



LEADERSHIP ACUMEN

Doug Macnamara, Banff Executive Leadership Inc. and
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Leonardo da Vinci, Please Call the Office

Toronto – One of the hottest management gurus around nowadays may just be someone who lived a half a millennium ago: Leonardo da Vinci.

The concept seems perfectly logical to Doug Macnamara, previously General Manager of the Banff Centre for Management, in Alberta. He's all fired up about the new seminar the centre is introducing this year: a leadership program drawing on the 1998 book, "How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci," by Michael J. Gelb.

"We're going through a renaissance nowadays," Mr. Macnamara says in an interview in Toronto. Citing the explosive growth of the New Economy, so who better to guide executives eager to make their mark as "agents of Change" and creative leaders, he asks, than the original, quintessential Renaissance man himself, da Vinci?

The Banff Centre's seminar is part of a larger trend toward business educators realizing that leadership is an art as well as a science – and that approaching management strictly by the numbers isn't going to cut it nowadays.

"A lot of what senior managers need is qualities like flexibility, the ability to inspire followers, creativity, and empathy," says Daniel Cushing of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. "But you could spend two years in business school and never hear those words."

Of these, the improve exercises have proven the more useful, Mr. Cushing suggests. "The mantra is 'Everything's changing.' What do you do when there isn't a tool box, a framework? Artists are great improvisers and inventors, and a big part of being a manager is improvising; you can't just turn to a book."

At Banff, leadership training and the arts have long been linked; the Banff Centre for the Arts is an organizational sibling of the Centre for Management.

Part of the concept of the new innovation and renewal seminar is active, hands-on learning, Macnamara says. "We'll be working with ceramics," he explains. "That will provide a physical interaction, and show how to get down below the surface levels of issues."

Why ceramics?

"A lot of ceramics is about texture – it's about figure and ground," Macnamara explains. "It's about what is background, what is theme. How do we train our eye to spot the nuggets we should be focusing on? Ceramics opens (the participants) up to other possibilities."

One other possibility the centre tried but has given up was modern dance unit, he adds. "that was too 'out there,' even when we told them they wouldn't have to wear tights," Macnamara adds with a chuckle.

Also on the program for the week-long sessions, set for February and June 2001:

- Working with music to help executives “find their inner voice.”
- Macnamara’s own tricks for music that helps his thought processes: Vivaldi for “deep think”; “good jazz for creative thinking”; rock music for when he needs to be “aggressive.”
- Theater work – including the Alexander Technique, long used by actors to enhance their stage presence – to help executives master the “public performance” aspects of their jobs, including media relations. There are issues of “how you are set up a room for a staff meeting, how do you set up a room for a speech,” Macnamara says. There are executives who are naturals at this, and there are those who have learned from the school of hard knocks.”
- Multimedia work: “Increasingly, there’s a sense that if you don’t deliver your work through multimedia, we won’t value it as much.”

For Macnamara, a key point in da Vinci’s work is that he considered subjects from multiple perspectives: He did dissections by cross-section as well as lengthwise, for instance, centuries before sophisticated software first let designers “rotate” three-dimensional models on computer screens.

Similarly, Macnamara says, today’s leaders “need to look at problems or opportunities from multiple perspectives – the employee’s, the company’s, the product’s, the community’s.”

Not surprisingly, Mr. Gelb concurs on the value of da Vinci for the would-be renaissance executive. He has been traveling the world offering seminars based on his “Leonardo principles” since 1978 to organizations such as Digital Equipment, 3M, and Anglo-American.

“My mission is to bring the thought of Leonardo to the world,” he says. Leonardo brought the world “from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance,” he adds, and as we progress from the industrial/mechanical era to the information age, da Vinci’s approach to understanding the world around him makes an excellent model.

That his famous notebooks involve both writing and drawing, word and image, makes them vastly more valuable as a thinking and learning tool than traditional linear notes and outlines, with their hierarchies of Roman numerals and letters, Gelb says.

The notebooks’ organic flow, furthermore, makes them “more Web oriented,” more useful in showing interconnections, he adds. “There’s been a shift from a “thing’ model of the world to a “living” model – in which everything has a soul.”

Moreover, da Vinci’s notebooks help bridge the gaps between art and science, and work and play. Gelb quotes the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, “We are most ourselves when we approach the seriousness of the child at play.”

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