

Artists as organizational development facilitators – evaluation of six projects

Ulla Johansson, Phd. Professor Design Management

ulla.johansson@gri.gu.se

Business & Design Lab.

HDK/ School of Business, Economics & Law in cooperation

Box 611

40530 Göteborg

Sweden

Abstract

This paper presents an evaluation of six projects where artists (graphic designer, dancer, actor, director, jewelry artist, photographer) worked with organizations (three public authorities and three companies) to help with their development. The aim of the projects was that the organizations should develop in some given direction (for example increase competence of salespeople, help a local authority deal with diversity etc.), and that the artists should use their own artistic competence to facilitate the process. The evaluation uses a combination of methods: participant observations in meetings at some of the companies, interviews with representations from the organizations and with the artists, and a survey to a broader group of participants within the six organizations. From organizational point of view the results were positive in all six companies, and extremely positive in some of them. From an artistic point of view, the results were more complex and need further investigation.

KEYWORDS: Art & management, organizational development

Introduction

What is the role of an artist in organizational development? How can a dancer help talented salespersons at NK – one of Sweden's most exclusive department stores - become even better? And what has a magician who is also an actor to do with governmental problem solving? How can a jewelry artist be part of management training?

These are questions that one may well ask – and the links are neither ordinary nor "natural" for most of us. During this project, I have experienced a journey, starting with asking the questions above with a mixture of wonder and fascination and ending with a number of

stories in which it is obvious that the artists have something to contribute. It is this journey from a raised eyebrow to an "Aha experience" that will be described in this paper.

The paper begins with a description of the background of the project followed by a short methodological statement. Then the six projects are described from organizational point of view, the first three in some detail and the rest more briefly, followed by some notions from the artists' perspectives. Finally, I make some general reflections.

The project in context

KIA stands for Creative Innovation in Working Life (*Kreativa Innovationer i Arbetslivet* in Swedish). KIA was granted money as an interregional project within the European Union in 2009. The project is coordinated by Communication department at University of Aalborg in Denmark that also is responsible for the overall evaluation of the program. The Swedish part, described here, consists of six projects. Business & Design Lab, an interdisciplinary research center in the intersection between Faculty of Art and Faculty of Business, Economics and Law at Gothenburg University, is responsible for the evaluation of these six Swedish projects¹.

The Swedish situation: Skådebanan and Tillt

Skådebanan is an organization within the labor movement, founded in 1909 by the famous Swedish author August Strindberg together with Hjalmar Branting, a famous socialistic agitator in Sweden at the time, and two others from the social democratic party. Its purpose was to be a link between the working class and culture, with workplace delegates as cultural mediators in that they had - and still get - both tickets and information they can pass on to fellow workers. Today in the western region alone, there are 700 delegates who represent a total of 50.000 employees.

About 15 years ago, *Skådebanan* in the western region of Sweden started a special new business activity that has become very successful. Instead of ensuring that workers could take part in cultural events by coming to the cultural institutions, *Skådebanan* began to think about how culture might come out to the workplace, (as one organizer said, "If the mountain does not come to Mohammed, Mohammed must go to the mountain"). Thus the culture would come to the workers and, in addition, the organizers wanted to integrate it in the workplace. The ties between the working class and culture were still there, but the relations were now extended from looking at individual to the whole organization; the goal became to show how art could be useful not only from an individual perspective but for the whole organization. Underlying the changes was the conviction that culture is something important that should permeate the entire society, and that artists can contribute positively in unexpected ways not only to society at large but also in professional life. "The intention has not been primarily to obtain employment for artists," emphasizes Pia Areblad, Executive Director and one of the initiators of *Tillt*. "Rather, it has been a desire to experiment in practical ways with and implement a partnership with companies that provides positive dividends for both companies and artists. The intention has always been that artists should work on their own terms in dialogue with the company. They should provoke: provoke new thoughts, perceptions and express unspoken feelings in their own medium (be it dance,

¹ A final evaluation of the overall interregional KIA-project will be documented in a book written in Scandinavian Languages (Swedish, Norwegian and Danish) to be published in June 2012.

painting or drama), thereby creating a more open climate and increased creativity.” As so often in the arts and various therapeutic applications, it is thus rather the side effects that companies are looking for and willing to pay for.

When Skådebanan became an international agent on the cultural scene, they changed their name to Tilt, which is easier to pronounce in English but also refers to the changed strategy that has occurred within the Western part of Sweden.

KIA projects from the Swedish horizon: shorter and with a more closed, goal-driven process than their normal activities

From the Swedish viewpoint, KIA projects and their approach forms part of a longer tradition, which is continuously developing. The flagship program for Tilt's cooperation with companies is Airis, standing for *Artists in Residence*, a project where artists of different kinds are employed to work in a company one day a week for almost a year (Areblad 2010). Tilt, however, saw an opportunity to do something a little different in connection with the Scandinavian cooperation, and decided to try, "a little shorter and a little harder-driven project to see how it worked," says Johan Lundbladh, project manager for KIA project implementation in Sweden.

Airis projects normally extend over 10 months, while KIA projects were meant to be completed within 3 months (something that in the end was the case for only half of the projects). Within the Airis projects, considerable time was used at the beginning for artists, employees and management to jointly agree on the target and how to implement the work. So the Airis project had a very open-ended starting process. In the KIA project, however, the target was already set when the artist came into the workplace. These two differences - the length of the projects and open or closed project - was something Tilt wanted to investigate.

Evaluation methods

All the KIA projects in Denmark, Norway and Sweden are evaluated through a survey study conducted by the Danish research team from University of Aalborg that coordinates the research program as a whole. In Sweden, Business & Design Lab at University of Gothenburg has been responsible for the evaluation of six KIA-projects. Three researchers have been involved and all have taken interpretative approaches (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009) of different kinds:

- Doctoral student Marcus Jahnke made participant observations of meetings in the newspaper company². He made these observations and reflections from a hermeneutic tradition. (Jahnke 2012).
- One of the artists, Victoria Brattström, made a special form of participation analysis, whereby she reflected on how she had used her special competencies as a director and actor when working with organizational development³. Her paper is presented

²Ulla Johansson made some participant observations at the department store NK. However, this participatory research project was interrupted by a combination of changed dates and Ulla's upcoming cancer treatment.

³ Her reflections are available in a parallel paper at the Cumulus Conference. (Brattström 2012).

parallel with this paper at Cumulus, and uses a narrative style in the form of a film manuscript to show how she used her directing competencies. (Brattström 2012).

- As presented in this paper, I used a combination of methods to make a qualitative evaluation of all six KIA projects. At KIA-conferences I met representatives from different companies for informal conversations and recorded personal interviews. In addition, I conducted telephone interviews with representations from all the six organizations and the six artists. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, yielding even more valuable data than originally expected. Each interview resulted in a transcribed text of 2400-5600 words that formed the basis for a shortened and interpreted description of the process and result. This paper therefore builds on an inductive and reflective method with some similarities with grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967). All the work was conducted in Swedish and quotations in the paper are the author's translations.

The Swedish projects from organizational perspective

This section describes the six Swedish projects. The first two projects are described in somewhat more length, and the remaining four very briefly.

1. Pomona Balance – wanted to give employees more power and creativity

Pomona offers HRM services to other businesses. "We arrange everything from recruitment to settlement" says current CEO Ulla Knutsson. They also work with team and leadership development. Much of their work concerns the rehabilitation of chronically ill employees. The challenge that the artist and the company presented was formulated as follows: to develop their service with help of artistic competence.

The artist, Martin Bröns was suggested by Tillt. He is a magician and filmmaker, and he was elected because the company had talked about shooting videos, "for example, how our values becomes apparent when we work ..." and post the videos on the website.

The start of the process

When Pomona was invited to join the Tilt project, their reasoning was as follows:

We wanted to have this part [ie, art and creativity] in the company because we are very creative. It's very much ideas around us. But it's so many ideas that sometimes we have difficulty getting it together.

Thus the company's desire seems to have been to maintain and develop creativity, but combined with increased structure. Also, "process" and "values" were two words that were repeatedly used:

We are working with a process while we work with people / ... / we work with the conscious choice [that chronically ill people should make themselves]. And this is actually our basic idea. So we have a process around it when we work with people ... [will] come from the back seat to the front seat, we usually say. And to drive their car themselves.

Yes, and our values are very strong, and we wanted to show it in some way, and had probably no idea if we could, to show more results ... what ... how our values express themselves and what they stand for, really. So it

... it was probably somewhere where we started, I think.

Values and the way they work with people who have difficulties in the labor market ("sitting in the back seat") are important for the company.

The project was regarded as messy at first, then became "so very natural after /.../ when we had met a few times. "

Initially, Pomona participants intended to make films about the activities - movies that would also show their value basis - to be published on the web. But after meeting a few times they realized that it was not necessary to film, and they worked on for a while "without having a firm idea of what would happen in the end. And then it became something completely different"

So we have not filmed. But we have been working as we would film. We like working with scenes and build in the crowd scenes, based on our values. So it's been very interesting to do.

The CEO said the meetings with the artist were "very exciting", "very different" and "did an enormous amount". Her staff also expressed similar comments. I wondered in what ways the meetings did a lot, When they answered this question they all related to the dualism of "mind" and "body" and that they now realized that they had brought this with them to work before.

He (the magician Martin Bröns) saw that we were using our heads so much. We are thinking about processes and when we think ... we talk and talk / ... / We use our brains to think out loud all the time and be so good. So the artist thought we needed to work with the body, so it became the essence of the whole thing.

The ongoing process

The CEO said that the artist complied different exercises for staff to use:

It's almost like in kindergarten, very simple exercises to release and be free. Then we work with role-playing and we work on different sequences that you put together to create a small scene.

Pomona thus built up scenes with various roles in which staff had to assume both client and coaching roles. Originally they intended to make film sequences, but when they came to the staging, they found filming quite superfluous. Instead, their focus centered on efforts to take the different roles, and the role-playing scenes became so important that even after the project ended employees made use of the games when they were "stuck" in a situation and didn't know how to solve it. At this point they asked a colleague to join them in role-playing to find new solutions to the problem at hand.

One example of role-playing games related to the company's values was "to meet all where they are." According to company management, that means, "Everyone should be seen as part of us, whether it is an electrician or a customer or a participant or an employee. And everyone should be treated the same way. That is the gist of the valuation, so to speak. " Various scenes were built on this value system, such as, "How we meet an alcoholic, how we meet a stranger who is dark skinned, how we meet a very wealthy person, how we meet an impoverished person." In the different scenes we are testing values of the companies against their internal images, to develop and be able to deal with prejudices. CEO said that they were

playing very exaggerated scenes, but that

We had to feel what it is to be a low status person. So what is the low status for us? So, we had to visualize it, or try to show it to each other. We went around the room and just felt depressed, or, if we had high status - how did we look then? And so, we were discussing it. How did it feel? There were plenty of these exercises.

So most recently we had a day for all employees where we all got to test the different things / ... / that a small proportion of the employees had done for some time. / ... / Then we had a show in the evening so we had to practice a little magic. And so, yes, we dressed ourselves (for our roles) and had a show for one another and some invited guests, and this created such a great memory. We laughed so much together, and ... it is almost the greatest benefit, that we were clearly connected together even more.

Plus / ... / it was approved by even the most crit ... the greatest critic that it is okay to ... okay to play

The result of the project from the management's perspective

The CEO said that the project has affected the company "a lot" and that now it's okay to do different things that formerly would have been regarded as weird. She also said that positive experiences from the project were mainly of two types:

The first, described as "new energy", "joy" and "permission to be playful", was mentioned as the most important result by both the CEO and the employees.

The second, that they acquired an (artistic) tool to use in daily practice, was also mentioned by everyone as very important. Here "tools" referred to the role-play they learned and which some employees now use quite often to catch new perspectives on how to resolve a situation. In addition, the CEO also mentioned that one of the management teams started to literally "paint their feelings," both when they started and when they ended a meeting.

So we painted our feelings ... How does it feel now that we start a new group? So we painted pictures ... How does that feel now, in the body? Then we painted the way it felt when we finished the meeting. So, here is a concrete example of what we did last week.

Only three people I spoke with could think of a single negative thing about the project, namely that it was "very messy in the beginning."

"It's been a great project," said the current CEO, and two other people I meet expressed similar opinions. They thought that the work itself was fun, and that the project got results and provided "tools" to apply in the daily routine work. In addition, they spoke very positively about "our artist or magician", and described him as "a truly remarkable person" who both understood their needs as persons and had an understanding of the company's situation. "Because we only had a limited time we barely completed it (the project), but we have refused to give up. So it has not been easy for him, I can say."

2. The prison probation unit - wanted to maintain its positive culture

The prison probation unit maintains contact with people who are convicted but sentenced to probation instead of prison. It therefore represents a sensitive link between the legally established court system and the social state

The organization faced a controversial move to new premises. It would leave its current offices in a small-scale neighborhood to move into a large, newly-built building that also housed both the court and police. Moving into the same building as the jail was not ideal for the probation service, which worked with pathways into the ordinary civil society, and which also stood for a completely different culture than the other organization. This is what Malin Sparrström, director and initiator of the project, said:

So we got very different physical conditions. And we thought that now we probably need all the help we can get. / ... / We are good at what our culture within the probation service stands for. Being able to preserve it, when we move to the new conditions was important. There was a great concern among the staff - what will happen?

They felt worried that their own culture would be engulfed by something other than their probation culture:

That we somewhat got raped, and the new prerequisites would mean that we couldn't maintain or own culture in some way.

The project was thus a conservation project and the project challenge became to clarify and preserve their organizational culture. They first needed to be aware of their own culture because culture is something that most people take for granted and only recognize when it disappears. In this case they wanted to clarify their culture and to consciously work with it so as not to abandon it. The project challenge⁴ was formulated by Tillt's process manager in cooperation with the organization before an artist was appointed:

- *Preserve and cherish the good internal culture within the new facilities with different conditions*
- *Clarify the staff's treatment of clients in connection with the move*
- *Raise awareness of our strategies, knowledge, and values.*

Peter Walselius was chosen as the artist. He is an actor, but has also worked as a coach. He was chosen because, "He personally had a positive attitude and his knowledge of the interaction between people could be helpful in this context".

When I ask Malin to describe the operation in such a way that I, who had never participated, would understand, she replied:

I do not know if I can. (laughs) Yes, it is terribly difficult to do so. Well, he had a model for how to work, and [he] has published a book that we are trying to follow.

It's all a lot about this and that; we start talking about what is our culture and what it is that we want, and what kind of things are important. In this way we built alliances together. / ... / Each working group [must begin to talk] about how to work with these kinds of important cultural and civic values, and how to keep these values by talking together with each other when things get difficult.

And [so he got us to] do other exercises in a way that the staff perhaps are not used to do. Maybe see each other from a slightly different [perspective], slightly different horizon than in our usual traditional meetings.

When asked to tell us about any exercise that she remembers, she replied by describing an exercise in which the management team which would "dream up" and put words to their dreams:

We would dream up and think about whether we imagined it just the way we wished it was; what was it we saw in front of us ... for creativity in the workplace.

⁴ "The challenge" is the word they used for a phenomenon that in other contexts is often called "aim" or "goal".

She also talked about how they worked with metaphors to sensitize themselves and express their identity. Here she said:

If I were to see my working group as animals or as a phenomenon, what do I see in front of me then? Somehow, this was a little bit of attack on the culture with different words and different conditions from what we usually do. These were the kinds of things, we worked with.

In addition, the organization wanted the project to create a clear impression that would be permanent and remain in "in our everyday lives." This became a play that took a historical perspective on their business activities. At the premiere there were a large number of creative workshops where you could work with dreams and visions in different ways:

The result - being able to articulate the culture and making new ways of working legitimate

There were several different types of results. One obvious result mentioned by several people was that people can now "put words to" things that used to be cultural and taken-for-granted. The positive - and important - culture had been made known, and therefore easier to protect.

When I asked about the most positive experience, the answer was this:

It was probably to have such a genuine opportunity to work in a different way, with someone who has completely different skills. It was extremely positive. That we met somewhat/little across borders, both with this artistic director, but also within the workgroup.

She also mentioned the joy and the increased life-energy gained by working with an artist:

We laughed a lot (laughs). I do not know if you can call that such a positive thing? It may be ridiculous, but, yes. / ... / Yes, it was actually very energizing. Maybe it's much better to say so, that it was very energizing.

The four remaining projects

All the projects were quite different from each other:

3. In **Skövde local authority** an actor and director worked with a group of top managers to find a platform for diversity work. Their work resulted in a visible result in form of an exhibition. The most important result, however, seemed to be the changed view and insights of the participants, where they stressed that the artistic process had given them new insights in a way that wouldn't have been possible through a more traditional consultant's work.

4. At **NK department store** – a top store in Gothenburg - a dancer worked with the salespeople to help them become even better at their job. She did it through observing their communicative body language. She also worked with the team's process.

5. At **Västgöta newspaper** a graphic designer worked with the journalists to help them be more creative and find their target group – female readers 20-45 years old. They found a new concept for some of the pages in the newspaper and they started new ways of communicating with the readers through social media.

6. **Almi**, a governmental organization, let a jewelry artist work with one of the managers who was burned out. Through his work with jewelry and talking about the conditions for artistic work she learned how to concentrate and make priority for one thing at a time.

Reflections about what the companies “got” from the artists

This paper has focused on a description of the process from the organizational point of view. In a separate paper submitted to this conference one of the artists, Victoria Brattström, describes and reflects over how she has used her specific competence as an actor and director in her work with Skövde city.

From her description (Brattström 2012), she clearly used some general artistic or creative talent, but, more important, when she worked with the management team on diversity she used specific working methods from her work as a director. This seemed to be the case with most of the artists involved with the various projects. I call this deliberate use of a competence from one context in work in another a “discursive translation” of competences from one professional working area into another. This discursive translation is both interesting and complex. In my opinion this inter-discourse translation is at the core of the value creation provided by these projects, and it is therefore an area for further problematization, exploration, and reflection.

Another point worth noting is what the organizations “got” from the artists. What is the deliverable from the artists and what is the character of this “delivery”? And is the artists’ delivery the same as what the organizations have gained from the project or is there some interesting discursive change between what the artists give and what is gained from the organizational point of view? From the stories above it is possible to claim that all organizations seemed to have received organizational development. Yet, it is very doubtful whether one can say that the consultants were organizational development consultants in a traditional way (e.g., Schein, 1969). If not, what should they be called, and even more important, what have the organizations gained from the artists? Here is a short list from the stories told above⁵:

- Increased energy and laughs (Pomona; Prison probation unit)
- Being braver and more insightful (Skövde local authority)
- Access to their own creativity (Skövde local authority; Västgöta newspaper; Prison probation unit)
- Better teamwork feeling (NK; Skövde local authority)
- Help in being aware of and interpreting their own culture (Prison probation unit)
- Exercises that became new tools for problem solving (Pomona)
- Help to reach a new level of concentration (Almi)
- New strategies for innovation (Västgöta newspaper)

Neither the tools nor the results were “organizational solutions” in the way this concept is normally understood (i.e. grounded in management knowledge and literature as normally taught in management schools). As hinted in the stories above – and as more explicitly

⁵ Only two of the projects are described in sufficient depth here for the reader to be able to follow the conclusions. The remainder are described in the Swedish book-chapter from which this list is taken (Johansson 2012).

discussed in the paper of Victoria Brattström – it is the artistic knowledge that is the foundation for their work. However, since artistic work always includes an emotional dimension, one could say that rather than providing the organization with new cognitive perspectives, the KIA projects instead opened up new perspectives and ideas from emotional dimensions.

4 reflections from a process perspective

Both Tilt and their client organizations in the KIA projects emphasized that the process as such is important when “implementing artistic processes” into commercial or governmental organizations. The organizational representatives all talked about “processes” and Tilt clearly put a lot of effort into “handling the process”. Below are some reflections made from a process perspective:

1. The introduction

The introduction of the projects into the organizations was a crucial point where a combination of earlier contacts, trust, and much communication play an important role. All organizations were aware of the need for the introduction and Tilt thought it was very important. However, this was still the most common feature mentioned when I asked for negative things or something to learn from.

2. A changed understanding took place about what art could do

During the ongoing activities, changes at a number of different levels occurred in the way participants made sense of the artistic work and its role in organizational development. This is an interesting phenomenon worthy of more in-depth studies and reflections.

3. All projects were regarded as positive

There were clearly visible results that all of the interviewees could easily describe in retrospect, though beforehand most interviewees seemed to have been wondering what would happen. Of course the results were not easy to quantify, but most organizational representatives did not seem to bother about that, since they knew there were positive relationships between the qualitative changes that took place and overall organizational performance.

4. The relation between the artist's aim and the aim of the organization

There seems to be an interesting and quite complex relation between the artist's aim and the aim of the organization. No explicit conflicts were mentioned; on the contrary, all the artists seemed to want to please the organization while they tried to use their own knowledge. However, I noticed two things:

First, what was “their own knowledge”? Many of the artists had both qualifications as artists and also a diploma in pedagogy or a similar area. So they could easily use this other knowledge if the artistic communication fell short. This could be helpful for both the artist as a person and for the organization, but it also created a conflict with the aim of delivering artistic development and pure artistic work. In addition, some companies said, ironically, they appreciated it more when the artist “worked with the body instead of talking” as they phrased it. Taking just this one example, the relation between artistic knowledge and organizational development work seemed to be quite complex and needs further problematization.

Concluding remarks

What I have done in this paper is mainly a descriptive overview of six empirical projects. The reflections are only grounded on a first reading of the data and the total text of the transcribed interviews provided a very rich source for further exploration and conceptualization. I therefor hope to return to the KIA-project and Tillt in future more theoretical problematizations and reflections.

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