Shifting metaphors, shifting mindsets: Using music to change the key of conflict

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1. Introduction

To date, artistic activism, including music-based interventions, has been rooted primarily in aspiration, not in evidence. People worldwide yearn for better societies, organizations, and leadership, but they must face that traditional approaches based primarily on economics, politics and the military are failing to produce desired outcomes. Such repeated failures have led people worldwide to experiment with artistic interventions in combination with their other more traditional strategies (Adler, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2015; Adler & Ippolito, 2015; Ippolito & Adler, 2016). To date, however, we have not had sufficient evidence to know if and when such artistic initiatives are efficacious. Do they actually lead to desired outcomes or even have the potential to do so? To address this critical need, research was conducted to begin to ascertain if and how music can enhance and transform individuals’ abilities to address conflictual situations. Whereas a wealth of studies demonstrate the positive impact of arts-based interventions on children (see Catterall, 1998; Catterall, 2002; Deasy, 2002; Rooney, 2004; Bamford, 2006; and Ruppert, 2006 among others), extensive and systematic research on adults, including those working in organizations, is only now beginning to be conducted (Berthon Antal, 2009, 2011; Johansson Sköldberg, Woodilla, & Berthon Antal, 2015).

1.1. Music and the musical-ensemble metaphor

Metaphors act as cognitive frames dictating how people think, feel and ultimately respond to situations. According to linguist Deborah Tannen, “language invisibly molds our way of thinking about people, actions, and the world around us. Military metaphors train us to think...
Table 1: Comparisons: The structure of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time period</th>
<th>Music-based group</th>
<th>Non-music-based group</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Introduced collaborative metaphors</td>
<td>Introduced collaborative metaphors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Reflection on personal cognitive and affective responses to conflict and its handling</td>
<td>Reflection on personal cognitive and affective responses to conflict and its handling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Observation of interactive Workshop with a string quartet</td>
<td>Observation of interactive talk on cross-cultural negotiations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 7</td>
<td>Observation and behavior:</td>
<td>Observation and behavior:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 10</td>
<td>Behavior: World Trade Center redesign complex multi-party negotiation</td>
<td>Behavior: World Trade Center redesign complex multi-party negotiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 11</td>
<td>Summary and reflection</td>
<td>Summary and reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

about – and see – everything in terms of fighting, conflict, and war. This perspective then limits our imaginations when we consider what we can do about situations we would like to understand or change”

(Tannen, 1998, pp. 7–8).

If conflict and the ways of resolving it are perceived as war then we think, feel, and act accordingly. If, however, we break frame and apply a new metaphor to our view of conflict, our perceptions and behaviors should similarly shift. Experts in arts and management contend that “…the arts can…open up the mind in such a way that it can change behaviour” (Buswick as cited in Amundson, 2011, p. 7). Buswick, for example, argues that

“By using or observing creative skills … [people] are taken out of a purely analytical framework, and that helps them view not only business issues, but the world at large, from a different perspective. That changes the way they see things, and ultimately the way they do things”

(as cited in Amundson, 2011, p. 7).

The question raised in this research is if music can change mindsets and behaviors, including in situations involving conflict.

1.2. Initial research on the use of music in resolving disputes

The first author of this article conducted a series of studies to investigate the impact of using arts-based approaches to learning how to achieve desired outcomes in solving problems and resolving disputes (see Ippolito, 2015). The study replaced traditional competitive and combative metaphors with the overarching metaphor of a musical ensemble for collaboratively negotiating and solving problems. Conducted at a prominent North American law school, the research employed three separate music-based experiences to attempt to alter perceptions of conflictual and contentious situations as well as to change how professionals would behave within such situations.

The music-based experiences that were used in the study were designed to take participants beyond relying primarily on cognitive approaches and purely rational analytical frameworks. The intent was to provide them with an integrated cognitive-affective-and-behavioral approach to solving problems and resolving disputes. The research thus utilized musical experiences to develop participants' emotional and social intelligence (Goleman & Senge, 2014; Alexander & LeBaron, 2013, p.544; LeBaron, MacLeod, & Acland, 2014). Whereas numerous researchers have identified emotional and social intelligence as essential to organizational and managerial effectiveness, it remains an underdeveloped competence among most professionals and absent from most professional training programs (Boyatzis, 2008a, 2008b; Boyatzis & Saatcioglu, 2008; Goleman, 1995, 2006; Goleman & Boyatzis, 2008; Goleman & Senge, 2014).

The set of music-based experiences, including the creation of playlists, an interactive workshop with a string quartet, and team-based music-making, were designed to support participants in exploring the nuances of communication and in building effective collaborative communities. In this study music served not only for “skills transfer, projective technique, illustration of essence, and making” (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009, p. 56), but also as an explicit tool within a complex negotiation. For comparison, the study provided an alternative set of standard experiences to a separate group of participants using non-music-based more-traditional collaborative metaphors and experiences.

In summary, the research focused on discovering 1) whether the negotiation and problem-solving skills and behaviors of ensemble music-making can be learned by adult professionals who are not musicians; 2) whether such skills learned in a musical environment are transferrable to non-musical situations involving complex conflicts; and if so, 3) whether these practices, once learned, can change cognitive frames and affect, and thus lead to more effective behavior and more desirable outcomes.

2. Structure of the study

All participants engaged in a series of experiential exercises in dyads, triads and multi-party ensembles, culminating in simulated negotiations and problem-solving exercises. In addition to recording the outcomes of each exercise and negotiation, participants regularly recorded their reactions both in reflection papers and on questionnaires using open- and close-ended questions. A modified grounded theory methodology was then used to analyse both the observational and self-report qualitative and quantitative data.

As shown in Table 1, collaborative metaphors, in place of more traditional competitive and combative metaphors, were introduced to both the music and non-music groups in the first week. The concepts of collaborative negotiation and a team approach to solving problems and resolving disputes were then reinforced throughout the three-month study. In addition, the researcher presented the musical ensemble, as a new metaphorical frame, to the music group in the first week. During the second week, participants in both groups engaged in a reflective exercise that allowed them to explore their personal cognitive and affective responses to conflict and its handling. As a part of this reflective exercise, the music group created a playlist of music as an adjunct to their verbal responses, while the non-music group responded by using words only. In the fifth week, music-group participants attended an interactive workshop with a string quartet. At the same time, the non-music group engaged in an interactive talk on cross-cultural negotiations with senior legal counsel from a major financial institution. In the seventh week, the music group engaged in a series of hands-on group music-making activities, while the non-music group attended an interactive session with a judge and the director of a mediation clinic and also took part in a series of verbal question-asking and active-listening exercises. During the eighth week, both groups took part in the Ugli
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