

My leadership lesson from William Kentridge

By [Lynn Madeley](#), issued by [Havas Johannesburg](#)

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Two nights ago, I went to 'William Kentridge in conversation with Kim Berman'. And that is where the two people reading this article will think, "I'll read one more sentence and then I'm off to find something appropriate to business and marketing, not high-brow art." I ask you to stick with me: So enthralled was I, that on a Wednesday night, sitting in a University of Johannesburg lecture hall, I began taking notes.



You see, Mr Kentridge, clearly an absolute genius, began talking about The Centre for the Less Good Idea, founded by the man. I will do it a total injustice to talk about it here, you can Google it. But the point is – it is an environment that has been created to support experimental, creative collaboration. And that is what hooked me. In our changing world, to progress, and stay ahead of the game, we are all having to learn about experimental, creative collaboration, even if we are rational thinking accountants, or marketers, or engineers.

We can learn so much from Kentridge. He talked about the importance of building on an impulse, because that impulse comes from a place of passion. He also talked about the fact that he has to fight himself not to listen only to the most self-assured voice in the room. There are two critical points for business here. Firstly, we have to create environments that allow people to act on impulse. We have to create spaces that are safe to have free-flowing ideas and thoughts, so that we can get to the truths that we need – whether that is a problem involving talent inside the business or a solution for a client. However, there is a tension here – how do we make sure that we encourage the 'right' impulses and not just random hogwash that will, frankly, waste time? I believe it's a process, led by learning and copying other, more experienced colleagues, but also and probably more importantly, it is about leaders of the business giving away ownership of a task and empowering people to come up with a solution. You see, if you have no responsibility and no real consequence to your action, sure you can be free-thinking but you can also be totally unfocused. Often it is hard focusing in a safe space that creates the impulse that works towards solving the problem. That hard focusing comes from trusting people to own the problem and creating safety nets so they can go too far and be brought back, if required.

The second point is about teaching ourselves not to listen to the most confident team or person. I guarantee we have all fallen victim to this. We seem to be programmed to feel the energy over hearing the idea and the words. As leaders, and often the people who are, frankly, the killers of ideas, we need to take this very seriously. We talk about giving assertiveness training – why don't we all give ourselves listening training. Honestly, people will find their assertiveness if they know that the decision maker is not going to be romanced by the loudest voice in the room but will be romanced by the best idea. I know I have much to work on in this regard and I suspect, most of us in leadership roles do too. Hey, even Mr Kentridge says he has work to do in this area.

So I've mentioned building on impulse, about learning from the quiet people, but what specifically about collaboration. Collaboration is something very close to my heart, I believe in it, though I think it is very challenging, probably because we don't listen to the quiet ones and we tend to shut down impulsive thinking. Kentridge describes collaboration "as a dance where you bounce off each other". It makes complete sense, but why? Firstly, if you are dancing *with* people, you are immediately in a team, with a common purpose, which is to move your bodies in an enjoyable way. If you are going to build true collaboration, you have to build it with willing dancing partners and that means dancing together must be more enjoyable than dancing alone. In teams that need to collaborate it is the duty of everyone in the room to understand that principle, but it is also critical that the end game is clear and that the benefits of the collaboration are clear for each party.

Great collaborators are more selfless and have more vision and want the best outcome for the task at hand versus satisfying their own ego. Today you may only be a small part of someone else's idea but if you are invited back, something you say or a skill you can offer may be central to the work coming out of the collaborative space. Great collaborative teams feed off each other's energy. They are positive, they are always looking to improve what is going on for the team. What they are not, is constantly using the filter of 'What's in it for me (WIIFM)'. The WIIFMs need to be removed from the team.

And lastly, I learnt a valuable lesson: I expected to learn about art, maybe a bit about the creative process. I did not expect to learn about leadership. It reminded me to stay curious, to remember that inspiration, if you are constantly scanning for it in the things you are passionate about can come from anywhere.

Thank you, Mr Kentridge, so very much.

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