KNOWLEDGE

Directions

...In this issue's conversation, Warren Bennis identifies four qualities that successful leaders share: adaptive capacity...the ability to engage others...authenticity and consistent values. Bennis does not know how much of these qualities can be learned. *The Ariel Group* helps leaders at least understand their authentic selves better and engage more effectively with others. Christopher von Baeyer's account of Ariel's work in "The Power of Presence" shows how leaders can learn some of what actors know about appealing to people's hearts and minds, not by pretending to be someone else but by using expressive skills to communicate more of what they believe.

Excerpt from "Signpost" by Don Cohen
Knowledge Directions – Fall/Winter 2001

THE POWER OF PRESENCE
by Christophier von Baeyer

The Power of Presence:

WHAT ACTORS CAN TEACH BUSINESS LEADERS

by Christopher von Baeyer

Christopher von Baeyer is a professional actor, consultant and presence coach who has designed and delivered programming for The Ariel Group and Boston Consulting Group since 1996.

...the skills and behaviors of the actor have direct and valuable application to the demands of interpersonal communication in organizations and businesses.

One of the nation's largest diversified media and communications corporations recognizes that it must deal with internal competition among its own business lines as newspapers, radio, TV and new media compete for content. A rapidly growing financial services company faces a disturbing spike in attrition in the early days of 2000 as the dot.com revolution sweeps its global offices and senior partners are lured away to lucrative deals with Internet startups. A Big Five accounting firm identifies a fundamental gap in the communication skills of its North American partners and searches for a dynamic way to train them in techniques they need to improve and expand service offerings to major clients. A successful computer bookstore and online publishing company suddenly faces the unexpected challenge of laying off significant numbers of employees in the wake of economic uncertainty following the tragedies of September 11, 2001.

Our ability to focus authentically on the people with whom we work, to pay real attention to them, is challenged by the increasing quantity of information that greets us on our voice mail, e-mail and television screens.

These diverse business challenges have important elements in common. Meeting them depends significantly on superior communications skills, on the power to communicate values and feelings as well as information, to build trust and inspire action, to maintain and foster threatened social capital. So all of these organizations turned to the theater for help. They asked the professional actor/coaches of The Ariel Group, a theater-based executive education and training company in Arlington, Massachusetts, to teach their executives how to communicate more fully and effectively.

Brian Bates, a psychologist at the University of Sussex, England, and author of *The Way of the Actor* suggests that "almost everything that actors do can be identified with things we do in less dramatic form, in everyday life. While we may not wish to acquire all the actor's technical skills, I believe that there is a rich world of intuitive knowledge and human insights in actor performance, rehearsal, training, and life experience."[1] This truth underlies the compelling proposition at the heart of Ariel's approach: that the skills and behaviors of the actor have direct and valuable application to the demands of interpersonal communication in organizations and businesses.

In a world increasingly dominated by discussions of the latest technical and electronic advances in knowledge management, a theater perspective can help bring the dialogue back to the human dimension of knowledge flow within organizations. Particularly in times of great change, companies must respond appropriately, sensitively and creatively to the human dimension of their business challenges. On the most practical level, an intensive training in the basics of acting can provide leaders and managers with the tools they need to communicate effectively and powerfully with their clients and colleagues.

So what does the training of the actor actually consist of? Which skills and techniques of the actor's craft can be applied to the demands of professional communication and knowledge management in large, complex organizations? And how we can free the art of acting from its association with illusion and deception so that it becomes a useful tool for helping people to convey information with greater accuracy and integrity? To answer those questions, we can look at a specific example of Ariel's work. For the past five years The Ariel Group has delivered professional development programming to partners and senior managers at the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), an international strategic consulting firm with offices in over 30 countries around the world. The relationship between these two organizations and the lessons they have learned as a result of their mutual commitment to training and development provide a valuable case study in how the principles of acting can be integrated into the training curriculum of a large professional services organization.

At the core of the Ariel Group's approach to training at BCG is the concept of **presence**. For the actor and the senior consultant, professional success depends fundamentally on the quality of one's individual presence: the ability to connect dynamically and authentically with the thoughts and feelings of one's audience. Peter Brook, the great English stage director, defines presence this way:

To me what matters is that one actor can stand motionless on the stage and rivet our attention while another does not interest us at all. What is the difference? Where chemically, physically, psychically does it lie? In this question we can find the starting point of our whole art.[2]

Barbara Berke, the vice president and partner responsible for training at BCG, says that presence is a core competency in her organization and important for career advancement:

Developing strategically sound insight for the client is just one of a successful consultant's skills. They also must be able to engage the client in a substantive dialogue, first to determine the real issues at hand and second to effectively communicate the solution. We are big believers in self-discovered logic and how one draws knowledge out of people. To this end we are skill-training in the essential act of human connection.

Theater makes you go inside yourself and ask yourself what's most important. Any firm that markets and sells itself by presenting itself—where the work product is fundamentally *people*—must develop professionals with an actor's ability to communicate with the audience. We aren't presenting works of fiction, but we are using lessons learned from the theater to facilitate the transfer of insight and knowledge from BCG to the client company, communicating what's most important. No matter how good the strategy, it will only have impact if the client understands and implements it. This two-way communication also builds trust, an invaluable asset to any consulting relationship.[3]

One of the first lessons an actor learns is that the quality of his presence on the stage is something that he can profoundly influence, but can never fully control. I vividly remember how, in my early days of training as a professional actor, we were given the seemingly simple task of walking onto a large stage from the wings, turning to our peers in the audience, speaking our name, and exiting the stage. The moment we became aware that we were visible to the audience, we seemed to be overcome by forces outside our control. One young man began to sweat profusely, another broke into nervous giggles, while one young woman temporarily forgot her own name. When my turn came, I found myself so tremendously self-conscious of my every move that I actually stopped breathing, stumbled and tripped off the stage. After years of study, I learned techniques to manage and control the seemingly invisible forces which paralyzed me in front of the crowd. Overcoming that fearful self-consciousness, and the effect it has on our ability to speak, to think and to move effectively, makes an important contribution to developing presence.

The quality of our presence can be improved in many situations, not just on stage or during formal presentations. Every moment of live human communication between two or more individuals, when studied closely, reveals a vast amount of information being conveyed on many levels. While we tend to focus on the verbal component of communication in our everyday business dealings,

Truly effective performers have developed range and flexibility in the four primary components of human expression: the voice, the body, the emotions and the mind.

we are, in fact, inextricably involved in a continual "kinesthetic dance" of body language, vocal inflection, and emotional exchange.[4] By understanding the subtleties of human communication, we create the opportunity for more effective exchange.

The Ariel Group offers a model that identifies four fundamental dimensions of presence necessary for effective business communication. By becoming aware of these basic principles and developing their skills in each of these areas, consultants at BCG gain a greater measure of control over how they interact with clients and colleagues. The four dimensions of the model are easily remembered by the first four letters of the word presence:

> **PRESENT:** The ability to be centered and aware in each moment of communication

> **REACHING OUT:** The ability to build and sustain an authentic relationship with one's audience

> **EXPRESSIVE:** The ability to communicate dynamically and congruently with voice, body, mind and emotion

> **SELF-KNOWING:** The ability to reflect upon and leverage one's unique identity as a person and a professional

A recent three-day training session at a hotel in London began with a discussion of this model, and quickly evolved into a full-fledged "boot camp" in communication skills and emotional intelligence. The twelve participants rehearsed Shakespearean monologues, improvised short scenes based on spontaneous suggestions from the audience, learned theatrical warm ups for their bodies and voices, and coached one another in final dramatic presentations. The exercises encouraged the members of the group, all officers and senior managers at BCG, to expand the limits of their comfort zones and explore new ways of communicating. For a group of consultants who had built their professional identities on a strong foundation of rigorous analytical thinking skills, this type of training was at once exciting and unfamiliar.

Jaap de Jong, based in the Amsterdam office, says:

> for me it was a completely new experience in which I could see how my way of operating can be very much programmed into a certain way of working. Given where we are now in our careers it is clear that we are in need of a much broader variety of skills and types of behavior. This type of training unlocks and taps the other dimension, which is much more on the emotional side. I learn about the impact people can have with how they say things, the way they act, and the energy they can radiate when they inspire other people.[5]

The first element of the model, the ability to *be* present, is perhaps the most obvious dimension of presence and the most difficult to embody. Our ability to focus authentically on the people with whom we work, to pay real attention to them, is challenged by the increasing quantity of information that greets us on our voice mail, e-mail and television screens. To be successful in the consulting industry, for example, one must develop the dual capacity of managing tremendous amounts of information while appearing relaxed, confident, trustworthy and attentive in the presence of one's clients. Actors face a similar challenge each time they step onto the stage for a performance, balancing the dual requirements of accurately rendering the playwright's lines and remaining spontaneous and available to the unexpected responses of a live audience. The ability to be centered and aware in each moment of communication becomes extremely important.
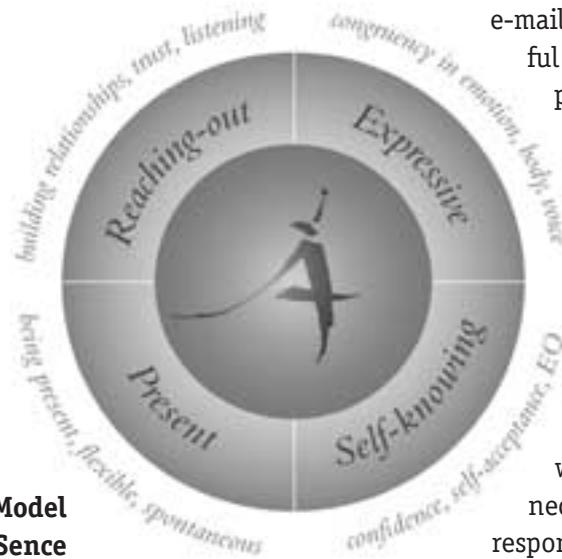
The Ariel Model for Leadership PRESence

The first morning of the program in London focused on the skills and behaviors associated with being present: staying relaxed under pressure, maintaining appropriate eye contact, projecting energy and enthusiasm, and remaining flexible and spontaneous with one's clients and colleagues. The curriculum compares in many ways to that of an acting conservatory. Participants learn by "trying on" behaviors in exercises specifically designed to increase awareness and expand the comfort zone in communication skills. Lessons are conducted interactively—participants drive the discussions based on what they have discovered for themselves in the experiential exercises. It is especially important when working with adult audiences, and particularly with high functioning individuals like the officer group at BCG, that the agenda reflect and leverage the knowledge already in the room.

Eye contact, for example, is a dimension of human behavior that cannot easily be reduced to simple lists of "do's" and "don'ts." Rather, individuals are challenged to identify their own personal and cultural habits and encouraged to expand their repertoire of behaviors. In one exercise, an officer from Korea stood in front of us to deliver a two-minute improvised monologue on a "low-risk" subject matter—his peers had assigned him the topic of golf. The objective of the activity was for him to focus on the "how" of his delivery as opposed to the "what." It immediately became clear that he was not making eye contact with anyone in his audience. Following his performance, his primarily European and American peers said they had the impression that he

was not fully present with them. He was surprised, and told us that in his culture it is inappropriate to sustain direct eye contact, especially with people who are in senior positions to him. In the end, we invited him to perform the topic again, with the added instruction that he conduct the exercise as a "scientific experiment" in the use of eye contact; that is, he should practice making sustained eye contact in order to examine the effects that it has on an audience. When he completed the assignment, the group remarked that his credibility was dramatically enhanced and that he appeared to be much more relaxed and present with his audience.

The lesson to be drawn from this example, of course, is *not* that more eye contact is always better. Rather, eye contact is a tool that can be used to manage one's degree of presence. In Korea, his presence will likely be heightened if he is more selective in his use of eye contact. In the West, increasing his use of eye contact with his audience will probably make him more effective. Like all communication tools, eye contact must be employed according to the demands and expectations of the specific individuals to whom one is presenting. The extent to which one can authentically exhibit a broad repertoire of behaviors will determine one's success on the international business stage, as it determines the success of the good actor. The ability to build and develop this dimension of presence requires first, an understanding of fundamental skills and behaviors, and second, the opportunity to practice employing them in a safe and supportive learning environment.

The second dimension of the PRESence model is "reaching out." While the initial morning session of the workshop encouraged participants to examine and practice *their own* ability to be present, in the afternoon the emphasis shifted to an awareness of *others*. The objective of the afternoon session, therefore, was to introduce the principle that effective presence is ultimately measured by one's ability to have an impact on other people. Communication is, after all, a two-way street. So the group explored skills and behaviors associated with building relationship and trust. One participant, Marin Gjaja, pointed out that the ability to develop authentic relationships with his clients and colleagues is fundamental to the consulting process: "The specific thing that I find valuable is to make sure that I listen and spend enough time with clients so that I'm understanding what's important to them. It is really just a commitment to the other individual—to communicating with them and helping them. I think that this commitment is the catalyst for effective knowledge transfer."[6]

A series of acting exercises that the group participated in during the afternoon demonstrated the value of the theatre as a tool for deepening and developing skills in relationship-building and trust. Each participant was assigned a Shakespearean monologue to study and rehearse. The coaches distributed background information on the selection and gave basic instruction on how to work with the poetry and heightened language of the Shakespearean style. Participants were then paired off and assigned the task of coaching one another on their monologues. The ultimate aim of the exercise

The fourth and final dimension of presence is self-knowledge—the ability to reflect upon and employ one's unique identity as a person and a professional.

was not the final performance for the group. Rather, the emphasis of the learning was the coaching itself—how well each of the participants handled the challenge of "consulting" his or her partner in a process that was, in most cases, highly unfamiliar and initially intimidating.

Like much of the curriculum in this program, this exercise is designed to employ theater activities as metaphors for processes that leaders and managers encounter every day in the world of business. In this case, the challenge of coaching a colleague on a Shakespearean monologue represents a typical transaction in the business of professional services, that is, transfering skills and knowledge to another individual in such a way that he or she feels confident and capable of taking ownership and responsibility for that material.

In a group discussion following the exercise, one officer shared her experience of coaching her partner, who worked on Mark Antony's "Friends, Romans, Countrymen" speech from *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. What struck her is that, because neither she nor her partner are experts in Shakespeare or this particular play, she had to rely on an entirely different set of techniques and approaches to get the results she wanted from the performance. She was compelled to listen extremely carefully to what her partner was saying in the speech, to ask provocative questions that deepened their shared understanding of the material, and to build her colleague's confidence by encouraging him to trust those acting moments that were most effective in the delivery of his speech. In short, much of the value that she provided as a coach was rooted in her ability to manage and leverage the working relationship itself: to listen, to ask questions and to build her partner's confidence. This is the essence of what it means to "reach out."

The third dimension of presence, the ability to be expressive, is perhaps the most directly related to the actor's art. Truly effective performers have developed range and flexibility in the four primary components of human expression: the voice, the body, the emotions and the mind. Too often in corporate environments, the mental component is emphasized at the expense of the others. As a result, human communication becomes uninteresting and even inaccurate. In a landmark study of nonverbal communication, UCLA psychology professor Albert Mehrabian determined that the degree to which the four components of expression are balanced and harmonized is directly related to the believability of the message.[7] What that means practically speaking is that if we do not back up our words with appropriate vocal inflection, body language and emotional emphasis, we risk being misunderstood or mistrusted.

A dramatic illustration of this principle was offered on the second day of the program. You can experience it yourself by repeating the following sentences out loud in two contrasting ways. Imagine that you are addressing a small team of colleagues or employees and your opening statement is: "Good afternoon. I am very pleased and excited to have the opportunity to speak to you today. We have some tough challenges ahead of us, but I am personally confident that each one of you can meet and exceed your targets." Try saying

it first without any emotional inflection, body language or vocal variety—in the monotonous manner of a computer voice. Notice how your feel and sound. Do you believe yourself? Now, go to the other extreme and give it all you've got. Emphasize the important words, invest emotionally, and allow yourself to include facial expression as well as physical gestures. Again, notice how speaking those sentences feels and sounds.

When workshop participants experiment with this exercise, they become viscerally aware of the subtleties of their own expressive ability. The first iteration of the sentence is generally perceived as boring and ineffective. While most people in the room admit that it is probably closer to the way they normally sound, they nevertheless agree that it would serve them to introduce more flexibility and variety into their speech. When the group reflects upon their experience of going to the other extreme, however, they are more cautious about coming to a definitive conclusion. To several people in the room, it felt highly unfamiliar and even "unnatural" to speak with so much expressiveness. Their concern is justified. As one gentleman in the group said, " I don't want to appear to my clients as if I am *acting*."

Indeed, what the group stumbled upon is one of the most important principles of the theatre, which every actor must somehow resolve in order to be successful on the stage: the relationship between the *self* and the *role*. Simply stated, every acting performance contains both. The actor plays a character, but behind every character is the actor himself. Actors intuitively draw upon their own personal experiences in the creation of their characters. In fact, many actors will tell you that each of the roles they have played in their career is built upon a part of themselves.

Similarly, each of us plays a wide variety of roles in the course of a typical day in the business world: employee, boss, teacher, advisor, client, friend. While we may *act* differently in each role, we are always ourselves. The particular vocal, physical and emotional pattern that a person adopts in his role as the boss may not be at all appropriate when his role changes to that of a friend or advisor in his next meeting of the day. The value of examining business behavior through the lens of the acting metaphor is that we can begin to distinguish the specific expressive factors that each situation calls for. Ultimately, with awareness and practice, we can expand our repertoire of behaviors in all four components of expression: vocal, physical, emotional and intellectual. It then becomes possible to attain a high level of flexibility in our ability to differentiate between roles without losing the through-line of our authentic self. As soon as people in the workshop begin to realize this, behavioral transformation becomes possible. They accept the fact that they can be more effective in their jobs without the fear that they are "acting," in the sense of being inauthentic.

In the second afternoon of the program, we conducted coaching sessions with each of the participants. George, a particularly jovial member of the group, shared a concern that he is not being as "authoritarian" as he feels is

...each of us plays a wide variety of roles in the course of a typical day in the business world: employee, boss, teacher, advisor, client, friend.

appropriate to be truly effective in his role as a leader.[8] He cited the example of a member of his team who is a highly intelligent and capable contributor, but who does not accurately follow the directions that George lays out for him. When I asked him to role-play a typical interaction with this individual, it became clear to everyone in the group that George's presence diminished significantly as he demonstrated the scenario.

I asked George to replay the scene, suggesting that he make changes to three of the components of his expression: to lower his voice, to use less physical gesture and to adopt an emotional tone of extreme seriousness. The persona these changes evoked surprised the group as much as it did George himself. He experienced a sense of power and authority that was new and unfamiliar for him. His colleagues confirmed that the change was positive; they reassured him that he was attaining his goal of becoming more authoritative. Most importantly, he was developing a more well-rounded and effective professional presence.

The fourth and final dimension of presence is self-knowledge—the ability to reflect upon and employ one's unique identity as a person and a professional. In this final module of the workshop the group was guided in a significantly different direction from the previous days' activities. Rather than focusing on the expressive and interactive components of presence, participants were asked to reflect on the values and motivations that have driven their careers as well as their personal lives.

Kathy Lubar, a founding member of The Ariel Group, defines self-knowledge in this way:

> Most good leaders realize that they don't only communicate from the neck up. They know that their messages have to enter the blood stream, the heart, and the emotions. The only way to truly motivate people is to engage them at this level—whether it's through e-mail, voice mail, or company-wide live presentations. Leaders need to communicate in such a way that their people will be able to say, "I work for someone I respect, who has values, who has consistency and integrity, who challenges me, and who offers me an opportunity to learn and grow." To do this effectively, leaders really need to know and trust themselves.[9]

Can self-knowledge be taught? The curriculum of a typical professional actor-training program in North America usually incorporates a wide spectrum of exercises in self-reflection and personal development. Originally designed to help performers become more authentic and truthful in their depiction of the characters they play on the stage, many of these activities have direct applicability to the training and development needs of business professionals. The objective, in the case of the London workshop for leaders at BCG, is for individuals in the group to expand and hone skills in transmitting their unique knowledge of the firm's social and intellectual capital to the next generation of leaders in the organization.

...without an informed understanding of the emotional dimension of business strategy, many efforts at organizational change and development are doomed to failure.

The learning process unfolds in four distinct phases. First, participants generate a visual autobiography of their professional lives using art materials provided by workshop facilitators. Second, they share their creations with one another and analyze the underlying themes that have emerged. Third, they identify specific stories and anecdotes that represent the most valuable teaching points from their autobiographies. Finally, participants dramatize and perform their stories for the group.

Ultimately, such an exercise can inspire participants to return to work with a renewed sense of purpose and dedication to their role in the organization. Noel Tichy, professor of Organizational Behavior at the University of Michigan and author of *Control Your Own Destiny* and *The Leadership Engine*, reminds us that "it's critical that leaders condense their own career experience into those magical moments of personal transition—moments when something major happened to them and a major learning evolved from it. Such career (or life) transition points are teachable moments. Leaders need only extract the wisdom from such experiences, and pass it along."[10]

As the program drew to a close, the group began to consider just that—how to retain and pass on the insights they had gathered over the last three days. One of the greatest challenges for a relatively short program like this is how to support individuals in the long-term development of their presence. Numerous techniques for imprinting and reinforcing learnings exist, including follow-up contact with facilitator/coaches, written take-aways, and future assessment and evaluation of program content. Perhaps the most valuable attribute of such an intensive program structure, though, is that it allows people to see and experience their personal potential as expressive, creative, imaginative beings. For many people this may be something that they have not considered for a long time. It is a powerful experience, and it sticks.

Jeannie Duck, senior vice president at BCG and author of *The Change Monster* (2001), goes further to make the case for applying these principles to issues of organizational development. She argues that without an informed understanding of the emotional dimension of business strategy, many efforts at organizational change and development are doomed to failure:

> I have come to believe strongly that the emotional aspects of change are not just important, they are vital. If leaders don't take into consideration the emotional data, all the operational information and numeric data in the world won't be enough to turn around a company. Changing an organization is inherently and inescapably an emotional human process.[11]

Perhaps one of the most significant conclusions is the one shared by an officer as he jumped into a cab on his way to Heathrow International Airport after the program in London came to an end. "I just can't wait to get home and use my new-found vocal flexibility to read my kids their bedtime story tonight!"

Endnotes

1 Brian Bates, *The Way of the Actor* (Boston, MA: Shambala Publications, 1987), pp. 7-8.

2 Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 232.

3 Barbara Berke interview, February 5, 2001.

4 Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1981).

5 Jaap de Jong interview, November 30, 2000.

6 Marin Gjaja interview, July 12, 2001.

7 See, for instance, his *Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago: Addison-Wesley, 1972) and *Silent Messages* (Belmont, CA, Wadsworth, 1981).

8 His name has been changed for the purposes of this article.

9 Kathy Lubar interview, July 4, 2001.

10 Noel Tichy, "Companies Don't Develop Leaders. CEO's Do," *Harvard Management Update*, U9710B (October 1997), p. 5.

11 Jeanie Daniel Duck, *The Change Monster* (New York, NY: Random House, 2001), p. 9.

ikm
Institute for Knowledge Management

KNOWLEDGE Directions

IBM

Lotus