# Research proposal:

# Improving Soft Skill Training in Management

# through Methods Used in Performing Arts Curricula

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References

I. Motivation

Recent research findings have reinforced the importance of soft skills for managerial success

(Gentry et al. 2008). Consequently, there is an ongoing practical need for and research

interest in effective soft skill training design for management development purposes (Crosbie

2005). To improve the quality and effectiveness of soft skill trainings for managers, a closer

look at professions with deep soft skill exposure, such as performing arts, could offer a source

of corporate training optimisation. Managerial training seminars on communication,

presentation and presence, speech and use of voice, stress management, facilitation or conflict

management rarely exceed a few days. By contrast, the higher education curricula of

performing arts universities include practical training on comparable topics over the period of

weeks or months. Requirements for soft skill mastery are extremely high in the professional

arts: the scale of the audience and the prohibition of mistakes with no chance of re-submission

of unsatisfactory performance dictate a most superior skilfulness for stress handling,

communication, agility, or, in the case of orchestra, leadership and team building (Gansch

2006). It therefore seems that, in at least some behavioural areas, there is a considerable gap

between the training and occupational requirements of performing arts professionals on one

hand, and the relatively limited training breadth and depth of managers. However, as stated

initially, many studies have witnessed that soft skills are consistently ranked as most

important when it comes to career advancement in management. Therefore, a systematic

exploration of the applicability of performing arts training methods and exercises to a management development audience is potentially valuable for advancing the effectiveness

and professionalism of soft skills training practice.

II. Literature scan

Two areas and their connections are relevant for the proposed doctoral project: soft skills in

business and arts-based training.

Soft Skills

Soft skills are defined as attitudes and behaviours displayed in interactions among individuals

that affect outcomes of such encounters (Muir 2014: 13). There exist a few item lists or

models that can serve as a starting point, including a competency model by the American

Management Association (Tobin & Pettingell 2008) or exemplified lists (Davis et al. 1996;

Crosbie 2005). These models can be taken as a starting point for describing soft skill

categories. Other concepts related to soft skills, such as emotional intelligence (Goleman

1995), personality or leadership should be included in the study of soft skills when turning to

training soft skills or exploring arts-based training. Many authors claim that soft skills can

actually be trained. For example, McEnrue and Groves (2006) confirm a considerable

agreement among scientists about the fact that skills can be developed over time. This is an

important prerequisite when proposing arts-based training elements.

Arts-based Training

Originally, the relationship between arts and the business world has been mainly characterised

by philanthropy, sponsorship and social investment and not by turning to artists for business

improvements (Manning 2007). Thus, it was only recently that “people in the arts would have

begun to share their expertise in creativity and high performance with leadership of business”

(Bartelme 2005: 5). Arts-based interventions in organisations may have existed for a few

decades, but overviews about this phenomenon only emerged recently. It is generally known

that “only very few empirical studies have been conducted” and that there is “ a considerable

gap between research and practice” (Berthoin Antal 2009: 5). Some very few models have

been proposed to structure the phenomenon of arts-based management development,

including a typology matrix (Tylor & Ladkin 2009) and the arts value matrix of Schiuma

(2009). However, these models are very abstract and do not address training specifics,

especially relating to the training of soft skills.

III. Research gap

As seen above, the review of literature on training and management development reveals

rather limited reference to the use of music or arts in managerial training settings. These few

references include the general “potential of arts in training” (Beckwith 2003), the

“enhancement of management education through music and magic” (Wheatley 1998), or the

metaphorical potential of chamber music for coaching managers (Megginson 2000). Thus, research has hardly linked the training universe built upon in performing arts education to the

training context of managers, particularly in the area of soft skills.

IV. Research question and research goals

The research question can be stated as follows:

How can management soft skill training benefit from training exercises used in performing

arts higher education curricula?

This research question translates into three distinct research goals:

1. Identification and structuring of soft skill training elements: Managerial and

performing arts training should be related to each other through a common frame of

reference – a suitable set of soft skills to be identified.

2. Clarification of the usefulness of performing arts training for management

development purposes: Without empirical evidence, any value derived from

performing arts training elements for management development remains a mere

assumption. To substantiate this assumption, empirical evidence is required.

3. Proposal of training approach: Based on the findings in the previous steps, a

suggestive model might be devised to capture conclusions and recommendations.

V. Research methodology

Arts-based training for managers is a hardly researched area. Qualitative research seems more

appropriate here, because the research topic has to be explored with many open questions.

Quantitative research, on the other hand, typically addresses specific questions, for example,

how one variable depends on the other – this is less suitable here.

The idea is to conduct in-depth interviews with two groups of respondents: performing arts

professors and HR representatives of consulting firms. In-depth interviews are conducted on a

one-to-one basis while allowing a great degree of flexibility. Professors from performing arts

universities are chosen because they know the curricula of theatre, musical instruments or

conducting, including training exercises. The second target group for interviews are HR

representatives, since they are knowledgeable about management training needs and

programmes. For empirical purposes, these HR managers will be interviewed from industry

known to have very high soft skills requirements: management consulting (Mohe 2006). By

choosing top management consulting as a target industry, the HR training community is

arguably limited to a more coherent population sharing similar training needs for empirical

research purposes. Typically, HR training managers in consulting firms have an actual career track in consulting (Kubr 2002), which makes them knowledgeable about the training needs

of consultants.

VI. Relevant professional experience and research project feasibility

I work as a professional trainer and executive coach. My training services include traditional

soft skills training engagements such as presentation and presence, voice optimization,

facilitation, or negotiation. In addition, I offer a personality development training where I am

actually working with selected exercises from classical music / opera training. Hence this

research proposal strongly reflects my specific professional background. Since I have had

success with my personality development training (with clients from industry, services, and

higher education), I wish to use the professional doctorate opportunity to seek further

professionalism, produce scientific evidence, and make valuable principles accessible to a

wider audience. I have access to more than forty sponsoring firms of my alma mater, mostly

represented by HR directors whom I assume to be open to research inquiry. The proposed

research project relies, however, not only on corporate interviewing opportunities, but also on

the possibility of approaching performing arts academics and professionals for empirical

purposes. Fortunately, I graduated from two Universities of Music and Theatre (in addition to

my MBA). This formal education background in the performing arts and in music pedagogy

provides me with contacts to teachers and artists for interviewing purposes.

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