

Artful Making

This summary is about “Artful Making: What Managers Need to Know About How Artists Work” by Rob Austin and Lee Devin. ISBN 0-13-008695-9. <http://www.amazon.com/Artful-Making-Managers-About-Artists/dp/0130086959>.

I think Artful Making is an interesting and useful cut at innovation and how to approach it. The book is a collaboration between two professors: one management and one theatre. And that is the foundation of the book – that many problems and projects should be approached as an ‘artful making’ instead of an ‘industrial making’ process. The book is well written but not perfect. There are some case studies and examples that help. However, in my opinion, some of the points are reiterated a bit too much. And there is only passing mention of the issues in most companies of overcoming the cultural challenges of shifting from industrial to artful making and how to deal with them.

It’s important to recognize that this approach is not intended for everything and I think it works best when the end goal or path isn’t clear or involves exploration or adjustment. Given the nature of current business and problems businesses face, innovation and dealing with the unexpected is really something all management needs be able to do. A good line in the book is:

“A manager who needs to be handed a clear set of objectives or a process specification is only half a manager (and not the most important half).”

The book points out the similarity between this ‘artful making’ approach and not only theatre but also agile software programming. A key part of this is that lessons can be learned from the rapid iteration, which are part and parcel of agile programming and theatre. This is the other end of the spectrum from detailed planning and ‘get it right (the first time)’. The authors point out that going artful is not the same as giving up control or not having deadlines. In theatre, they are very constrained in budget, time, resources, etc. and get a production together consistently.

The qualities/framework of artful making described are:

- Release: Openness. As opposed to restraint. Having a management approach that accepts wide variation in solution/approaches.
- Collaboration: The character of how the team works together – with little or no vanity, inhibition, preconceptions.
- Ensemble: The quality of the team pulling together for a common goal – the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.
- Play: The quality of the production (end result) while it is being consumed (by the customer, consumer, or the audience).

Clearly, these are very art/theatrical in nature. And it takes some effort to wrap a more management-oriented mind around them.

The ‘industrial making’ process is very linear/sequential and planning-oriented. In the software realm, this is very much the classical ‘waterfall’ approach. The ‘artful making’ process is very iterative and often exploratory. This is clearly the ‘agile’ software approach. This all also relates to strategy development. (It is sort of like Plan/Do/Check/Act, but that’s not quite all the way to ‘artful’. It would need to be more Experiment/Iterate/Release/Check/Act...) A comparison of ‘agile’ and ‘theatre’ described in the book was:

	Software development	Play Making
Iterative cycle	product build and test	rehearsal
Distributed, independent,	individual programmers	individual actors preparing

simultaneous invention	working on source code	between runs
Unifying action	product build	rehearsal run
Director facilitating coherent choices	project manager	director
Forum for conversation	meetings or electronic forums	rehearsal room
Way of setting structure	code holds structure	actors enact structure

One of the key aspects of this ‘artful making’ approach is rapid iteration/exploration. For that to be successful, the iteration cost has to be very low – which relates to reconfiguration costs (e.g. retooling) and exploration costs (e.g. scrap). The authors state that the sweet spot for ‘artful making’ is a project that 1) has low cost iteration, 2) needs reliable repetition, and 3) has a need for innovation.

A challenge with ‘artful making’ is supervision. The book talks about the challenges here and the need to avoid standard management and compliance mechanisms. The recommendation is about release – letting the ensemble have the openness and freedom to try things. A key thing about this is the level of trust between the manager and the team. The authors also talk at some length about having a secure workspace which relates to the trust aspect as well. It is about the ability to try things and not be penalized by the manager/director or the other ensemble members.

I think Agilent (both life sciences and T&M) is very much an ‘industrial maker’ sort of organization. It is very sequential and to be honest I think it has a hard time dealing with changes and innovation. I think that this is true of not only the senior management bench, but also broadly of the engineers and lower level managers. And one of the challenges I see for Agilent is that it needs to appropriately use ‘artful making’ tools for many of its near and medium term challenges (internal and market).