that it was a very closed community, this business. The thousands of employees and their families lived nearby. They had a major problem with the retirees going to live with their kids. It was kind of an obligation and a norm when retiring to stay with your kids, but they became a huge nuisance to the kids because they were sitting around and there was not enough room for them and they were an extra burden. So this Human Resources professional decided to train retirees in all kinds of homeowner skills: painting, wall paper, and plumbing. A retiree, maybe a year before his formal retirement, would, on company time, learn these additional skills, so then when he went home, he was suddenly welcome because he had now become an added value and was kept busy. It changed things completely by giving people some different skills and gave the retirees a sense of self worth. At the same time, he instituted a whole series of studios for

employees to do art on their own for the fun of it, again with company support. This was fifty years ago, but I have never forgotten how important it became in the life of that company both that they have a retirement program that involves new skills and an arts program that stimulated all their employees.

Now, finally to answer your question. What I think I realized is that all the stuff about mindfulness and reflection that has been recently taught is very closely connected to my own experience with art. I have never been a serious artist but I did a lot of sketching and when I got interested in sketching, my daughter gave me an arts book, which made the point that if you are going to sketch something or draw something, you should spend at least five minutes just looking at it, and it suddenly clicked in my head-- this is exactly the same thing as what the mindfulness people are saying--you should find some time to think about something or look at something and let it wash over you instead of immediately becoming active. So the idea is that the artist, in order to do something, must first be very acquainted with the phenomenon particularly the visual artist. I had the experience that you don't see something until you have taken the time to look at it for a long time. That to me is a skill that artists take for granted that is just as applicable to any kind of other creative activity, but even more important to the activity of being a businessman, developing strategies, designing organizations, or whatever. Seeing is something you have to learn to do. That is not automatic. An artist takes for granted that you have to learn to see.

Then it also occurred to me that the artist is viewed by society as just a pure creator; what is missed is all the knowledge and skill that is involved: learning about color, shape, learning how to manipulate your hands so that you paint properly; there is a huge amount of training involved in being an artist. It is not only an expressive activity and that makes it again much more similar to other kinds of activities. So I guess what I am realizing is that the difference between the artist and a non-artist is not so much in

having unique skills, but in having something to say. I remember an artist, friend of ours, in Cambridge who was a teacher at a local college. He was really frustrated that he would teach all the skills but he would then tell my wife and me: “you know my problem is that my students don't have anything to say”. There was something missing in them. They could learn to do all the right things but their work was pedestrian.

The uniqueness of the artist is not the skill set but the impulse to do something different, to have something to say, and that, if you feed that back into my world of writing a text book, applies there. I just finished the revision of my organizational culture book. It is the fifth edition. What makes it challenging is that I have to ask myself “what do I have to say that is different?” A revision could just be adding a few references; that would not be any fun but I decided that the culture world is changed. It is much more international. National cultures have become more important. So the fun of the revising was to be artistic in what I was doing. Maybe that is the key I am looking for. How can any of us become more artistic? Somehow there must be an impulse in everyone from time to time to say something that is different. That is the key of being an artist.

AoA: What are your ideas on how an organizational culture can be created that supports this type of artistic practice?

Edgar Schein: I am hanging up on the word “practice”. I would be more comfortable with the idea of the artistic impulse. Practice immediately takes you to “what do I do”. I had a recent insight as a writer: When I left the MIT about 10 years ago, there, as a professor you do everything: you teach, you do research, you write and you learn. When I left MIT, I discovered that I did not really like teaching. I did like writing. So I started to write my autobiography and other kinds of writing. It immediately hit me. You often hear a painter saying, “I did not know how to render that tree. The whole painting was there, but I did not know how to render that tree.” My daughter, who is in Seattle, has become a painter so I talked a lot

to her about the process of learning to be a painter, and so often you have two thirds of it done, but that last third of it, you don't know how to do. You have to then learn to do something else in order to learn how to render that tree in the way you want it to look. That immediately clicked with rendering something in words. I know the idea, I know what I want to say, but it is difficult to know how to say it, how to render it. That seemed to me a very important principle of what happens in normal life but that is similar to the artistic problem. You encounter something that you know what it is you want to do, but you don't quite know how to do it.

Somehow, out of that came the idea that it is not about accepting mistakes, it is about allowing yourself to have period of search and uncertainty. During that time, maybe you try stuff. You try drawing that tree and that did not work. So I presume composers, painters and writers, all have this experience. They throw stuff away, because it did not work. It did not look right. It did not sound right. There is a difference between throwing it away during the search part versus committing to something final and then deciding the whole painting is to be thrown away. I think this is how the question 'how to create that climate in a company' comes to us. Should the company culture stimulate experimentation and innovation but not allow that to become absolute judgments about the final quality of what was done? In the Silicon Valley there are all kind of proposals under the term of agile software development where supposedly the more errors you make the quicker you learn. They turned the "making mistakes" into a positive thing. If you are not making mistakes, you are not trying hard enough. They turned it completely upside down.

There are also national differences here. I just recently talked to a group of Austrian consultants who visited Silicon Valley and said in Europe it is still much more hierarchical. Employees have much more of a sense of obligation and will take orders, and do the right thing. Their experience in Silicon Valley was that the younger employees have no sense of obligations and no loyalty to the company. The company has no loyalty to them either. The career is

a series of jobs and contracts. So for that generation, the role of art is a completely different question. You can almost say that they live their life more like an artist. So the question of 'what kind of company is it where you are trying to create this commitment to being more artistic becomes the critical thing. Companies vary a lot.

And it's complicated because these companies in Palo Alto who are practicing agile software development don't realize it is a set of routines for the wrong questions. Here is where I am coming out—how to combine the practice notion with what is inside you. I love Otto Scharmer's image of what happens when the artist stands in front of the empty canvas. What happens in that moment psychologically? What is the process by which something inside you comes out? For me, that is a vivid image. The practice that I think is missing in companies, which will help us with that issue is reflection time. I think when we first started the human relations labs and got into the training groups, we would do some behavior analysis. We would reflect on our observations and realize that the learning and the growth was in reflecting and analyzing not in the doing. If you look at business today, it is all about doing. Travel should not be viewed as an expense. It is an opportunity to reflect. You sit in the airplane and think of what is going on because there is nothing else to do. If I am not able to focus as a writer, if I take a walk, things begin to come back to me. When people say 'can I walk with you'. I say 'no, I want to walk alone. I don't want to be distracted by another human being' [laughs]. I think that is the practice that we have to bring into the company. It is to figure out how to legitimize analyzing process and reflecting on it. That is the big missing component so people never learn to see because they never take the time to practice seeing. I am saying seeing and reflecting as counterpart to each other. When people talk about mindfulness and so on it is sort of allowing yourself to look inside yourself.

Do you know the author Ellen Langer? You must get her book called "On Becoming an Artist". She is a professor at Harvard, a

very creative psychologist. She decided she wanted to become an artist. So she not only started becoming a painter, but wrote about what the experience was like. One of her profound insight was we have to silence the judgmental mind. The minute we say 'let's draw something', we say 'it's no good'. But 'wait a minute, who says we have to judge it. Can't we just sit there and have fun drawing'. She makes a big point as she learned to paint not to judge but just to enjoy. The important thing was to teach herself and to teach other people to learn to enjoy the experience rather than to judge it. I thought that was really profound because her argument about mindfulness is that we focus too much on the immediate intention and not enough on what else is going on.

My hunch is that this is an important point for artists. You are not only zeroing in on what you are trying to draw or paint, but you allow other things to enter in, in order to enrich your vision of it. The key question is 'what else is going on in any given moment', and her point is that we tend to discount it rather than to focus it.

I think that what happened is that a concept like reflection or mindfulness has become corrupted just as the word culture became corrupted and becomes routine in methodologies. The original reflection in the NTLT training groups, my original training, was guided by what we called then the 'spirit of inquiry'. It was always connected to what has been going on in the group. You did not go off and reflect or tried to do some mantra to be mindful. We said 'wait a minute, what just happened here? How did this come about?' And then you maybe thought about it later and said 'this is amazing'. When I take my walks, it is totally because I have gotten stuck in the work. I can't proceed in the work, so I take a walk not to get away from the work but to change my attitude towards the work, to allow other thoughts to enter and it is interesting to me how that always works. I say 'I have got to take a walk now' and nothing happens for maybe 20 minutes but after 30 or 40 minutes, suddenly I have a thought. And that thought is helpful and it brings me back to the work. I carry notepads with me because sometimes

I need to write down that thought immediately so that I don't forget about it later. My notion of mindfulness and reflection is tightly linked to the work, but linked in the sense that I have gotten too focused and I need to get away from this immediate focus to allow other ideas to enter what it is I am trying to do.

AoA: So it seems to me that you are promoting certainly much more time and focus for searching and reflection in the organization in general as a means to become more artistic, if you want to use that term.

Edgar Schein: It is not more time. It is a different use of time. Have you seen my latest book called "Humble Consulting"? The title "Humble Consulting: How to give real help faster" focuses on speed because faster is a fact of life. I may not like the speeding but it is happening. I was getting a lot of criticisms that process consultation takes too long. Who has time to ask and answer all these questions? So in this book, I argue, that to build a relationship quickly, you have to personalize quickly. That is a process that applies to the arts in a certain way. I can discuss with you the theory or I can say 'who are you and what are you doing', which is more personal and that speeds things up. I tried to do that. I tried to do it by saying, 'ok let me tell you where I am at. Never mind your questions, that would take us into the theory'. The impulse is 'let's be personal. I'll tell you what has stimulated me and then you tell me'. That is speeding things up. We could have spent this whole hour in the realm of theory and it would have felt slower. So I don't think reflection has to be slow or take a lot of time. I think it's a matter of stopping what you are doing and seeing what else is going on. I give myself permission to take a walk around the block, which only takes 10 min, or at the end of a meeting, to say 'let's just take a minute to what we just have done'. I don't want it to become a time consuming thing. It is rather another activity. Does that make sense? It has to be speeded up otherwise people won't do it.

AoA: Apart from what we discussed so far, do you see any other core elements of modern organization or modern culture that need to put in place in contrast to the past?

Edgar Schein: My son with whom I am now working made an important observation that applies to this. 'Are we trying to standardize or are we trying to customize?' I think that my answer to your question is 'it all depends on the company'. You have to customize how to get more creativity in the given organization. Anything general I would say to you immediately becomes so abstract as to become corrupted. That's exactly what will happen. If I would say companies should find more time to reflect, they might turn *reflection* into some programmed activity and I would say 'no that is not what I meant'.

I think, you should approach this as an artist would approach a new creative act. To work with a company, to get them to be more creative is itself a creative act on your part. Let's say a company invites you to think with them on how they can institute more creativity in their organization. The best thing you could do is to become curious. 'What are you doing now? Why is this a problem? What are you trying to do?' and get very creative about this interaction.

There are other places where we need creativity. I think that we are entering the age of relationships and we are very, very unequipped to be creative about relationships. I think, I, you and everybody need to think about how we manage relationships and whether we could be much more creative in how we talk to each other, what our purpose in talking to each other is. I think that you and I immediately have an opportunity to be personal and say, 'hey, cool, what are we trying to do here?' Or you can say 'very interesting, let me tell you about our program, what do you think of it?' One way is formal and traditional, the other is agile and cuts through to the personal "here and now.". And immediately the relationship becomes different, right? [laughs]. We are very stagy

and uncreative on how we talk to each other! Being more personal is being more artistic.