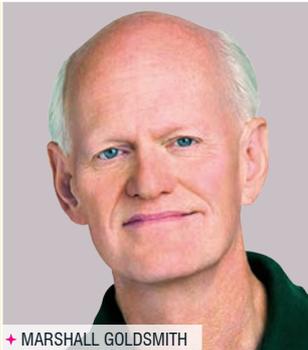


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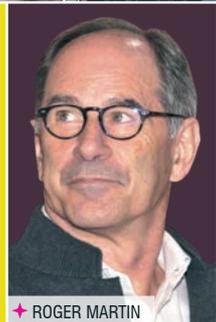


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FUTURE OF MANAGEMENT



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INSIGHTS FROM AWARD-WINNERS OF 2015 THINKERS50, GLOBAL RANKING OF MANAGEMENT THINKERS

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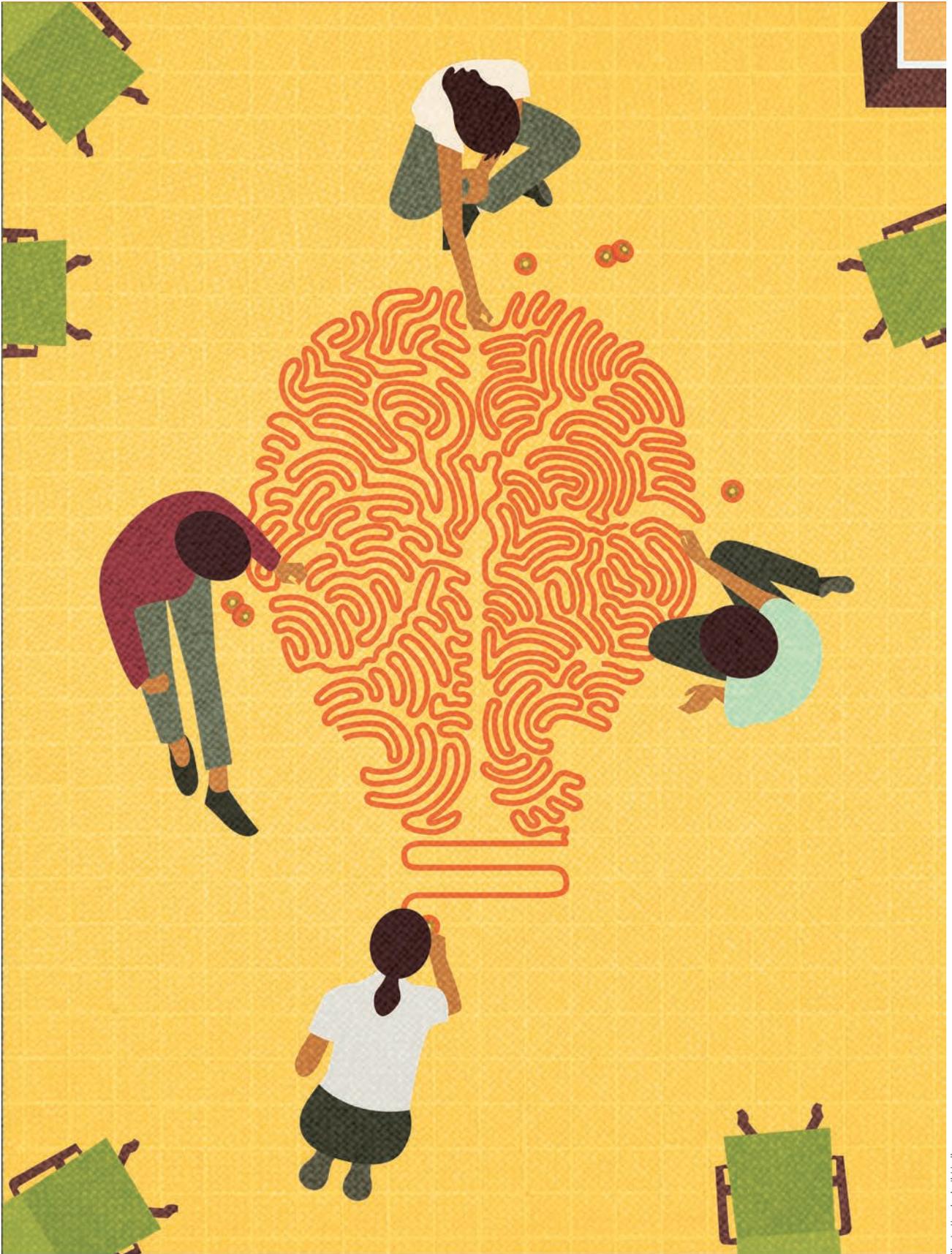


Illustration by ketki jadhav



MICHAEL TOWNSEND

IS THE INVENTOR OF TAPE ART AS A MEDIUM, AS WELL AS THE FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE TAPE ART CREW, A GROUP OF GLOBALLY-RECOGNIZED STREET ARTISTS THAT HAVE BEEN PRODUCING DRAWINGS ON BUILDINGS IN CITIES ALL OVER THE WORLD FOR OVER 25 YEARS.

drawing together the path to innovation

Falling communications costs, globalization, and the increasing specialization of knowledge-based work have made collaboration within and among organizations more important than ever.¹ But engaging business leaders through art, and more specifically tape art, is a unique concept that is gaining popularity. Michael Townsend, through his art-based sessions, not only teaches corporations a new form of art but also links the entire experience to their everyday business environment.

We have been watching teams of corporate leaders draw together for over twenty years. Using the medium of tape, their drawings have overwhelmed the walls of training facilities, engulfed the floors of conference centers, and stretched the length of corporate hallways. These drawings demonstrate their capacity to innovate, an ability to come up with original solutions—especially when working in collaboration.

Notice that the term used is collaboration, and not teamwork. A traditional teamwork approach breaks a

project into roles, sets concrete goals, assigns tasks, and executes those tasks within given time constraints. We have seen successful teams exhibit those skills and produce acceptable drawings. But the best teams use teamwork as a foundation and exhibit additional unique behaviors. They tend to be willing to operate in ambiguity for longer, take more risks, are often surprised by the outcome of their own work, and demonstrate greater levels of inclusiveness and engagement. People who begin the workshops believing they cannot draw get swept up in their own ability and sometimes would even refuse to stop. These



In this environment, someone can start to self-identify his or her own strengths and weaknesses as an innovator and leader.

teams also laugh a lot. In short, they collaborate, leading to breakthroughs that far exceed their own expectations.

Workshops designed around an art-based exercise are uniquely suited to creating the conditions that allow for collaboration. They provide an environment of ambiguity in which the participants assume they do not have the skill sets to succeed. By making everyone a beginner, the playing field is leveled and teams have to use the process of collaboration to take advantage of their collective strengths to find a solution.

In this environment someone can start to self-identify his or her own strengths and weaknesses as an innovator and leader. The workshops provide a safe space to experiment, test new ideas, and explore content and meaning. As facilitators, we have introduced Tape Art to over 50,000 people and in corporate workshops we link the experience of making art together to practical situations in the business environment.

Before unpacking more observations, let us describe what each team experiences in a Tape Art exercise. We start by breaking large rooms of people into groups of ten or smaller. An artist from our team gives a brief introduction to tape as an art medium and demonstrates how to draw with it. Each team is responsible for depicting a narrative interpretation of a common theme or prompt. Teams draw simultaneously, working together toward an agreed-upon aspiration of what the result should be.

We are looking for tangible evidence of innovation manifesting itself in how the teams construct their stories, apply the tape to the wall, manage their time, and/or create something unique. Each team can approach their project

in their own way. When time is up, a group discussion provides insight into the content and the process of making it. Whether teams utilized a teamwork approach or a collaborative one, the final result is evidence of the effort of all the participants and how active each person was in determining and executing the outcome—responding and evolving in real time to the piece as it grows. Debriefs of the final artworks tend to focus on the interactions between the team members and the implications to their leadership practice when challenged with navigating a new problem.

how do they react?

There are two dominant responses to these exercises: disappointment or exhilaration. The first tends to result from not being able to execute a traditional teamwork model in which every individual has a specific task; the second is the result of a more collaborative approach. From these group de-briefings we have noticed certain patterns.

Groups who relied on teamwork gravitated toward finding the most fit/strongest/experienced (or sometimes just the loudest) leader and deferred all ideas to that person's final decision. These groups were mainly interested in executing a perfect vision. They married themselves to certain plans before they had even put tape on the wall, so they quickly got frustrated not only with their individual drawings, but also with the drawing as a whole. Near the end of the drawing period, teamwork groups focused solely on whether they had met the criteria of the assignment, regardless of the quality of their work or their satisfaction with it. They often finished early and expressed more negative feelings about the work and their team's performance. What we have witnessed is that it is not unusual for individuals who pride themselves on their teamwork to fold completely when faced with the prospect of inventing something new with no immediate path to success.

On the other hand, teams of corporate artists who embraced a collaborative approach (although they rarely identify it as such) described their experience positively. Their process often began with an apparently non-hierarchical brainstorming session. These groups recounted that everyone felt comfortable in giving input

and openly discussing a range of possible outcomes. The collaborative groups were tolerant of ‘mistakes,’ viewing each step in the drawing as iteration towards a better product. And there were more innovations—using the entire height of the wall as well as floors and ceilings, manipulating and applying the tape in ways not demonstrated by the artists, and making three-dimensional objects. They were active until the last minute, looking for final details to make the work look better and enthusiastic throughout.

Most importantly, they were curious and open to embracing a new experience and excelling at it. Adults sometime fixate on the idea that they cannot draw. Ask most corporate types if they ‘would associate themselves with being an artist’ and you will receive a resounding no. During a truly collaborative process however, these same individuals become excited about exploring new mediums and methods of communication. Collaboration with their peers enables them to overcome artistic self-deprecation and marvel when the group produces a genuinely engaging work of art. The results repeatedly remind everyone in the room that they are capable of being part of a creative engine that will drive the Next Big Idea.

learning through art: GE, a case study

For the past six years, we have worked at GE’s Management Development Institute in Ossining, New York. Of all the organizations we have worked with, GE leaders working in teams have exhibited the keenest commitment to innovation. They fill their learning centers with leaders from a wide range of business across the world and this diversity of outlooks plays a large role in their quest for new innovations.



Collaboration with their peers enables them to overcome artistic self-deprecation and marvel when the group produces a genuinely engaging work of art.

If art is inherently linked to creativity and innovation, how do we get our leaders to become better artists? We have watched the answer to this unfold over the last six years on GE’s Ossining campus. Leadership training makes them better artists—the more they have had, the stronger their artwork became. The more tenured employees will regularly create artwork that is more confident, more compelling, and better looking than the younger leaders in their organization. GE has used our art-based workshops as a tool to help leaders identify a wide range of skills and give them opportunities to talk with one another, not only about how to strengthen themselves, but also the workplaces they oversee. For them, as for other corporate entities, art provides a short cut to test their competencies in these areas. Giving people a unique project, asking them to assume uncomfortable roles, identifying new options, looking at your own responses in an unfamiliar situation, and becoming actively engaged are all traits that encourage good leadership with an eye to innovation. A common thread to success in all these areas has been how well these leaders can truly collaborate with each other.

We have seen some truly astounding artwork made by our corporate friends and our hope is that the benefits of true collaboration will continue to permeate their workplaces and lead to their next great breakthroughs. ■



01 http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/organization/mapping_the_value_of_employee_collaboration