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Architecture of the Invisible

Delivering Complex Leadership Learning

*“What is essential is invisible to the eye.” Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince**

By Ian Chisholm
and Mark Bell

As leadership development practitioners, we often receive requests to design indelible learning events: experiences that will be utterly unforgettable for everyone who takes part and whose impact will far exceed the work itself. In the field of executive development, forums like this are the complex, elusive, high-touch masterpieces required to connect with sophisticated consumers and to amplify, augment and anchor the impact of other learning strategies.

We recently orchestrated such a gathering, inviting key players from all of the different teams and client organizations that we serve. Unexpectedly, the gathering developed a formidable purpose that was more important, more relevant and more necessary than any of its designers or participants anticipated or planned for. *The creative leadership required from everyone involved in bringing this experience to life was exactly the kind of leadership that the experience itself had been designed to develop.*

How does one imagine, design and deliver an indelible learning event? Here we reflect on our process and present the key choices we made along the way.

Choosing What Is True

Although designing an experience for a constituency of important, decision-making “tribe members” (as we called them) came with the temptation to make a big impression, to dazzle them with cutting-edge concepts and to demonstrate just how deftly we had a finger on the pulse of our craft, a few honest conversations stirred a more mature appetite and an intention to create significant value in the lives of everyone involved: we would design the experience *with* them and not *for* them.

We began with some core philosophical principles: The experiences must be based on the way that leaders learn, and leaders learn from their own experience. One-tenth theory adds insight and nine-tenths practice invites initiative. We must somehow work with our own Greatness, by constantly focusing on our inner Direction, AND our own Practice, what we consciously or unconsciously do well or less well in our leading and living. By reviewing the themes from the story behind us, we gain glimpses of the stories ahead of us – the stories we are capable of creating in the world. Feedback from those we lead is invaluable for our own learning. *Finally, leaders need time, space, support and challenge to practice being inwardly directed and outwardly open.*

Joining us in piloting this experience was author and learning pioneer Tim Gallwey. By inviting Tim to join us, we were choosing to meet and work alongside a teacher whose life's work had inspired both of us to adopt a coaching approach in our own areas of leadership.



Having Tim Gallwey with us had countless rewards. The learning was steep and rigorous, not flashy, slick or 'edutaining'. By means of his example, we were invited as leaders to say real and unpolished things. His authenticity and generosity aligned with truths everyone already knew. More than any gem of content, insight or perspective (of which, there were many), *the messenger was the message*. His conduct – the interface where his character met the world – created poetry and prayer for all involved. In every moment, his manner demonstrated the kind of highly aware, conscious and deeply practiced leadership that we had all chosen to emulate in our own leadership practice.

All of us – designers and participants alike – were required to raise our game from merely knowing and doing to *becoming aligned with who we had always been*. By returning to core concepts and having Mr. Gallwey join us, we chose what was true over what was new.

Choosing Practice Over Expertise

There is a strong temptation to occupy the ground as an expert when leading experiences like this one. 'Expert status' gives those stewarding the experience the confidence, authority and credibility to do what they have to do to deliver an excellent product. When the dynamics get complicated, experts in the room show the way out. The problem is that experiences like the one we created are *complex* – not *complicated* – and, despite the fact that we frequently interchange these words, there is a substantial difference.

A *complicated* system is one with numerous variables that influence an outcome, albeit an ordered one. All (or at least most) of these variables and the connections between



them are known, discernable and predictable by someone who understands that particular system. Piloting a large ship is complicated, but a crew with the right expertise using good practice can accomplish exactly what needs to be done in a variety of situations, reliably and nearly 100% of the time.

A *complex* system, by comparison, is adaptable, unordered and unpredictable. Living systems (such as a learning event full of highly capable, influential and strong-minded human beings) often fall into this category. So does taming a wild tiger. A tiger-tamer who carries out the same action 100 times with a tiger might very well be met with 100 different responses. And no one – not even an esteemed zoologist – knows the absolute right way forward or what the full range of responses from the tiger will be.

The tough news is that there is no such thing as an 'expert leader' in the complex field of leadership development. *There are just practitioners* and the deeply principled work they do *in situ*. Some have a wealth of experience to the point where they themselves have become a product of their own deep-abiding philosophies. But this does not constitute expertise or a prescriptive certainty beforehand of the best way forward. The most dedicated practitioners have an innate trust in their ability to be what is required at all times, and to invite whatever it is time for in the moments that count – even if they have never done something like it before. They are prepared to design a program 'on the go' and find the way forward as it emerges in front of them. What results is an integrity of design that is often only fully understood upon completion. Time spent with these practitioners – and the invisible scaffolding of possibility that they create – is an experience that sticks with people, forever, and the experience is wholly what it needed to be.

The idea of *the architecture of the invisible* is a paradox and that maybe its greatest value. The notion points at something which we cannot see. So how is this possible? How can you point when there is nothing to be seen. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his book *The Little Prince* puts it well when he says "what is essential is invisible to the eye." There are many reasons why we do not see something or someone: we are not present but are somewhere else in our head, we do not want to see, our world view does not permit something to exist, we have consistently stopped paying attention to something, also being always busy, and so on. The notion points at designing something which we cannot see. *Seeing* in these terms can be about opening up a mindset, or confronting a



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fear, or practicing paying attention and studying something. It can also be about pausing and slowing to another speed, about asking a question and holding it open in a sense of curiosity and wonder.

To accomplish this, we chose not to make the common mistake of cramming too much pre-planned content into the time we had together. Evenings were left open for people to do whatever it was that they needed to do. "Be wisely selfish," we told them. "Reflect, inquire and pause." The unstructured time created space for remarkable stories to emerge – not only stories told, but stories in the world for each participant to be the authors of.

Under these conditions, the invisible take-aways become more relevant and more poignant than any promised learning objectives. The messengers creating the experience are called upon to be more honest and more creative than could have been imagined, often throwing away their ideas of a flow of the days and rather allowing the 'sessions' to emerge. And the overall concept becomes more courageous and has more impact than anyone expects – even for those responsible for 'leading' the work.

Choosing Ownership Together

Counting on emergent practice is not to say that an experience should be left to chance. Over the past two decades, we have had the opportunity to create many unique and powerful group experiences. One characteristic common to all of our favourite forums has been when all participants take ownership for creating their experience together. This exposes our demanding preference for leading self-led people rather than compliant audiences. Thus, when our participants arrived with legitimate expectations that their experience would be welcoming, well organized, well managed, well served and well led, they soon learned, in no uncertain terms, that they were as responsible for creating these conditions as anyone else.

Our stage consisted of a beautiful geographic setting and venue, and to this we added a cast of remarkable characters. We did our best to surround the forum with people who embodied great leadership stories. Everyone involved in the experience – driver, hotel staff, yoga instructor, musicians, chefs – had made courageous decisions about the roles they currently held and the work they performed. We briefed them on the nature of the event and our approach, and related to them the non-confidential details of the invitees.



Tim Gallwey authored a bestselling book in 1974 called *The Inner Game of Tennis* – followed by a series of *Inner Game* books in the fields of golf, skiing, music, work and stress. Flying in the face of the business literature at the time (which was firmly focused on ‘the outer game’ of strategy, business planning and controls), Gallwey’s approach is one that began with a highly intuitive ability to notice what was happening inside the experience of his athletes. He identified clearly that experience itself was the greatest teacher. He invited people to notice what was happening rather than try to create what should be.

Today, modern neuroscience has backed up many of the concepts that Gallwey identified on the tennis courts almost 40 years ago including “being in the zone,” neuroplasticity, the intuitive known and the relationship between performance, potential and mental interference. Tim Gallwey’s life’s work has changed the field of coaching, learning and human development dramatically, and he is an important influence in the life of any leader who has chosen to use their own conduct in a way that enhances the performance, learning and enjoyment of others.

We encouraged them to play a key leadership role, pairing who they were with an explicitly high standard of professionalism and service. The result was that everyone surrounding the project felt part of a remarkable experience.

For those of us facilitating, the experience summoned all of our faculties. We understood that creating a program this way meant a commitment to late nights and early mornings in order to design multiple ways forward. We accepted the difficult assignment of using and believing in our intuition to choreograph something that was uncontrived and that left room for surprise. Facilitating the experience demanded a high degree of perception – noticing the weak and not-so-weak signals in the room and in ourselves – to inform us where the group was in their process. It meant being attached more to the learners in the room rather than to any agenda, learning objective or plan. It required a paradox of humility and confidence, of being both experienced and a novice, of being inwardly directed together and outwardly open as individuals. We needed to believe in the culture we had created among our tribe members and that, just as in wider endeavours, the connections we established with others would carry us through any trials or tribulations. Together we developed a quiet partnership and trust among the facilitators and the group, which many participants mentioned as a dynamic they noticed and learned from.

This experience taught us significantly more than what it takes to create a learning event that has impact. Leaders are increasingly being asked to design a world where doing the work itself invites greatness and practice – people’s finest selves making their finest contributions. Encouraged by Tim Gallwey, we all experienced the beauty of countless moments of spontaneous natural learning and equally beautiful moments of learning from what got in our way. Our experience of the invisible architecture that supported our way of being and learning together at this event informs what leadership will increasingly need to look like – all the time.



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Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

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