Taming the "Alpha-Male" In the Space Between Art and Business.

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Abstract

Arts-based interventions may expand how team members and leaders understand their roles and impact. For an intervention to be useful, there needs to be a way for the aesthetic experience to translate back into the regular organisation. Nine managers of a professional services firm, including the chief executive, engaged in weekly group singing sessions for more than a year. The paper discusses their learnings in light of the two communities of practice they took part in—the choir practice and the managerial practice. In terms of learning content, the notion of "alpha-male" serves a label for the range of identities and behaviours that were rattled. The aesthetic experience of multi-part choral singing enabled the participants to *hear* the futility of being constantly pushy. Eventually a more varied team dynamics emerged. The paper focuses on one particular aspect of the set-up—the location of the practices and the transfer space between them. The stair-case connecting the two practices became an in-between space—a *conduit*—where the aesthetic experience lingered, was interpreted, and applied, in silence or through dialogue.

Keywords: team development, knowledge transfer, choral singing, communities of practice

Taming the "Alpha-Male" In the Space Between Art and Business.

When we make use of art in the field of organization and leadership development, we assume that there is some underlying mechanism for transferring knowledge from one domain to the other. Exactly how it happens and what insight is acquired will depend on the type of intervention and the nature of the aesthetic experience. Sutherland (2013) has proposed that arts-based methods affords three stages of learning: aesthetic workspaces, aesthetic reflexivity, and memories with momentum. The transfer mechanism then arises from the privileged conditions offered by aesthetic experience, by which participants discover self and others in ways that induce changed leadership practices. The present paper attempts to elucidate this transfer mechanism between the art domain and the organization as the target domain in one particular kind of aesthetic experience—being immersed in group singing with no external objective. In 2007 and 2008, I worked with the nine members of the executive team, including the chief executive officer, of a professional services firm. They engaged in weekly (or bi-weekly) choir sessions back to back with their regular management meetings for more than a year. The intervention has been thoroughly researched and reported elsewhere (Jansson, 2018, pp. 152-175). The present paper raises an additional discussion— on the significance of the physicality of the rehearsal space and the office premises. In this particular case, the conduit between the aesthetic experience and the management practice was in fact enhanced by a spatial channel where experience was processed and new insight emerged.

When researching the application of art in organizational work, some researchers focus on the learning content (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Bush, 2011; Dobson & Gaunt, 2015; Hatch, 1999; Jansson, 2018; Ludevig, 2015; Matzdorf & Sen, 2016; Pearce, Launay, & Dunbar, 2015; Romanowska, Larsson, & Theorell, 2013). While often a blend, others attend more to the learning process (Darsø, 2004; Ladkin & Taylor, 2010; Springborg, 2010; Sutherland, 2013). While the default assumption is that aesthetic experiences are valuable, it is not obvious how learnings are made available in other domains, or whether learnings can be transferred to management practice (Springborg & Sutherland, 2016). Given the inherent existential nature of art, experience and insights may not readily serve the instrumental purpose of organizations beyond improving interpersonal skills and the human condition in general. The present paper does not attempt to draw a comprehensive picture of the transfer between art and business (which is a tall order), but look at the learning process from one particular angle—how insight from one domain (a choir) is made available in another domain (a management team) through the coupling of two adjacent communities of practice (Omidvar & Kislov, 2014; Wenger, 1998, 2000) and particularly the immediacy between them. The condition of immediacy was created by the tight connection between the two practices in terms of space as well as time.

Types of art-based interventions

The choir project initially had no external objective, it was merely intended as a pleasurable break in a busy work day, hopefully bringing a small relief and simply doing something together as a newly formed team. Although, the chief executive assumed that the activity would be good for the team, there was at the outset no explicit or traceable connection between the activity and desired change external to the activity itself. The project started with an intrinsic or existential motivation (Stone, Deci, & Ryan, 2009). Because the motivation changed in the course of the intervention, let us position it a little more carefully. One categorisation of artistic interventions arises from a distinction between why and how. The why-question clarifies whether art serves an instrumental purpose or is pursued for its own sake. The why-question highlights the different powers of propositional knowing and

aesthetic knowing: are we seeking to solve a specific problem or are we attempting to acquire insight with wider and unexpected applicability?

The how-question is about where we stand with respect to the aesthetic qualities of an event or object: are we perceiving them or reasoning about them? Another way to frame the how-question is whether we are immersed in the aesthetic experience or looking at it from the outside. A simple illustration is the difference between singing yourself and reading a press review of a concert. Figure 1 depicts the taxonomy arising from why and how, an adaption from Taylor and Hansen (2005).

MOTIVE
Why leaders could engage in an aesthetic experience

	Instrumental Orientation *for a specific purpose*	Aesthetic Orientation *for its own sake*
Intellectual *thinking about it*	Type of learning: New ways to solve specific problems Type of intervention: Exploit metaphors, Draw leadership learnings from a Shakespeare play 4	Type of learning: New ways to look at self, the team and the mission Type of intervention: Reflect on aesthetic object (painting, film, poetry …) 2
Artistic *immersed in it*	3 Type of learning: New ways to experience specific problems Type of intervention: Theatrical acting of problem, Choral conducting, Art therapy	1 Type of learning: New ways to experience self, the team and the mission Type of intervention: Workplace singing, Building 'business Lego'

APPROACH
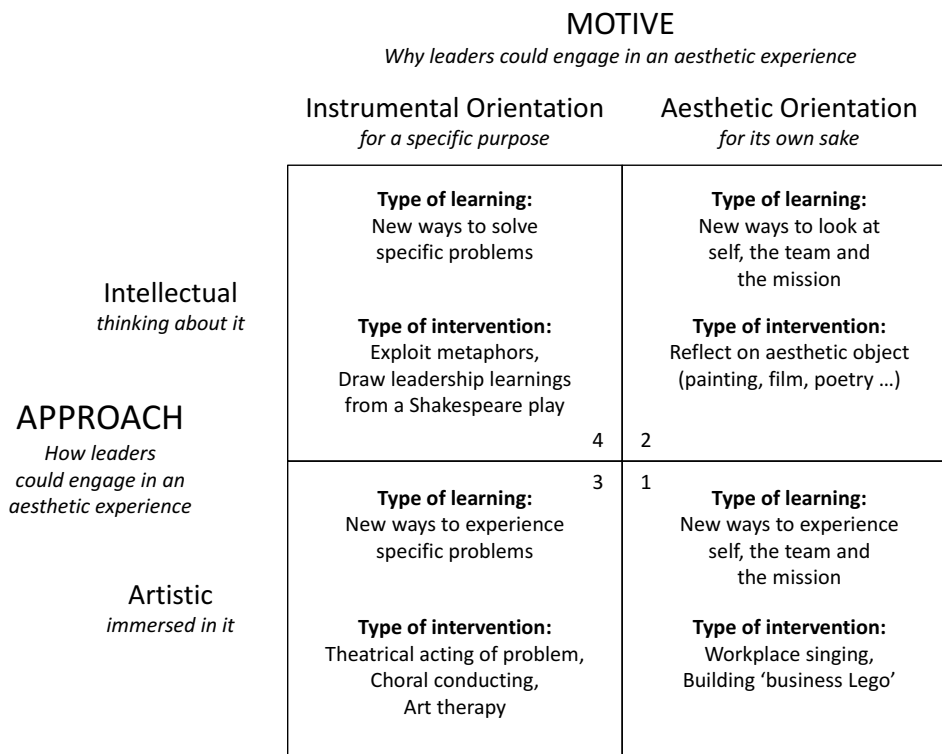*How leaders could engage in an aesthetic experience*

Figure 1: Taxonomy of aesthetics-based leadership development (Jansson, 2018, p. 144). Adapted from Taylor and Hansen (2005), which used "content" rather than "motive" for the horizontal dimension.

The first position (lower right quadrant) includes activities which require direct participation in the artistic process and involve intrinsic rewards. This is where the choir project was initiated—being immersed in the musical experience with no external end. Most company choirs exist for the sake of musical and communal enjoyment and serve no business need other than being part of the overall work environment, along with the company cafeteria and the workout room. However, for an activity to be considered a development intervention within this framework, it goes beyond mere ambiance enhancement. There needs to be a connection between the experience itself and organisational implications. While leadership training may happen unrelated the actual working situation, the choir project, which is discussed in the present paper, engaged a complete group of leaders who were in daily working relationships. The experience had a direct impact on the functioning of the team and the mission, although the impact could not have been planned or foreseen.

The second position (quadrant) involves intellectual engagement with aesthetic experience, which, for example, is what product developers do when they attempt to design products

which are appealing to our senses or contains symbolic as well as functional value. The third position involves the activation of aesthetic experience to achieve a given objective. For example, one could insert oneself into a professional choir while it was rehearsing in order to learn how to manage a time-constrained team. The fourth position can be exemplified by a team which, after having watched Macbeth, discusses what its members extracted from Shakespeare's play to better understand power plays. In this position, the aesthetic object is treated like any other learning vehicle and differs only slightly from using a business case or a team sport as inspiration. This position, where we take the outsider's view, was traditionally where the majority of the work on organisational aesthetics research was done (Taylor & Hansen, 2005), at least how it was observed a little while back.

In practice, an intervention can rarely be contained within one quadrant, because motives and learnings tend to "leak" across the boundaries, which did in fact happen in the choir project, as the group started to reflect intellectually on what happened to them. However, the starting point in the lower right quadrant was an important design feature of the present project, because this position is the most difficult to wander accidentally into, and therefore rather precious. It serves as a gateway to the full potential of aesthetic learning, which is probably the reason for its growing presence in the volumes of Organizational Aesthetics over the recent years, as for example noted by Biehl-Missal and Springborg (2016).

Case: The singing executive team

Choral singing is a vibrant activity in a variety of social settings, and the positive effects of singing are well known (Clift et al., 2008). Oscar-nominated films such as The Chorus[1] and As It Is in Heaven[2] (both in 2004) give epic examples of the profoundness of choral experiences. The workplace choir is one particular setting, and the effects have been researched to some degree (Balsnes & Jansson, 2015; Giaver, Vaag, & Wennes, 2017; Stewart & Lonsdale, 2016). The workplace choir is a tighter community than a regular company choir, because its participants also have daily working relationships. A management team choir, as in this case, is even closer knit because it involves fewer people (usually less than a dozen); in addition, individuals in a management team hold unique positions, each of which covers a specific function. In addition, a management team is often the most exposed part of the organisation, thereby creating a distinct group, with a clear inside and outside.

The members of the management team were quite young, most of them in their thirties. They had been in their current positions for a short period, a couple of years at the most. The profile of the participants is shown in table 1.

The project consisted of regular one-hour sessions, scheduled directly before (occasionally after) the weekly management meetings. The rehearsal space was an inconspicuous storage room in the basement of the office building. The structure of each session was consistent and very simple. I started with concentration and breathing exercises, then presented various experiments with the voice and tones to stimulate aural awareness, and even infuse elements of music theory. The last part of the session consisted of rehearsing three-part songs, arranged specifically for this group, which included three sopranos, three tenors (one of which was actually a very deep alto) and three basses. The pedagogical approach involved serious engagement with music but included plenty of joking and having fun with it. In my capacity as facilitator, I had full control of the agenda and the priorities, and the chief executive relinquished every aspect of being the boss. Although the project was based on a weekly

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[1] Original title in French: Les Choristes

[2] Original title in Swedish: Så som i himmelen.

routine, every now and then a rehearsal would be cancelled, if too many participants were travelling or engaged elsewhere. On average, over the project period, there were two to three rehearsals per month.

MANAGEMENT POSITION	GENDER	MUSIC BACKGROUND
Chief executive officer	Male	no music experience
Chief financial office	Female	some music experience
Commercial director	Female	individual singing experience
Service delivery director 1	Male	initially close to tone deaf
Service delivery director 2	Male	no music experience
Chief technology officer	Male	seasoned amateur guitar player
Legal director	Male	no music experience
Communications/PR director	Female	some choral singing experience
Human resources director	Female	some choral singing experience

Table 1: Participant profiles

Although, the choir rehearsals were initially framed without external objectives, as they began to feel a certain mastery, they developed the idea of performing two songs at the company summer party, with several hundred guests. The project was not announced to anyone outside the management group, but became public knowledge after six months, at the first performance. Eventually, they ended up with two additional public performances (one at global headquarters, one at a national trade show), which both contributed to building the team and not least, boosting a victorious spirit.

The activity was initially not set up as a research project. However, five years later, I conducted in-depth interviews with the participants about the experience, complemented by short written narratives eight years later[3]. The learning content of the intervention was analysed by using the theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000). The theory posits that learning happens in the form of social practices and is closely associated with the creation and maintenance of communality, meaning, and identity. Four experience trajectories were identified: (1) from individual enjoyment to collective achievement, (2) from diversity to team virtuosity, (3) from resistance to persistence, and (4) from vulnerability to sensitised power (Jansson, 2018, p. 157). The participants travelled these winding roads of learning with individual speed, turns, and detours. In sum, however, an aesthetic intervention was indeed able to expand their managerial repertoire and improve team cohesion.

A pivotal point is that the participants understood that they would not have acquired this their insights without doing what they did. Sensing the simultaneous voices, reflecting on the self

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[3] The participants were more than willing to be interviewed for the purpose of research, and they signed written statements of consent. Quotes in this article are anonymised with alias names. However, they were in fact quite proud of their learning process, despite the intimate nature of their statements, and several of them would have preferred that I used their real names. In the course of the choir project, strict ethical ground rules were adhered to: (1) The participants should "own" their own experience and whatever learnings and implications coming out of it. (2) No judgements of participants" contribution should be made. (3) Each participant came with different predispositions, but everyone's contribution should be considered equally valuable. The shift from facilitator to researcher five years after was for me a distinct and conscious change, subsequently adhering to principles for ethical research. However, there was a high level of trust between the participants and me after a long and rather intimate intervention, hence they did not appear to distinguish the researcher from the facilitator.

in light of the others, and discovering the concerted power of a balanced team brought each of them through all the four ways of knowing (sensory, interpretive, propositional, doing) depicted in figure 2.
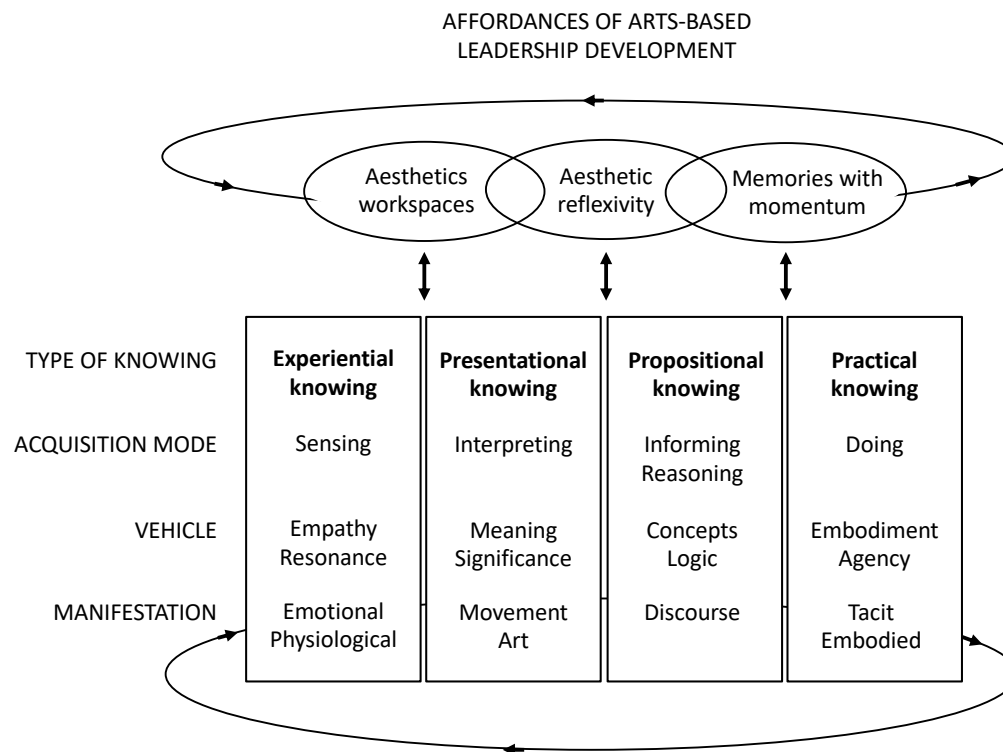
AFFORDANCES OF ARTS-BASED
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

TYPE OF KNOWING	**Experiential knowing**	**Presentational knowing**	**Propositional knowing**	**Practical knowing**
ACQUISITION MODE	Sensing	Interpreting	Informing Reasoning	Doing
VEHICLE	Empathy Resonance	Meaning Significance	Concepts Logic	Embodiment Agency
MANIFESTATION	Emotional Physiological	Movement Art	Discourse	Tacit Embodied

The ovals at the top read: Aesthetics workspaces — Aesthetic reflexivity — Memories with momentum

Figure 2: Affordances of art-based leadership development[4].

The study was similar to Ian Sutherland's (2013) work with management students and choirs, and the findings of the two studies are consistent and complement one another. Both studies involved an experiential learning path, along which experience was transformed through perception, cognition and behaviour (Kolb, 1984). The present study focused on the substance of the learning (Sutherland's study concentrated on the learning process), and the learning proved in fact to be long-term and durable effects (if we consider five and eight years to be long term). The participants' changed leadership practice, coming out of the choir project, indeed justifies Sutherland's coinage "memories with momentum". A project of such duration reveals itself to be a constantly recurring process, whereby some loops happen instantaneously and others take several years to unfold.

The conduit between practice communities

The management team constituted a community of practice, which according to Wenger (1998) is the primary locus of learning and seen as a collective, relational, and social process. The choir provided an additional community of practice, consisting of exactly the same members. The two practices were very distinct, completely disjoint in terms of purpose, activity, and not least location.

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[4] Inspired by Heron (1992, Heron & Reason (2001), Sutherland (2013), Taylor & Hansen (2005).

Hence, there is a simple case where the learning process can be addressed specifically through the conduit between two communities of practice. According to Ropo, Sauer, and Salovaara (2013, p. 379), "physical conditions affect social space interpretatively and symbolically, albeit not in a determined manner." The physicality of the set-up proved to be a key enabler of knowledge generation and transfer. The project set-up provided a highly condensed place (the storage room, the executive floor, and the stair-case) and a corresponding inter-subjective space (the two practices and the conduit between the two) that was "revealed in stories, images and sensuous experiences." (p. 381). In the following, I will discuss selected learnings from the project that are closely related to the set-up, under Sutherland's (2013) headline categories: aesthetic workspace, aesthetic reflexivity, and memories with momentum.
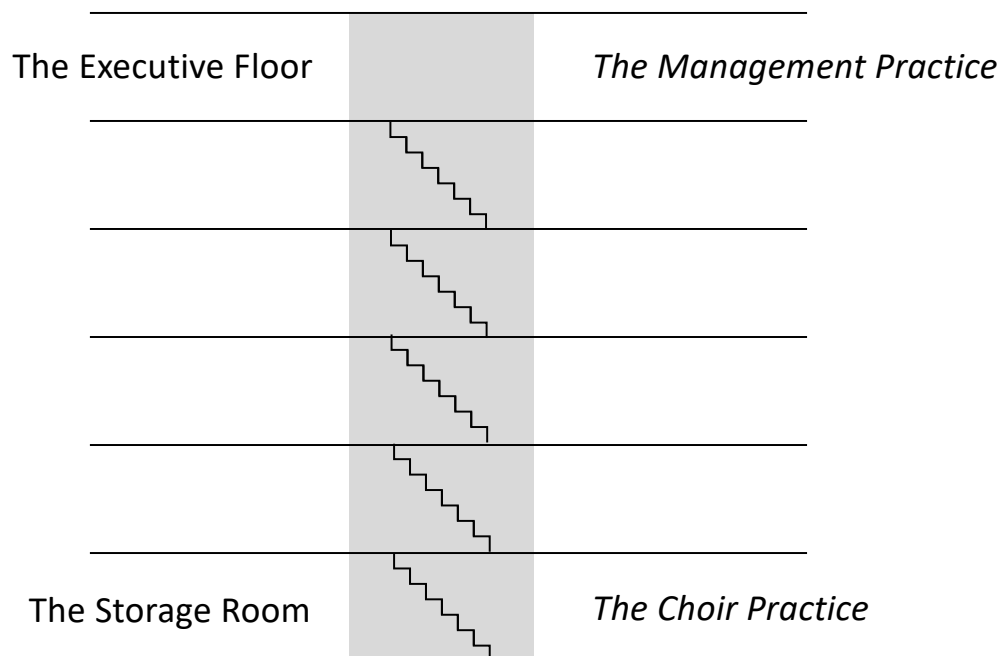
The Executive Floor   *The Management Practice*

The Storage Room   *The Choir Practice*

Figure 3: The staircase between two spaces, each hosting a community of practice.

Aesthetic workspace

One cornerstone of the project was the regularity of the sessions and how they became an unobtrusive component of the weekly agenda:

> Andrew: After I didn't show up for the second session, I remember that he [the CEO] banged the table and stated bluntly, "[...] you have no choice but to be there". Then I realised that it was as mandatory as the management meetings. And after a while, I was longing for it and looked forward to going down there—it was a break-out, a free space—in all the stress, it was a soothing place to be, it was so good. Then I felt that mastery came more and more, as we were together more and more.

Regularity of the sessions ensured that the choir was reinforced as a practice community and that we in fact had two superimposed communities. Whereas the management practice was a publicly exposed arena, the choir practice was clandestine and took place in the least

glamourous space possible. The choir practice was "naked", with no technical aids and everyone standing in a circle— nothing got in the way of living, breathing bodies. It was a practice stripped of all the protective shields, disruptions, and crowded agendas of the regular organisation. In short, the choir practice was an unusually well-defined and stripped-down practice community, insulated from the outside world.

The basement storage room was chosen as a compromise between easy access but still slightly off the busy office landscape. It reinforced the clandestineness of the activity, which removed much of the initial fear and resistance. The room was rather messy and uncomfortable, which clearly signalled that this was separate from regular team interaction (which would not have been the case with a conference room). The laughable location added humour as well as provided refuge, not to be underestimated when senior managers expose their vulnerability.

The autotelic nature of the activity at the outset, with no external reward, is one of the characteristics of a flow situation. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) noted that a flow sensation does not have so much to do with mastery and capability as such, but rather a condition of not being worried about lack of control. This helps to explain why the activity was found to be enjoyable, in spite of initial scepticism and the participants' sense of vulnerability. Even at the novice level, with a playful ambiance, there was a balance between capability and challenge— everyone stayed safely within the "flow channel" (p. 147) and avoided surrendering to either worry or boredom.

The distinctiveness of the two practices enabled some very concrete comparisons to be drawn by the participants. One of the most charming was how they experienced that a choir requires multiple voices, which at times move to the foreground and at times move to the background—in contrast with the constantly pushy "alpha-behaviour" in the management team. The term "alpha" was used by several participants to denote dominating behaviour[5] by males as well as females, and two of the men were particularly conscious of their own position:

> *Leo: Several of us in the management team were a kind of "alpha males". And that is something that you cannot have in a choir. [...] Andrew and I are very "alpha"—I think this [the choir project] was good for us. [...] Andrew and I were sort of the "front row" in the management team. We can surely say that, in the choir, we were the "back row". This had such a good calibrating and formative effect on us.*

Leo's statement illustrates how participants assume different identities in different communities of practice. The aesthetic workspace afforded a different set of possibilities, which for some were not entirely pleasurable. Moreover, it was difficult to escape the aesthetic workspace, due to the location as well as the chief executive's insistence on mandatory participation. In sum, the choir practice endured as an experiential ground that inevitably engendered reflexivity.

Aesthetic reflexivity

The staircase between the five floors separating the practices became a physical channel, one which allowed both the time and occasionally the solitude to make the transition back to the

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[5] "Alpha male" is defined as the dominant male in a particular group.
https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/alpha_male

executive floor. It became clear that a good portion of reflections happened during the transfer. For some reason, the group always used the stairs, rather than the lift. They often walked together, sometimes forming sub-groups. After some time, walking the stairs became an important in-between arena, coming out of an experience as well as re-entering managerial life. The staircase as a transfer space was clearly unintended, and transfer of learning could most certainly have taken place under other physical circumstances. However, it became an emblem of the simplicity of the set-up. Because the choir rehearsal and the management meetings were back to back, the immediacy was itself enhancing transfer of learning.

> *Greta: Maybe it's like this: if you come out of the basement and have been singing in perfect harmony and performed a really good tune, you simply cannot go up to the top floor and have a bad meeting. [...] You cannot yell at someone you've had a fantastic choir rehearsal with.*

An aesthetic experience does not by itself offer a line of reasoning or a mechanism for drawing propositional insight. Of course, we all talked about the activity during the project, but it did not involve systematic debriefing (beyond the interviews five and eight years after). Learning happened—or did not happen— in an uncoordinated manner and in highly individual fashions.

> *Kirsten: There were quite a number of stairs to walk from the top floor down to the basement. Then coming back . . . suddenly you see the strategic stuff, thinking more about the bigger issues. I remember that we had conversations on our way back up from choir rehearsal that were of a different kind than those we had sitting at our desks.*

In the course of the project, a new insight, a new idea, a parallel, or any other thought might just suddenly strike. Sometimes they talked about it, sometimes not. What actually took place in the transfer space eludes systematic scrutiny, because as time passed, they remembered only to some degree the details of what happened. What remained was the feeling. Despite the fact that some propositional insight emerged during the project, we must assume that a large part of the experience remained as unarticulated knowledge. To this point, it is quite remarkable that Chester Barnard, 80 years ago, recognized that managerial competence to a large degree belongs to the aesthetic and speechless realm:

> *Since there can be no common measure for the translation of the physical, biological, economic, social, personal, and spiritual utilities involved, the determination of the strategic factors of creative coöperation [sic] is a matter of sense, of feeling of proportions, of the significant relationship of heterogeneous details to a whole. This general executive process is not intellectual in its important aspect; it is aesthetic and moral. Thus its exercise involves the sense of fitness, of the appropriate, and that capacity which is known as responsibility—the final expression for the achievement of coöperation (Barnard, 1938, pp. 256–257).*

If the project learnings had not been researched several years after, some of the propositional knowledge coming out of it would not have been articulated. However, sensory and interpretive knowledge would still have remained as "sense of fitness", "feeling of proportions", and "details to a whole". The choir project engendered aesthetic reflexivity on the two coexisting levels pointed out by Springborg and Sutherland (2016) — sensory/interpretive as well as enactive. Neither of these depend on language, but reflexivity inextricably leads to some reflection in the form of conscious thought. What articulation

added, in the course of the project as well as during interviews and the group interview, was reinforcement, sharing of experience, and widened applicability of learnings.

Memories with momentum

Every organisational development intervention faces the challenge of engendering lasting change. It is reasonable to assume that the regularity and longevity of the choir project contributed to make changes stick. Unobtrusive insertion of choir sessions into the weekly agenda created an ambiance of ongoing-ness, as opposed to a finite project. It is probably a rare situation that a business management team engages in an ongoing music-based process for a long period of time. Going directly from the rehearsing room into the management meeting enabled the immediate transfer and re-application of insight, whether it remained as a sensory experience or they discussed and articulated propositional knowledge based on it. The group singing provided a direct parallel to the dynamics of the management team and the parallels became more salient as time went by. Although there were immediate effects, some of the insights emerged as articulated knowledge several years after. The chief executive reflected back on the overall impact of the project:

> *Caleb: It went deeper than I had expected. I did expect to have a good time and fun together, and that we maybe would get a lighter mood and be a little better acquainted. But we learned to know each other deeply—we created deep relations and had a much bigger impact on team spirit than we thought it would have. [...] It was much more important to everyone [than expected]. I believe it has been the best time in their lives, although I cannot know that for certain.*

The management team gave varied accounts of how the choir united them for the long run. However, the bonding started after only a couple of rehearsals. In their best moments, they sensed a certain "collective virtuosity", which is found to be a characteristic of peak performances in an orchestra when everything feels ineffably in place (Marotto, Roos, & Victor, 2007). A key question in this regard is whether the choir differs from other "instruments" or groups when used for team development. A study of seven adult education classes (four singing and three non-singing) found that singing does in fact mediate social bonding more rapidly than non-singing activities (crafts and creative writing, in this case). This suggests that singing is an icebreaker, "promoting fast cohesion between unfamiliar individuals, which bypasses the need for personal knowledge of group members gained through prolonged interaction" (Pearce et al., 2015, p. 1).

The management choir also involved extensive verbal exchange, and therefore the best of both worlds—quick ice-breaking and continuously strengthening bonds. As the members of the management choir reflected on what made choral singing different from other development interventions, they reiterated intimacy and vulnerability as the keys to fostering team cohesion, individual behavioural change, and expanded managerial repertoire. This observation is significant and non-trivial, given how intimacy and vulnerability are usually at odds with the posturing and armour that senior executives appear with. To this point, the courage to be and appear vulnerable was indeed one of the learning outcomes.

In retrospect, the performances became crucial for the learning experience. They did not fundamentally change the group dynamics, but nonetheless affected the two practices in different ways. A certain "stage fright" on the part of everyone in the team created a more level playing field in terms of competence in the choir practice—thus enhancing community. In the management practice, the performances induced a sense of invincibility, which in addition to community became an emblem of strong group identity—they could do something no other similar group was known to do. The fact that the group ended up doing three public

performances is in stark contrast with the internally focused beginning. Very importantly, the external goals could not have been set prior to the activity. By allowing objectives to emerge from a process of discovery, they ended up with an ambition level beyond their imagination. This points to an important discussion about the usefulness of goals, outside the scope of this paper.

The significance of unfreezing identities

The notion of "icebreaking" (Pearce et al., 2015, p. 1) is an interesting one, because it alludes to a rigidity that gets in the way of fluid interaction. It also resembles "unfreeze" as the first of three stages in Kurt Lewin's change management classic (Cummings, Bridgman, & Brown, 2016; Lewin, 1947). Any change, also on the individual level, depends on a certain "mobility" and "agility". Fixed positions and frozen identities inhibit change, including learning. In the workplace, managers engage in ongoing construction of the self, and artistic interventions trigger identity work (Zambrell, 2016). Although the management team was fairly new, the managerial community of practice was solidly established compared to the completely new choral practice in the shaping. The group was at the outset not in any way dysfunctional, but it had its normal share of conflicting personalities, squabbles, and soft power plays. Identities were rather fixed and reinforced by the daily managerial practice, to the degree that they became protective shields, well-adapted to fencing off attacks, but detrimental to flexible team work:

> *Kirsten: I see it all the time—you dress up in your title or your place in the hierarchy. And the more insecure you are, the more turbulence there is in the organization, the newer the management team is, the more crisis there is, the more important the armour becomes. [...] My experience is that if everyone is occupied with one's armour, cooperation is more difficult.*

One of the main effects of singing together was that they had to listen, they could hear that it sounded better when they didn't stick to their old habits and could leave their existing roles behind for a brief moment:

> *Charlotte: [Roles] got wiped out in that setting, where we could be completely different people and be a little nervous together. We definitely brought it back into the management meetings and were both more relaxed, had fun and a positive ... no, it changed the whole dynamics: it was easier to come forward, if you know what I mean, to be open, to dare.*

> *Kasper: That shell you wear in business, the "role" you pretend, disappears— it goes away. Then you are yourself. You give of yourself, or open up in a completely different way.*

The identities within the choir practice were different from the management practice. It is difficult to reconcile being an "alpha male" as a manager and close to tone deaf in the choir— with the same people and within the same hour of the day. This observation aligns with Zembrell's (2016) findings on how performing artistic interventions may challenge identity construction. When two communities of practice are superimposed, it unavoidably leads to cognitive dissonance for some of the members. According to Proulx and Inzlicht (2012), such dissonance calls for resolution in order to maintain coherent meaning. Andrew, who initially saw himself as tone deaf as well as an alpha-male, coped with the situation by modifying his participation in both practices. He gradually mastered multi-voice singing and he developed a more varied behaviour in the management group. The cognitive dissonance was reduced to

the degree that he later engaged me for another music-based intervention when he became chief executive of another company.

Beyond resolving dissonance between the two practices, the fact that the mission was music-making (and not anything else) may have been an important factor. Music has been found to soften or simply make us tolerate cognitive dissonance (Perlovsky, Cabanac, Bonniot-Cabanac, & Cabanac, 2013). Musical meaning is characterised by semantic poverty, but sensory and interpretive richness. Music greatly expands what is meaningful common ground for the group, thereby pushing disruptive differences to the background, while not necessarily removing them. This enables music to restore unity and cohesion in a group more effectively than verbal exchange.

Concluding remarks

The simplicity of the set-up (in addition to the longevity) proved to be the most valuable aspect of the intervention. This is not to say that it is easy to find a group of managers ready to undertake such an endeavour, but rather that when such occasions arise, a key success factor is simple design. Simplicity comes from the combined agenda fit and location. The time-space set-up allowed the superimposing of two communities of practice for the same group of people. Moreover, distinct spatial separation of the two practices created a conduit between the two practices—a transfer space where aesthetic reflection could happen, in silence or as dialogue, of sensory/interpretive nature or action oriented. The staging of the choir intervention may be seen through Katrin Kolo's (2015) view on choreography as the design of perception of space, time, and movement, bearing in mind the Greek roots of chorus (khoros)—the dancing place in a stage play. Although the chorus was set in the storage room, the overall staging did in effect comprise a wider "choreography". The staging was only partly deliberately chosen, and there is no question that the impact of it was discovered along the way and even long time afterwards. It is a reminder of how staging may directly shape the transfer space between the aesthetic domain and the target domain, as well as it may easily be a lost opportunity.

In terms of learning content, the notion of "alpha-male" serves as a label for the pushy behaviours and identities that were rattled and eventually modified during the project. Aesthetic experience and managerial practice were intertwined to the degree that transfer of learning after a while probably flowed in both directions—eluding simple cause-effect scrutiny of the intervention. The management choir was a real-life situation which was not set up for the purpose of research. This is in contrast with non-real research designs that allow the researcher to control the variables, to eliminate certain things and render others observable. The problem with complex human phenomena is that there are often too many variables to control. Despite its weaknesses, the key strength of the choir project (as research) was that a real group of managers, acting in their daily jobs, went through a learning process by singing together, which altered their understanding of self, one another and their means of operating within the organisation.

Concerning the data collection, it should be noted that the project bears resemblance to action research, as I served both as facilitator and researcher (although a fellow scholar reviewed the analytical categories and interpretation). Participants" reflections on their experience five and eight years later were not fresh and "uncontaminated" data, but rather further articulations of a co-constructed reality that grew out of the collective sensemaking in the project (of which I was a part). In retrospect, it is not possible to know which reflections were made while it happened and which have been shaped by the exchange taking place within the group to the present day. It is possible that the individual experiences appear more coherent than they in fact were. There is also a risk that participants overrate the experience,

not least when they talk about it when they meet as a group (which they continue to do, even if most of them are in new positions in new organizations). To the extent that they have felt the need to romanticise the story, this is in itself an aspect of how they made sense of the experience, and as such also valid data in its own right.

With regard to the replicability of such an intervention, it is clear that every management team, and the situation they find themselves in, is different. Hence, an intervention cannot be copied. However, some process-oriented design factors for similar types of projects can be summarised:

1. Group singing is a quick icebreaker. At the same time, for those who are not used to it, singing together is felt to be very exposing. It makes everyone feel vulnerable. Existing relationships and identities are immediately rattled.
2. For this reason, facilitators must be conscious of the ethical aspects of such interventions and take care of the participants when the experience hits them. Explicitly stated ground rules are useful.
3. Initial resistance must be expected, to varying degrees, depending on the participants' point of the departure. Converting resistance to enthusiasm is probably not possible in a dysfunctional group, or if the leader is not strongly committed.
4. It is very useful if the facilitator is "bilingual"—that is, proficient in music and organisational work.
5. A workplace choir (consisting of an entire organisational unit) enables the direct transfer of learning between communities of practice. Everything that happens in the music-making situation is immediately interpreted within the frame of the regular organisation.
6. A workplace choir lasting for several months engenders the ongoing processing of aesthetic experience, interpretation and reasoning, and the desire to re-deploy new insights.
7. Even a purely aesthetics-oriented intervention (void of instrumental goals) will eventually surface some level of ambition or a desire to show and share acquired capabilities.

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