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Ritch Eich

Eich Associated, ritcheich@gmail.com

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MEMO TO CEO: FIVE EASY WAYS TO INVIGORATE THE C-SUITE



**RITCH K. EICH, PHD,
EICH ASSOCIATED, PRES.
THOUSAND OAKS, CALIFORNIA, U.S.**

Is your organization burning out as the result of yet another round of – choose the term *du jour* – down-signing, rightsizing, restructuring, or reorganization initiatives, as you try to please your investors?

Is your own leadership team losing their spontaneity, creativity, or ingenuity because they're focused on beating this quarter's expectations instead of concentrating on ways to produce sustainable growth?

Is their morale slipping, hurting relationships with their own direct reports, other employees – even customers and clients?

Layoffs may not always be avoidable, but you can give your team – indeed, your entire organization – a creative diversion to address the mental malaise and stress we all experience. It doesn't require climbing walls, paint ball, or falling backwards into waiting hands. Instead, it requires integrating art into your organization.

Your team might simply need a mental break from their routine to get their minds cleared of the suffocating strategic, financial, and operational demands that are part and parcel of organizational life.

The arts have long been recognized for their power to heal, provide calm during a storm, and keep the mental clouds at bay. Having served a previous stint as a Fellow at Abbott Laboratories and an administrator for the University of Michigan College of Pharmacy, I was fortunate to understand the power of art as a result of the Parke-Davis (Pfizer) and Abbott art collections. During World War II, Abbott hired a number of civilian artists to capture authentic scenes of Navy corpsmen and doctors treating the sick and wounded. Seeing the Abbott collection made my own challenges seem relatively trivial, but more importantly, they inspired me to do more.

Art is more than aesthetic. It has a positive – and powerful – physiological impact on the brain. Research has shown that fine and performing arts can help reduce blood pressure while improving one's focus and outlook on their job or about life in general. As your organization's CEO, bringing art into the workplace is one way that you can improve the well-being of your own team, and your entire organization.

Art will help your team look at something with a different perspective by stimulating creativity and thoughtful observation. Art can combat tunnel vision, and help make a

cold, sterile work environment feel more inspiring. Art can inspire us to think more creatively (i.e., “outside the box”).

One of the people who really opened my eyes to the power of the arts in business was Frank Merlotti, Sr., president and CEO of Steelcase, the global leader in office furniture. I was a Senior VP at Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and Merlotti was on the hospital’s board of trustees. Our relationship gave me the opportunity to visit the Steelcase offices many times.

Steelcase has long understood the interrelationships among art forms, design, functionality, creativity, and workplace efficiency. If you ever want to see one of the most effective blends of art, architecture, and business success, visit the Steelcase corporate headquarters in Grand Rapids. The entire business environment delights the senses and heightens the desire for discovery. This is no big shock, considering that Robert Pew, the former board chairman of Steelcase, and his partner, Frank Merlotti, Sr., the former president and CEO, were leaders who believed in — and practiced — humility, generosity to their employees, and being team players while delivering quality and value to customers.

Pew and Merlotti understood that the arts inspired employees, instilled creativity, and inspired clear thinking. These benefits are often unrecognized and viewed as a frivolous use of funds. However, the ability to think clearly and creatively is anything but frivolous when you are part of a leadership team charged with making decisions that impact the lives of others. In fact, Pew felt so strongly about the impact of art that, during the construction of Steelcase’s new corporate headquarters in the 1980s, he oversaw the acquisition of hundreds of pieces of art to be integrated into the building’s design. Those works — including those by James Rosati, Dale Chihuly, and Andy Warhol — remain with the organization and are exhibited in the company’s offices around the globe.

While you can undoubtedly think of others, here are five suggestions for integrating the arts into your workplace:

1. ***Include music in your place of business.*** The Nordstrom department stores were well known for their pianist-in-residence. The pianist was there for the benefit of customers, but associates benefited just as much. Take a cue, and install a music system for the lunchroom or a conference room and set up a good playlist to run. Ask your team what type of music they prefer and incorporate their ideas. Some executives may like classical music while others prefer jazz or rock. Choose a selection that will appeal to all so that your team (and their teams) can enjoy some music during their workday or lunch hour. The result will be a more relaxed and refreshed team — and that translates into more effective problem-solving.
2. ***Plant a small garden outdoors or on a patio.*** If you have the funds, consult a landscape expert to create a soothing Zen garden — or better yet, ask employees for their own ideas. Be sure to include tables, chairs, and benches so your team (and their teams) can enjoy their lunch there. Don’t have any outdoor space? Transform a patio or the lunchroom with beautiful plants, potted trees, and flowers. Place plants throughout the workplace. Add statuary from the local garden store and a water feature like a fountain. The result will be a calmer team, better able to

focus. And don't be surprised if they start meeting regularly in the newly-installed garden.

3. **Create an art gallery at your workplace.** Consult a local gallery owner or artist to help bring in paintings, sculptures, professional photography, or other pieces of art for display the way many hospitals do. If you don't have the budget to purchase pieces, invite local artists, art students, or even employees to display their works on a rotating basis in the hallways at your place of work. Chances are the artists will be thrilled: you get a rotating gallery and they get free exposure; it's a win-win for all. You can also ask a local foundation or art school to help you acquire donated art. The result will be a less-sterile environment that will inspire your team, and may even elicit conversations between team members viewing the art – conversations that wouldn't have otherwise taken place.
4. **Take your team to see a live performance such as dance troupe or a play.** Check the local newspaper listings or go online to find a production that fits everyone's schedule and make a day of it. Even if some team members complain that they can't afford the time away from the office, I assure you that everyone will appreciate the break, and come back refreshed and ready to problem solve.
5. **Hold a staff meeting off-site at a local museum, art gallery, or arboretum.** Keep the meeting to a few hours and allow everyone to enjoy the venue afterward. The off-site setting alone will reduce anxiety and encourage people to participate more than they would have back at the office. Without office distractions and with inspiring surroundings, chances are they will contribute more.

Business is inherently stressful, especially for those in leadership positions. Frank Merlotti believed that office environments either promoted mental health and sustained competitive excellence or deprived workers of both. He taught me that chief executives must monitor their teams for burnout and mental malaise. In fact, Merlotti insisted that his own team always took their full vacation time for renewal purposes.

Bringing in the beauty, splendor, and restorative power of the arts is certainly worth the return you'll see on your investment.

About the Author

Ritch K. Eich, president of Eich Associated, is a retired captain, U.S. Naval Reserve, who commanded three naval reserve units and served in NATO, JCS, Atlantic, and Pacific Fleets. He is the author of *Real Leaders Don't Boss* (Career Press, 2012) and *Leadership Requires Extra Innings* (with Second City Publishing Services, 2013). He has a Ph.D. in organizational behavior and communication from the University of Michigan. Ritch can be contacted at ritcheich@gmail.com.