

Collaboration in Business: A Lesson From the Arts **By Patricia Milton, Marketing Leader**

Does art imitate life? And, if so, how can we apply the lessons learned before they're lost?

At Interaction Associates, we help leaders at all levels in global organizations apply collaborative methods, self-awareness, and strategic thinking to solve business problems. We believe that collaboration is, more often than not, the best route to achieving sustained success. From IA's point of view, collaboration produces superior results ---in business, in the arts, in non-profit organizations, in government--- anywhere.

I had the pleasure of engaging in a six-month collaborative process at Central Works Theatre in Berkeley, CA, to write the play, "Reduction in Force." Central Works has been developing world premiere plays collaboratively for 21 years. The company was recognized in 2010 with the prestigious Paine Knickerbocker Award, named for the former theatre critic of the SF Chronicle, presented annually by the SF Bay Area Critics Circle to "a person or organization that has made a continuing contribution to Bay Area theatre."

The company, headed by co-founders Gary Graves and Jan Zvaifler, produces three world premieres each year using "The Central Works Method." [Quote from Gary and Jan]

Though only one writer -- the playwright -- actually does the writing in this Method, all the "collaborative partners" (the director, the actors and a few others, in addition to the playwright) are deeply involved in the development of the script from its inception. I set fingers to keyboard in late January 2011, and the play premiered at Berkeley City Club at the end of July 2011. I could not have written a play (any play) in that short a timeframe without the support of a collaborative process.

From my work here at Interaction Associates, I can put forward a few reasons why the Central Works Method works so well:

- 1) It is a defined, transparent, agreed-upon process. This is vital to successful collaboration. Ground rules are agreed upon, including "rule number one": the playwright does not start writing until the first workshop meeting. Ten workshops are scheduled, and a timeline agreed to by all. Also critical to the process is clear and unambiguous decision making. The playwright is responsible for writing the play, the director for directing, the actors for acting, the designers for designing. Each contributes during the workshops to giving honest feedback and doing research in service of the play. For each aspect of the production, final decision making is clear.
- 2) It fosters good relationships. Of course, the process helps this. What also helps: Mutual respect, good communication, and assuming the best of one another.

Since theatre is a collaborative art in any context, many theatre artists have at least a passing understanding of collaboration, and the attitude necessary to make it successful. Actors and playwright are selected with this in mind: do they have the capacity to play well with others --- to set aside ego or temperament in service of the project? Interestingly (or maybe inevitably), two characters working together with mutual trust became a key thread in the play.

- 3) There is shared responsibility for success. This doesn't mean everyone takes on every role, but we all had "skin in the game," and passionately strove toward a vision of success for the project. It was "our" project.

The process of writing a play in six months was fascinating (and occasionally terrifying). I typically write for 12 – 18 months before completing a final draft. Without the supportive, strategic partnership provided by Central Works' "Reduction in Force" team, it would not have been possible.

Read more about the Central Works Method here:

http://www.centralworks.org/pages/about_method.php