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Picture this: Business gets artistic in Montreal

Bridging two worlds, McGill management faculty professor says finance and creativity go together

BY PAUL DELEAN, THE GAZETTE
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Artist and McGill business-management professor Nancy Adler, with some of her work at Galerie MX, where her interactive show *Reality in Translation, Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management*, opens next month. **Photograph by:** JOHN MAHONEY THE GAZETTE, The Gazette

MONTREAL - Artists and business leaders used to be widely perceived as polar opposites.

In today's world, however, the corporate managers most likely to prosper are those who conduct themselves more like artists, innovating and responding quickly to stimulus.

That's the contention of McGill University professor Nancy Adler who, in addition to teaching at the Desautels Faculty of Management, is an accomplished painter whose first local solo show will open to the public next month at Galerie MX on Viger St. W.

The interactive exhibit, titled *Reality in Translation, Going Beyond the Dehydrated Language of Management*, combines words and paintings and includes this quote from business guru Warren Buffett: "I am not a businessman, I am an artist."

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"His canvas is the economy," she said.

"He has a fabulous eye for what should and will work.

He's helped make a whole lot of businesses work a lot better, and he does it with his own vision, not somebody else's formula."

Adler, who'll also be conducting workshops during the annual meeting in Montreal today through Tuesday of the Academy of Management (the largest organization in the world devoted to management research and teaching), said one of her objectives as a teacher is "outing the humanity" of her MBA students.

Many still arrive ready to adhere to the stereotype of what a professional should be - hard-nosed, hierarchical, focused on the bottom line and/or stock price.

These days, though, it takes a more responsive, empathetic leader to get the best out of a team and inspire and encourage the sort of continuous innovation needed to sustain companies in a competitive global economy. Employing an artistic mindset can be part of the solution.

"Actors, dancers and musicians - performing as ensembles - have developed team-based collaborative skills to a much greater extent than have most managers," Adler noted in a much-cited 2006 paper, *The Arts & Leadership: Now That We Can Do Anything, What Will We Do?*

Adler said companies - and management schools - are starting to get the message. That's why they're calling on people like improv specialist Rob Nickerson, an alumnus of the famed comedy review *Second City*, for coaching sessions aimed at getting employees to work more collaboratively.

The respect for artists and their methods from managers today is in stark contrast to the old divide, Adler said.

"People used to talk about the two solitudes. Many business people viewed artists as leeches on society, and artists viewed the businesspeople as Neanderthals, with no taste or sophistication, caring only about the bottom line."

Adler said one of the goals of her exhibition is to get people to pause, step back and reflect, "so they can reconnect with what's really important to them."

That's been a common practice of societal leaders - corporate and otherwise - going back generations, she said.

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