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# Engage Your Employees

## The pARTnership Movement

The arts can strengthen employee engagement by encouraging personal growth, providing opportunities to develop new leadership skills, and by inspiring employees to innovate and collaborate on solving problems.

By Aaron Dalton







A business leader participating in the COCAbiz SPARK conference fully embraces the circus art form used for the exercise.

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## THE BIG IDEA

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**A**rts partnerships frequently offer companies effective and cost-efficient methods of achieving critical business goals. Americans for the Arts is producing a series of essays that explore and illustrate the different types of benefits that arts partnerships can bring to your company. This essay makes that case that organizations can use arts partnerships as a means to inspire and engage employees so that they are able to achieve their full potential and help companies achieve success.

In 2009, Mark Royal and Juran Yoon, consultants at the management consulting firm Hay Group, published a paper in the *Journal of Compensation and Benefits* noting that engaged employees display two key traits:

- High levels of attachment to an organization and a desire to remain part of that organization and
- A willingness to go above and beyond the formal requirements of the job by being good corporate citizens, pouring extra effort into their work and delivering superior performance.

“The highest compliment that you can pay me is to say that I work hard every day, that I never dog it.”

*Wayne Gretzky,  
leading point scorer  
in National Hockey  
League history*

Royal and Yoon found that organizations with highly engaged employees had much higher revenue growth and much less employee turnover than those companies with poorly engaged workforces.

This makes perfect sense. Clearly a company is much more likely to get good results if employees are enthusiastic and loyal than if employees are apathetic and just looking for a chance to jump ship.

Unfortunately, engagement turns out to be a pretty rare phenomenon. In January 2015, [Gallup](#) warned of an employee engagement crisis, with the company's research showing that only 32 percent of U.S. employees are engaged.

In June 2013, Gallup had estimated that "actively disengaged" employees cost the United States \$450 to \$550 billion per year in lost productivity in its report, "How to Tackle U.S. Employees' Stagnating Engagement."

How can companies combat this problem and boost workforce engagement? Mark Royal says that engagement tends to be deeper among employees who feel that they have opportunities for growth and development. "The problem for organizations is that demand for such opportunities frequently outpaces the available supply," he says.

By partnering with arts organizations, companies can provide employees with innovative opportunities for growth and development, which can in turn have positive effects on engagement, morale, retention and performance.

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## THE SUPPORTING DATA

ORGANIZATIONS IN THE TOP QUARTILE ON  
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT ACHIEVED  
**TWO AND A HALF TIMES THE REVENUE GROWTH**  
OF ORGANIZATIONS IN THE BOTTOM QUARTILE.

COMPANIES WITH HIGH LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT HAD  
**40 PERCENT LESS TURNOVER** THAN COMPANIES WITH  
LOW LEVELS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT.

A SAMPLE COMPANY WITH 20,000 EMPLOYEES  
THAT REDUCED ITS ANNUAL VOLUNTARY TURNOVER RATE  
**FROM 8 PERCENT TO 4.8 PERCENT** COULD  
THEORETICALLY **SAVE MORE THAN \$22 MILLION.**

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Source: Mark Royal and Juran Yoon, "Engagement and Enablement: The Key to Higher Levels of Individual and Organizational Performance," *Journal of Compensation and Benefits*, September/October 2009



CLT class members learn to play Suzuki violins—a favorite annual tradition (left)—and participate in improvisational theatre exercises (above) during a session showcasing arts education strategies.

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## THE THEORY IN ACTION

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### Case #1: The Cultural Leadership Training (CLT) Program in Charlotte, North Carolina

In 2005, the [Arts & Science Council \(ASC\)](#), Charlotte, NC’s local arts agency, began training executives from other sectors and businesses to serve on the boards of arts organizations through its [Cultural Leadership Training \(CLT\) Program](#).

“The impetus for the program originated with the arts organizations we support,” says Katherine Mooring, Senior Vice President of Programs & Services at ASC. “Our arts partners told us that they were having a hard time identifying new leadership for their boards. Charlotte was growing and attracting lots of new talent to the private sector, but the arts groups were struggling to figure out how to make connections and evaluate potential leaders for board positions. They were eager to find a way for executives who might never have served on a board before to get some education on the responsibilities and processes of board membership.”

Knowing that such executive board training programs existed elsewhere, Mooring and her colleagues at ASC surveyed programs in other cities including Boston and





A ceramic artist introduces class members to the craft of hand-building decorative bowls (left); class members learn how the collaborative “quick change” in a local theater production relates to board service (right).



Portland, OR, then put together a training program that they thought would work well for Charlotte.

Each year, the class of approximately 30 executives all start the Cultural Leadership Training program in September and graduate together in May. The program consists of nine monthly sessions, each of which takes place on a Thursday afternoon from 3 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. “We start with an orientation to the Charlotte arts community to give them a broad understanding of how the arts sector operates and the role the Arts & Science Council plays,” says Mooring. “Once they have that grounding, they move through a series of program sessions focusing on issues such as board governance, legal and fiduciary responsibilities, board-staff relations, and financial statements.”

Although the CLT program initially used a classroom model of instruction, Mooring says that ASC soon discovered it could increase the enthusiasm and engagement of participants by making the program more hands-on and experiential. “We made the decision to shift the curriculum so that when students visit a dance organization, they actually are able to dance,” says Mooring. “When they visit a music organization, they play instruments. When they visit a theater company, they perform something improvisational. When they visit a museum, they create a piece of art.”

If this idea sounds a little off-the-wall, be assured that Mooring felt the same way at first. “The first time we tried asking the CLT participants to participate in art, we were kind of terrified,” she admits. “The people in our classes are bankers and lawyers and accountants. What if we put violins in their hands and they freaked out and just refused to participate?”

In fact, just the opposite happened. It turned out that everybody not only wanted to play music—they wanted to try every instrument!

Not only did the executives enjoy the participatory and creative elements of the CLT program, it turned out that the experiential aspects of the program actually made the education part “stickier” or more memorable. The memories of making or performing art were embedded right alongside the intellectual piece of the program. For example, when students recalled their musical jam sessions, that helped them remember the class discussion about board-staff relations that took place the same day.

In addition, the participatory element enabled CLT students to discover their own artistic passions. “It’s one thing to hear an arts organization president talk about the importance of dance, but quite another to actually experience the emotional thrill that comes from leaping, tumbling, and running around a room as part of an impromptu dance performance,” says Mooring. “They could discover which artistic disciplines really resonated with them on a personal level and figure out in which organizations they wanted to apply their leadership skills.”

One clear sign that the CLT program is working is the fact that getting into the class has become highly competitive. There are a couple of sponsoring companies that underwrite the program and are thereby guaranteed a seat for one of their executives. Local law firm [Parker Poe](#) is the primary program sponsor, and ASC has an in-kind/space-trade agreement with Queens University of Charlotte. The executives who are interested in joining CLT have to submit written applications containing recommendations both from inside their companies and from the community at large. A selection committee made up of 15–20 alumni from previous CLT classes reviews applications and conducts in-person interviews with applicants to decide who can attend the program. (Mooring notes that even the candidates from sponsoring companies must still complete the full application and interview process so that they have a shared baseline experience with other participants.)

To cover the expenses of running the program, ASC does charge tuition for CLT: \$650 for students who work at nonprofit organizations and \$900 for students from for-profit corporations. Mooring says that many organizations see CLT as a leadership development tool and thus cover the cost of their employees’ participation. In other cases, the organization will pay half the cost of the program, but there are some instances where participants pay for the entire cost themselves.

“Part of our rationale in charging a tuition fee is to set the students’ expectations that as board members, they will be expected to give financially,” says Mooring. “A student who has to struggle to pay for the class may want to reconsider whether he or she is ready to join a board.”

“Whatever your life’s work is, do it well. A man should do his job so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn could do it no better.”

*Martin Luther King, Jr.  
(1929–1968), civil rights leader*

Halfway through the program, CLT arranges a sort of “speed-dating” session where all the CLT students have a chance to meet with 25 to 30 participating arts organizations looking for new board members. The organizations identify the aspirants who seem like the best fit based on the needs of their board. CLT passes this information along to the class members who then select the top three boards on which they would like to serve. That information goes back to the arts organizations, and CLT then assists with a matchmaking process. By graduation, all the class members are ideally serving on one or more boards.

Executive Director of the Children’s Theatre of Charlotte Hannah Grannemann says her organization has benefitted greatly from participating in the CLT program. “Some of our most dedicated board members have come through the program,” says Grannemann. “We choose them because they are ready to hit the ground running after receiving such a clear understanding of their responsibilities as board members. The ASC and the CLT program definitely help to keep the pipeline of dedicated volunteer leadership in the arts flowing in Charlotte.”

CLT also gives its participants special access to the inner workings of the arts sector. “Anyone in the current class has the opportunity to observe board meetings at some of the local arts organizations that have participated over the years,” says Mooring. “People are very seldom going to be able to observe a board meeting just by knocking on the door and saying they want to be on the board. So CLT gives our students great behind-the-scenes access.”

The Charlotte corporations that send their employees to CLT also derive multiple benefits from the program. One major benefit comes simply from seeing which employees volunteer to take part in the CLT program. This self-selection process sometimes helps companies to identify ambitious and talented employees whom they might otherwise have overlooked. “Firms absolutely use CLT to identify potential leadership candidates,” says Mooring. “We had one law firm tell us that they would not have picked a certain employee as leadership material, but they transformed their opinion of that employee’s potential within the firm after watching that person go through our program and serve successfully on an arts board.”

Alternatively, companies can use CLT as a low-risk way to test whether an employee who is already identified as “leadership material” lives up to his or her potential by watching how that person performs during CLT and post-graduation on an arts board.

How has the program worked out for actual participants? Jami Farris, a partner at the Parker Poe law firm, was part of the first CLT class—she started the program in 2005, graduated in 2006 and joined the board of the [Children’s Theatre of Charlotte](#) the same year. In 2013, she became Chair of the Children’s Theatre board.

Farris appreciates the fact that Parker Poe supported and encouraged her service on



an arts board. The firm covered the cost for her to attend CLT, and Farris says that Parker Poe has embraced CLT and arts board service as fulfilling the firm's strategic commitment to community service. "We are one of Charlotte's original regional law firms, and it's important for us to be seen as being involved and giving back to the community," she explains.

The CLT training that led to Farris's board service provided lasting rewards from a personal growth and development standpoint. "I was actually an educator before I was a lawyer," says Farris. "So having the chance to be involved with a children's theater company that works in the schools helps me stay connected to that part of my life. Education and the arts have always been two of my main passions. Having the opportunity to apply my legal talents and leadership skills to both those areas recharges me in a way that carries over to my legal work for the firm."

Another CLT graduate, J. Brandon Neal (CLT class of 2011–2012) serves on the board of the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art both as Vice Chair of the Nominating & Governance Committee and as a member of the Development Committee. A Senior Counsel in the Law Department at the financial services company Wells Fargo, Neal always had an interest in drawing, but ended up deciding to go to business school and then law school.

Neal says the program definitely helped expand his professional network, and that he often finds himself running across former CLT classmates and program alumni. "The people that CLT chooses are leaders of the Charlotte business community. I'm confident that the relationships cultivated through CLT and subsequent board service can lead to business opportunities for Wells Fargo that could also benefit my career in the long run," he says.

Meanwhile, Neal says his leadership team at Wells Fargo has told him that the company appreciates the fact that he is giving back to the community while serving as an advocate for Wells Fargo and burnishing the firm's corporate citizenship credentials. As a result of his involvement at the Bechtler and in the arts community, Wells Fargo recently nominated him to join the National Urban League's Board of Trustees.

"I feel proud to represent a company that has such a strong commitment to investing in team members and strengthening the communities where we do business," says Neal. "Wells Fargo demonstrated that commitment by giving me the opportunity to participate in programs such as Cultural Leadership Training, supporting me in my subsequent board service, and now providing me with additional leadership and development opportunities that allow me to deepen my involvement in the community."

Management consultant Mark Royal of Hay Group says that the CLT program is a good example of the sort of external partnership that can help companies while also giving employees a chance to spread their wings. "By serving on the board of arts organizations,

rising leaders can flex their leadership muscles in ways that could be difficult for their actual employers to provide,” says Royal.

In addition, Royal believes that leaders who serve on arts boards could gain valuable exposure to different organizational and leadership models. “There are almost always benefits from giving employees a chance to broaden their organizational thinking beyond the four walls of their own company,” he says.

## Case #2: COCABiz in St. Louis, Missouri

Board service is not the only way that companies can use the arts to promote employee development and strengthen engagement. Consider the case of the Center of Creative Arts (COCA), a nationally recognized nonprofit organization based in St. Louis that plays many roles in its community:

- Students of all ages and abilities can take classes at COCA in dance, theater, voice, art, and design.
- COCA’s advanced student companies put on performances for the public throughout the year.
- COCA sends teaching artists into schools through its COCAedu program to work with educators, not only to provide arts education, but also to integrate arts into the core subjects in ways that strengthen students’ understanding of math, science, and language arts.

In response to demand from the St. Louis business community, COCA began exploring how its arts educators could help companies unleash creativity and solve other business needs about six years ago. With guidance and support from the [EMCArts Innovation Lab](#), COCA conceptualized a [COCABiz](#) program that would employ key elements from its arts integration work in classrooms to provide meaningful benefits for businesses. “Just as we partner a teaching artist with a classroom teacher and use the arts to engage students in core curricular activities through COCAedu, we realized we could apply the same strategy to business applications—pairing hands-on teaching artists with business facilitators who could map the artistic lessons back to the everyday language business people use and the challenges they face,” says Kelly Pollock, COCA’s executive director.

COCA took its time to develop COCABiz and get it right. “We piloted the program and revised it until we felt comfortable that we were delivering something to the community that had value both from an artistic and business standpoint,” explains Pollock.

With the approval of its board, COCA launched the full-fledged COCABiz program in 2011. Since then, COCABiz has offered the St. Louis business community a range of programs—from scheduled [workshops](#), [talks](#), and [networking events](#) to a biennial



**SPARK** conference that pairs artists with business strategists and combines speeches with hands-on art activities called Creativity Labs to help participants unleash innovation and hone their creative skills.

Beyond these public programs, COCAbiz also partners with corporations on custom engagements. COCAbiz works with its corporate clients to identify key issues and opportunities, then uses interviews, data analysis, and site visits to design a program that meets a company's needs, budget, and timeline. After implementing the program, COCAbiz makes sure to circle back and gather feedback from participants to assess the program's effectiveness.

COCAbiz focuses its efforts on four main themes:

1. Leadership development
2. Communication skills
3. Creativity / Ideation (the process of forming ideas)
4. Collaboration

Steve Knight worked in California for more than 30 years in leadership coaching and succession planning before moving to St. Louis to serve as director at COCAbiz. "My role has been to help COCA and its artists engage in ways that are acceptable and effective for corporate buyers," says Knight. "I've coached our teaching artists on how to be effective with business groups, but I've also learned to trust the teaching artists whose insights and ideas are at the heart of COCAbiz. Our COCAbiz engagements have to deliver clear business benefits, but it's equally important that they provide an authentic hands-on exposure to an artistic discipline."

Participants in the COCAbiz client engagements discover new ways of thinking through performing and visual arts exercises.

All the COCABiz programs match a teaching artist with a business facilitator. Knight has done some of the facilitation work himself, and COCABiz has gathered a group of facilitators who have demonstrated the capability to work effectively with its teaching artists. One thing Knight has found is that business people want to work with artists who are practitioners, not just teachers. “We’ve found that it helps to establish credibility with our business audiences if they know that the artist who is teaching their workshop during the day will be performing that night at the municipal opera,” says Knight.

The COCABiz programs are as diverse and varied as its teaching artists. Depending on its partners’ needs, COCABiz uses teaching artists from a variety of artistic disciplines including choreography, set design, theater, and poetry. Working with the business facilitators, these teaching artists help business people discover new skills and approaches in areas such as leadership, collaboration, communication, risk-taking, creativity, and presentation skills.

“People become experts at their jobs by doing the same thing many times. But repetition can lead people to get stuck in a cognitive rut where it becomes hard to see new perspectives,” explains Knight. “We use artistic experiences as a way to help people escape from those mental ruts and rise above their normal routines to find new solutions and opportunities.”

This emphasis on active learning appeals to clients like Allison Boland, brand manager at Nestlé Purina PetCare Company. “Our marketing experts often need to influence project teams without having explicit authority over the key stakeholders on those teams,” says Boland. COCABiz worked with her to create a day-long workshop to boost engagement while helping participants improve their influencing skills.

One part of the workshop consisted of improvisational theater. “These improv exercises helped me realize that to be an effective influencer, you really have to listen to other people and incorporate their ideas,” says Boland. “As we performed the exercise, I would often catch myself wanting to jump ahead and start speaking without waiting to find out where the other person was trying to lead me. I realized I had to wait to make sure that my response made sense depending on the direction in which the improv skit was heading. Rather than just pushing my own agenda, I had to figure out what the other person wanted to get out of the skit and incorporate their ideas, too.”

Stephen Wurth, a design strategist at Nestlé Purina PetCare, says COCABiz helps companies boost engagement and stimulate creativity by using the arts to prod people out of their comfort zones and break down some of the rules, processes, and orthodoxies that typically govern corporate behavior. “Improvisation, comedy, choreography—all of these methods that get people out of their chairs and engaging with one another in meaningful ways can help break down barriers that people did not even know existed and drive greater collaboration,” he says.





Participants in the COCABiz client engagements discover new ways of thinking through performing and visual arts exercises.

Wurth has encouraged his colleagues to join him in attending the annual COCABiz SPARK conferences. At one recent conference, he participated in an exercise that used theater skills to teach more effective communication skills. “Much of my job involves synthesizing observations and then analyzing data to create strategies,” says Wurth. “Experiencing how actors and directors use the See-Think-Wonder method showed me a really powerful way to communicate and offer suggestions in a way that promotes dialogue rather than shutting it down.”

Wurth says that Nestlé Purina’s commitment to professional development keeps him and his colleagues engaged and performing at the top of their game. “If you had asked me a year out of college whether I would still be working for the same company a decade later, I would have said you were crazy,” says Wurth. “But Nestlé Purina’s commitment to supporting my personal growth has played a big role in keeping me here for 11 years now.”

Monsanto, the multinational agricultural company that is headquartered in St. Louis, has partnered with COCABiz on leadership development. Anne Schuchardt, leadership development project manager, says that COCABiz has delivered a series of development workshops for high-potential future leaders. One of these workshops uses multiple COCABiz artists to teach up-and-coming Monsanto leaders how to deliver compelling presentations. A set designer gives pointers on visual communications, while actors show how everything from projection to articulation to posture can prove vital to getting a point across.

“Leadership is unlocking people’s potential to become better.”

– Bill Bradley, Hall of Fame basketball player, three-term U.S. Senator

So far, Schuchardt says employee feedback on the COCABiz workshops has been enthusiastic. In a survey conducted right after a three-day program led by COCABiz (part of a nine-month accelerated development program for future Monsanto leaders), 98 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the experience had been valuable and that the lessons learned would be applicable to their business challenges.

Anecdotally, Schuchardt says she has heard very positive reports on the impact COCABiz has had on Monsanto. For instance, participants report being able to get their messages across more clearly and forcefully in presentations thanks to the lessons learned from COCABiz experts.

“Our company has a lot of scientists, so we were not sure whether an arts-based development program would be a good fit,” admits Schuchardt. “It turned out that innovation and experimentation which underpin the arts are also really important for scientists. As a result, our employees have jumped in and embraced the artistic lessons that COCABiz delivers.”

Monsanto’s investments in training and developing its employees certainly seem to pay off. Schuchardt says that surveys show high levels of workforce engagement. The company has seen just 3 percent turnover (which equals a 97 percent retention rate) among the future leaders who have gone through the COCABiz workshops and other components of this leadership development program.

As with all good arts-business partnerships, both its corporate partners and COCA itself benefit from the COCABiz engagements. COCA does charge companies a fee for the programs, which helps the organization establish a new revenue stream.

Developing, launching, and running the COCABiz side of the organization took major investments of time and energy for COCA staffers, but Knight says that effort was helped by a sense that COCABiz is integral to the organization’s core purpose. “Our mission is to enrich lives and build community through the arts,” notes Knight. “The future of St. Louis depends on business innovation, so if COCABiz encourages creativity and helps companies engage their employees, then that is kind of a big deal.”



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## THE TAKEAWAY

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**C**ompanies can partner with arts organizations to give employees more opportunities for growth and development. Such development programs not only have the potential to make employees more effective and help prepare them for leadership roles, but can also strengthen employee engagement. High levels of workforce engagement are linked to superior performance and low turnover—characteristics that can help companies reduce costs while achieving their strategic goals.

### The Questions to Consider

- What metrics does your company currently use to track engagement and disengagement among employees?
- What percentage of your employees are engaged/disengaged? How has engagement been trending recently?
- Does your company have an internal program or any external partnerships to give employees opportunities for board level training?
- If so, what results have you seen from participation in these training programs? If not, are there any local organizations with which you could partner to develop such a program? If no such local organizations already exist, might you be able to partner with other local corporations and arts organizations to develop your own board training program?
- How could your company use arts-related programs to promote engagement and improve morale?
- Do any potential arts partners in your community offer programs like COCABiz that use artistic methods from the world of dance, theater, visual, or written arts to help companies accomplish workforce development objectives?
- If not, are there any local arts organizations (particularly ones that already have a teaching/training component) with which you might be able to partner on developing a customized training program like COCABiz to fulfill your company's training and development needs?
- Does your company have a program in place to encourage and recognize employees' artistic pursuits? If so, how can you measure the impact of that program and look for ways to improve its effectiveness? If not, what would it take to launch such a program?

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