



What Managers Can Learn From Painters

Excerpt from

Management Lessons from the Artist

By Robert Fritz

The popular image of painters, particularly since Vincent Van Gogh cut off his ear, are an eccentric maladjusted and strange lot whose genius and talent plagues them and those around them. So at first blush, it may seem that the organizational professional has little in common and little to learn from the professional painter. However, if we overcome our cultural stereotype, we can find at least seven major lessons from the way painters work -- lessons that you can use directly in your organizational work. Lessons that you can use in your life.

Painters fall into the category of those creators who primarily work alone. And the lessons of the painter can be better understood once we think about those times that we work alone, something that, no matter how collaborative our work is, we all do from time to time.

How do we think about our process? How do we motivate ourselves? How do we manage and then adjust our methods? How do we create energy within ourselves? How can we create greater momentum and greater facility? Painters know the answers to these important questions, and when we study their work patterns, we can see some of the most practical aspects of the creative process that anyone, from the CEO to the line manager, can use professionally within the organization.

1. The Lesson of Structural Tension

The first lesson we can learn from painters is the lesson of structural tension. The word structure means an arrangement of various elements. Tension is created whenever we have discrepancy, contrast, or difference between at least two elements. Whenever we set up a tension, it will strive for resolution -- it is a dynamic that generates movement and energy.

So structural tension is the arrangement of elements that establish a dynamic force that can help us create the results we want.

Structural tension is formed when we have:

- a vision of the result we want to create, and
- an understanding of the current conditions we have in relationship to that result.

Structural tension is formed by the difference between the desired state and the actual state.

In the beginning of the creative process there will always be a discrepancy between the vision or the desired state, and the current reality or the actual state. This is because the primary intention of the creative process is to bring something into reality that doesn't exist yet.

The word tension sometimes connotes emotional or psychological distress, strain, and stress. But structural tension does not create emotional conflict or psychological anxiety. Rather, it is structural in nature, and generates excitement, energy and power.

This principle of structural tension is the fundamental basis of every aspect of the creative process, within the arts and within business and organizations. All of the books I have written have explored this important principle, because it is the key ingredient in creating. Filmmakers, poets, musicians

and actors, composers, sculptors, architects, cinematographers, fashion designers, and authors all use structural tension in their work, as we will see later in this book. But the painter uses this principle in its purest form! So for the manager, the painter is a particularly good teacher in the use of structural tension.

Imagine yourself as a painter. How do you bring the painting into being? It begins in the mind's eye. You need to have an image of the finished painting in your mind before you even begin to work.

Which raises an often asked question: how clear does the vision have to be for it to be useful?

Sometimes the painter has a general look, a feel, an impulse in mind. The image may be of colors, textures, form, shapes, and content. The painter may not be able to determine exactly what the final result will look like, but still have a clear enough image of the final result that he or she can make a series of critical decisions that move the painting to its completion.

For managers, the vision of the outcome must be as clear and tangible as is the painters. Whatever the degree of explicitness, at some level the vision must be understood. It can't be vague, obscure, or nebulous.

How clear the vision?

So, how clear does the vision have to be for both painter and manager? Adequately clear -- clear enough that the painter or manager will be able to work with it.

The vision's development may take place over several steps and stages. Painters often make sketches and studies. Before the painter is ready to begin a major project, he or she may make a series of drawings to learn more and more about the vision. Artist Janet Fish, describing her process of developing an idea for a painting, said, "I am very interested in finding out what I actually see. I don't really know until I get going."

Over time, the vision becomes progressively concrete as it crystallizes in the painter's mind.

The practice of sketching and making studies gives us an important insight about the creative process: sometimes, the vision of the final result we want is developed over a period of time. This is in contrast to a notion that a vision must be the product of sudden inspiration.

Painters may have sudden revelations or an evolutionary process when they conceive of a painting. Both modes can be useful or not. One way of developing a vision is no better than the other. It is a personal matter. It can also be different for the same individual for different projects. As a manager, you may find that sometimes you are able to "flash" on a result, and you know exactly what you want. But, other times your vision may develop more slowly as you go through a series of stages that help you learn more and more about your vision.

However the painter or manager develops the vision, at the beginning of the creative process, there has to be enough of a vision of the final result, that the outcome can be achieved.

Forming the vision -- where do ideas come from?

"Where do your ideas come from?" is a constantly asked question whenever an artist, writer, filmmaker, or song writer is interviewed on television. Forming a vision is often made to seem to be a mysterious process. So, where do ideas come from?

Sometimes the artist will describe the conditions that were going on when the vision was conceived. "I was looking at the night sky, and a shooting star blazed across the night, and that's when I realized the look of the painting..." What does that tell us? Not much. It only tells us where the painter was, and what he saw, but it leaves out an essential ingredient -- how the vision was conceived.

Other times, the artist might describe a step-by-step process of sketching and making studies, but that doesn't tell us where the idea for the painting came from.

An artist can talk about other artists that influenced his or her ideas, but that doesn't tell us where ideas came from.

Here is the big secret about where ideas come from, a secret that is both profound in its insight, and deceptively simple in its wisdom.

Where do ideas come from? *You make them up!*

Often, we think that ideas occur to us, or happen to us. And, sometimes, they do. But even when an idea somehow spontaneously appears in our heads, that idea is made up. We make them up by thinking them up. We make them up by a process of sudden realization. We make them up as variations of other ideas. We make them up in dreams. We make them up while in conversation with other people. We make them up while we're watching TV, or driving, or soaking in the bath tub, or eating a meal.

Now, it's usual to glorify how and why an idea was made up. It makes a great story, particularly if you're being interviewed for People Magazine or USA Today. But, what is the essential difference between an idea that was made up through a process of what seemed like a mystical experience, and an idea that you made up at the water cooler? In fact, nothing.

Great ideas can come from both types of experiences. But, as the professional creators all know, inspiration can lead to terrible or unworkable ideas, and mundane experiences can lead to wonderful and very workable ideas.

One misconception about the creative process is that the experience you have while conceiving of an idea is exceedingly important. In fact, it is totally and absolutely unimportant, and the experience itself should never be a standard of measurement about how good an idea is.

Don't worry about the experience you may have when you are making up your vision. Evaluate the vision based on one standard of measurement only: do you like the idea enough to create it? To bring it to full completion? To do the work it will take to create it in reality? The painter makes up his or her vision of the painting. You can make up your own vision of end results you want to create.

The vision in mind

Painters always have the vision in mind when they work. They cannot afford to get lost in the details or lose sight of the vision in other ways, because if they do, they will make wrong moves which can destroy a painting. What lesson about vision can the manager learn from the painter? This: the vision is a constant guide and target. It is the object that is aimed for, and the standard by which progress is measured.

For painters, the vision is both in the back of their minds and in the forefront of their focus. As they work, they see the painting in their mind's eye as a constant factor. When managers adopt this principle, their work takes on a pointed focus which helps generate energy and self-motivation.

An organizational lesson

Within organizations, constancy of vision is much too rare. It's easy to lose focus, get overwhelmed by problems, politics, and inadequate processes. But those whose focus is as constant as is the painter's have a distinct advantage. The point of the great volume of actions you and your team take have a single ultimate point -- to create the vision.

Once upon a time within the organizational world, it was fashionable to talk a lot about vision. The reason that the term vision lost some of its luster is that many of the people who used the word didn't have the slightest idea of the meaning. They may have said vision this and vision that, but they did not have a picture in their mind's eye of the result they wanted to create. Instead they had vague "Mom and apple pie" statements which didn't have any real understanding of the final result these people may have wanted.

Vision Means Vision

The painter works with a vision of the finished painting. When you work, have a vision of the end result you are after. Make it as clear as you need so that you can:

- * recognize the vision once it is accomplished
- * make adjustments over time as you get closer and closer to the achievement of the result
- * use the vision as a guide, standard of measurement, and source of inspiration and purpose.

As the painter makes sketches and does studies of the final result, you may want to sketch out your ideas and study various aspects of the final vision. Picture what the final result will look like and feel like once it is in place. What impact can you envision for the achievement of the outcome you want? Describe it in writing. You may even draw a picture of the final desired results on paper. Describe it to others, and see if they can understand what you are talking about. By experimenting with these methods, you will get to know the vision over time, and as you work with it, the vision becomes crystallized in your mind's eye. Form a mental picture of the result you are after, and refresh the picture regularly.

Current Reality

As the painter works, the painting changes. The painter must be aware of the changes. At first the painting may only be a blank canvas. But the canvas itself has a reality. It has a shape, a size, a texture. As the painting progresses, the painter observes the impact of that change, particularly in the context of the vision for the painting. To be fluent in reality is a necessity for managers, but so few are able to truly be aware of critical aspects of reality.

The nature of painting demonstrates the most direct form of structural tension possible because the painter is constantly reestablishing the tension between the actual and the desired states by his or her focus. This is an act of simultaneous concentration on the critical elements of vision and current reality.

The painter's lesson dealing with reality is that reality changes, and, for managers to be effective, we need to be fluent in that change. This is an easy statement to make, but the practice is not so easy. People are not used to looking at reality, even though they think they are.

Painters are trained to see and observe. At first, they are not very good at this, even when they have enormous talent. Painters, particularly representational ones who base their work on real objects, learn the lesson of observation. They begin by practicing to see what is there to see, an arrangement of flowers on a table, a landscape, a building, or a face. Rodin said, "Oh, doubtless a mediocre man copying nature will never produce a work of art; because he really looks without seeing, and though he may have noted each detail minutely, the result will be flat and without character."

Looking and seeing are not the same thing. Those of us who are untrained often look but do not see what we are looking at. But painters go through extensive training to see what there is to see. They must be able to be fluent in the reality they are observing and fluent in the way they have represented it on paper or canvas. The discipline is to observe two points in relationship to each other, the subject matter in front of them and the way it looks in the picture they are making.

The observation may lead to a vision of a painting, which then becomes the focal point of structural tension.

When painter Andrew Wyeth was a boy, his father, the great illustrator, N.C. Wyeth was his teacher. Before young Andrew would arrive in the family studio, N.C. would position a skeleton for the boy to draw. Andrew knew what his first assignment was as he entered the studio, to draw the skeleton in the new position. This exercise went on for many months. But one day Andrew arrived only to find there was no skeleton in the studio. It was gone. "What do you want me to draw today?" Andrew asked his father. "The skeleton." N.C. answered. "But there is no skeleton, you've taken it away." Andrew said. "Yes. Now you must see it in your mind." N.C. said.

Andrew needed to learn how the body's bone structure worked so the figures he drew and painted were convincing. His father was teaching him to see the figure and the bones structure within the figure. One startling characteristic of an Andrew Wyeth's extraordinary painting is an almost eerie perception that the viewer can not only see the figure, but feel the bones within the body of the figure, even when the figure is quietly sitting.

Years ago I took a life drawing class. It was my first, and I found it extremely difficult to get my hand to do what I thought my eye was seeing. As I struggled, the teacher would come over from time to time, and say, in his deep and booming voice "Look! Look!" He would then make one or two extensions of my line, and suddenly the drawing would come alive. He was able to see more accurately than I was able to see. He was able to teach his students how to see more than they could see at first. He was able to teach them how they could represent what they saw on paper.

In drawing, you first must see what is there to see before you can represent it in the picture. Claiming that you see what there is to see isn't enough. You must be able to prove it by your ability to represent it accurately. I often wonder what organizations would be like if the same test of accuracy was given when claims about reality are bandied about.

2. The lesson of the feedback system

Once the painter establishes structural tension by knowing his or her vision and by being fluent in current reality, it's time for action. The painter usually makes a sketch on the canvas. The sketch is like a blueprint, showing the major objects and shapes in relationship to each other within the picture. As the painter paints, the canvas changes. The painter looks at the current state of the picture, and compares it to his vision. He makes more changes. He compares the new state of the canvas to his vision of the finished painting. He makes more adjustments.

This process is a feedback system.

Of course, this feedback is imbedded within structural tension. Within the context of structural tension, action is taken which produces a result, a change within the painting. This change is evaluated, which then leads to an adjustment, which then feeds back into the next action, which is designed to resolve the tension by ending the discrepancy.

Each stroke of the brush is motivated by the painter's desire to match reality with the vision of the final result. Every move is seen within the context of structural tension. Many masters of the art are able to have every brush stroke bring the painting alive on the canvas. For those masters, the period of trial and error are over long before the paint process begins. They are able to work with an economy of means, in which every action they takes counts and contributes toward the final outcome. The rhythm of work, even though it will be invisible to the viewer, adds some X factor that can deepen the expression of the painting.

The lesson of feedback can apply directly to your organizational work, as well in your life, although we are hardly ever able to benefit from the quick feedback time frame that the painter enjoys. But the closer we can come to understanding the relationship between our actions and how well they served our vision, the better. If we are clever, we can invent our own methods for enhancing quicker feedback. Perhaps we will do quick samples of bits and pieces of reality to get an impression of how well it's going. Perhaps we will ask people who are especially credible to keep tabs on critical aspects of reality as it changes.

Certainly one lesson we can learn from the painter is that major moves ahead can be more effective if they come after an evaluation of how effective the previous steps have been.

Feedback is made possible in the context of truth and honesty. For the painter, there is no room to lie or distort reality in any way. For if the painter did, the future adjustments and actions would not work. The painter, no matter how egotistical he or she may be in their personal life, must be able to be separate in their relationship with the painting, even if the painting is a profoundly expressive. Andrew Wyeth, a deeply expressive artist, said, "I wish I could paint without me existing -- that just my hands were there."

Van Gogh, even in his most desperate moments, still was able to discern the reality of his paintings as he worked, and be totally honest with himself.

What these examples lead us to is the principle of separation, an exceedingly important lesson for anyone who wants to be effective.

3. The lesson of separation

Painters know that they are not their paintings. They are separate from them. This is a physical fact. It is also a psychological, emotional, and spiritual fact. However, it takes great insight to understand these facts. Once these facts are understood, insight transforms itself into wisdom, and the artist gains additional expressive power.

Painter Chuck Close said, "The only way you can get it is by divorcing yourself somewhat from the image." Painter Audrey Flack has said, "A painting has its own power and its own life. It exists in time, and expanse which is far longer than our lifetime." A lesson we can learn from these painters is this: your work has its own life, and sometimes to really "get it" is to divorce yourself from it.

Many people think that they are what they do. Let's think about the proposition. If you are what do, who were you before you did what you did? Since whatever you do is predated by your existence, how could you be what you do?

It is common for people to identify themselves with their work, their accomplishments, and their failures. However, this puts them at a enormous disadvantage because they become too close to any situation they are in to evaluate the consequences of their actions properly. If painters thought that they were their paintings, they would not be able to be objective in their evaluation of the painting -- an evaluation which fundamentally asks the question: does the painting match the vision or not?

Objectivity requires that there is a separation between the painter as an individual, and the painting as an object.

The irony is this, the more objective you are, the more subjective you can be. Subjectivity, in the case of the painter, is the painter's ability to be moved deeply by the painting, to feel it, to experience it in body, mind, and soul. True commitment and dedication are generated by the painter's relationship with the painting. That relationship would be impossible if the painter thought he or she was the painting, because relationships require at least two elements: a something as related to a something else. The painter and the painting. The filmmaker and the film. The architect and the building. The worker and the work. You and what you do.

The wisdom to understand the principle of separation allows you to be free to make mistakes and not take them personally. This ability supports the learning process. Learning supports developing competence over time and experience.

Separation is not disassociation. Separation enhances the possibility to be totally involved in your work. Separation doesn't lead to feelings of isolation and alienation, but, as in love relationships, affinity, involvement, and engagement.

People who have not learned the lesson of separation inadvertently hold back from their total involvement of their work -- sometimes the work they actually love, because they are fearful that full involvement in their work, or in their own life, may lead to painful self-revelation. Subconsciously, they are afraid of what their degree of success or failure says about them as human beings. In an attempt to overcome this condition, people begin to talk about "taking risks" which is a motto designed to compensate for the pain a person may experience from not living up to his or her ideal of how a person should be.

What is the risk? Often, the people who talk about "risk taking" are not talking about a person engaging in feats of physical danger, or jeopardizing his or her job security, but rather, facing the potential anguish that might be felt if one fails. This "take risks" advice is predicated on the notion that people are their work, and their work's success will somehow define their very being.

"I don't know what my identity is." said Edward Hopper. Obviously, he didn't need to know to be one of the most important American painters of the twentieth century. Painters could never paint well if they had an identity issue hanging over their heads. Whatever they think about themselves as a human being is independent from the job at hand -- make a painting that matches their vision of the painting.

The lessons we can learn from the painter about separation are these:

- * we are not what we do.
- * when we understand our separation from what we do, we can better evaluate our work, make adjustments, and learn.
- * when we understand that we are separate from our work, we can be more totally involved. We can have a true relationship with our work.

4. The lesson of changing perspectives

Painters must regularly move away from their canvas and look at the painting from a distance. They move to the left and right, and sometimes turn the painting upside down. They are studying the painting from different vantage points. This gives them information that is impossible to have if they only stood close to the painting, constantly in the same position.

There is no other way a painter can work with regard to changing perspective. But people habitually get trapped in a single point perspective. Tunnel vision is a good name for the phenomenon. From that vantage point, all you can see are the numbers, or the micro-actions, or how people are feeling on a particular day, or the boss's mood, or the regulations, or whatever is before your eyes.

There is only one way to see more than you are seeing, and that is to look at reality from a different vantage point. For some people, that means backing up and observing the overall shapes and patterns that reality forms. From this perspective, you can readily see the relationships to each other of the various parts or elements that factor in the current situation you are in. This can give you a better sense of causality -- why things are the ways they are. This can give you a better understanding of effective action, and where the leverage points are in the situation.

Others need to change perspective by moving in for more details -- the actual numbers, the print layout, the number of sales in Chicago. Whenever you are in the habit of locating your focus in or out, the real lesson from the painter is that you need to be changing it all the time, probably more often than you think.

Instant reflection

When the painter moves back to observe the painting, he or she goes through a process of quick reflection. Reflection is the sister of evaluation. Evaluation is analytical and active...reflection, receptive and rather passive. Reflection is a way of being with the painting. Absorbing it, feeling it, experiencing it. Before this sounds a little too "New Age", we must note that reflection is not a total passive non-judgmental mindless state. Reflection contains what we might call "reflective

judgment," a different type of discernment than evaluation, insight and perception that bestows judgment on the painting, but from a more experiential orientation.

Both reflection and evaluation are part of the painters tool kit for updating current reality. When managers add reflection to their tool kit, reality becomes easier to discern. But managerial reflection is uncommon.

My friend and Colleague Peter Senge has often pointed out one telling difference between the Japanese manager and the typical Western Manager. If a person comes upon a manager sitting quietly in Japan, they will avoid disturbing him. If that same manager is busily working away, other people feel that it is the right time to interrupt that person. In the West, it's exactly the opposite way around. If a person is sitting quietly at her desk, others feel that it's perfectly okay to choose that time for a chat. But if the manager is in the thick of it, no one would think to interrupt her.

As managers, we are not used to reflecting on our work, let alone our lives. In the west, people generally feel awkward by such contemplation. I suppose it seems un-macho or un-savvy. But if we learn the lesson of reflection from the painter, we will learn that an important part of the process of understanding reality is to engage in deep reflective thought often as a regular part of our jobs.

You might take a break every hour or so, close your office door, put on your voice mail, tell your secretary to hold your calls, put down your coffee cup, take a deep breath, relax your body, and focus your thoughts on the current state of your work in relationship to your desired state. Two or three minutes later, you will be flooded with fresh insights, new energy, and some deeper perception of the current situation at hand. The only further suggestion is this: don't let anyone catch you in the act!

The painter and the manager

The painter changes perspective by physically moving away from the painting. The manager does a similar move in his or her mind. Of course, the painter is also changing perspectives in his or her mind, but the physical act helps the cause. As a manager, you may try physically getting up, walking around the office, and standing for a moment or two. Perhaps that will help you change your perspective on your work. But the habit to get into is to create a change of mental perspective. And, there are an infinite number of changes in perspective that can refresh your viewpoint quite effectively.

The painter doesn't carry the old view with her as she moves back from the painting. She not only changes perspectives, but starts without a preconceived notion that might be based of her experience of seeing the painting close up. Each change of view enables her to rethink reality. But when managers try to change perspective, often they bring their old perspective with them. Trying to see a new viewpoint while forcing it though an old viewpoint makes it hard to see anything.

Instead of looking, the manager might reduce everything to an empty cliché such as, "it's a cultural difference," or "it's a lack of leadership," or "it's the guys over in marketing over-promising again."

Whenever you find yourself ready to fall back on an easy organizational hackneyed image worthy of Dilbert, stop and imagine a big burly guy behind you saying in his deep booming voice, "Look! Look!"

5. The lesson of corrective adjustments and learning

If the creative process is anything, it is a continual learning process. And painters are naturally good learners. Their learning is motivated by practical concerns such as, "How do I get the vase to look like it turns?" or "How can I get the light to seem brighter?" "I like to work into a painting everything that I've learned from my own past successes and failures and what I've learned from looking at nature and great art," said painter Jack Beal. It is typical for painters to be able to learn

from all of their experiences, and use that learning in their work. If managers took a page out of their book, they would be increasing their competence and effectiveness continually.

As we have seen, sketches and studies help the learning process. But another aspect of learning comes from the unceasing corrective adjustment process that painters take advantage of by each stroke of their brush.

If the brush stroke worked, they somehow register that event in their mental and physical memory. If the brush stroke didn't work, they become more conscious of how they might be holding the brush, the size brush are they using, the angle of stroke, the amount of paint they loaded on the brush, and so on. When the brush stroke works, the event gets recorded automatically in their subconscious mind, and when the brush stroke doesn't, it's time to find a better process to use. A single painting may contain tens-of-thousands of brushstrokes, providing plenty of chance to master the skill of brushwork, texture, color blending, and so on.

As managers, we make tens-of-thousands of decisions, some that are so small and easy that we hardly know we are making them -- the tone of voice we use with a colleague, how to word a sentence in a report, how much time to devote to a meeting, how to sequence a work schedule. Most of these decisions work, and that reinforces our own mental and physical memory of successful processes.

The painter can learn easily because the feedback system is so fluid and timely. But, unlike the painter, we can make mistakes and yet not know we have made them. The manager is often unaware of the consequences of actions he or she may take. If managers were aware of the consequences of their actions, they would be quite willing to learn quickly, put in the adjustment, and increase their competence and effectiveness. But, alas, too often, reality is obscured by time-delays between an action and the result of that action. What to do?

The manager needs to work extra hard and be extra clever in studying the impact that his actions have. If he asks for a volume of work to be done, did it get done on time with adequate quality?. If he puts corrections in with the people he manages, did the correction get put into practice?

Some managers attempt to have proper feedback, but they end up getting lost in a sea of data which doesn't give them the essential information they need to understand the impact of their decisions. How can these managers get the feedback they need, and yet not be overwhelmed by obsessive detail? The answer is by maintaining structural tension as the painter does. The manager must get into the habit of looking at reality in relationship to the end result he or she is trying to create.

Another lesson the manager can learn from the painter has to do with how painters often work from over all shapes and patterns first, to developing the details later.

6. The lesson of the moving eye

Painters learn an amazing lesson -- to work the whole canvas, to keep their eye moving. First they will work in one part of the picture, and then, work in another part of the picture. Now, this may not seem like a big deal, because it makes sense to work the whole picture. But, human nature, being what it is, doesn't naturally lend itself to this practice. Painting is a discipline. Before the discipline is learned, we can see human nature in action. Beginning painters have the habit of starting the painting by working with the overall shapes of the picture. So far, so good. But then, they get lost in detail. They begin to develop minute parts of a section of the painting, and then they get stuck. They lose sight of the overall form and structure of the painting. Consequently, the final result usually doesn't hold together. The painting can look like bits and pieces of nicely rendered objects, but a feeling of unity within the whole picture is missing.

Painting teachers tell their students, "Keep your eye moving!" In other words, remember to work all around the canvas, and don't get stuck in one section. This practice is a discipline both painters and managers need to learn.

Here is an example of how a painting is developed -- from the overall shape first, and then, progressively into more and more details later. Notice that at each stage of development, the feeling of the whole picture is maintained.

The thought process the artist is using becomes apparent by studying the development of this picture. Certainly, there is remarkable logic here. We can see the painter managing the process by sequencing the overall shapes first, to the details later.

As managers, we are usually not trained in this kind of thought process. We let the workload organize us more than we organize it. The lesson from the painter is to move our eye and action over the whole picture. This lesson can help us maximize the effectiveness of our processes, while keeping everyone focused on managing the right action and right information at the right time.

But sometimes, details must be worked out before a next stage can be created. How can we keep our eye moving while developing these details. What can the painter teach us about that situation.

Some artists use an approach that mirrors such a situation. First, they lay out the entire picture in sketch form. This would be similar to a tactical plan in which the deliverables are well described. Then the painting is developed from one direction to another, with many of the details work out as the painter moves. The painter is still looking at the details from the point of view of the whole, but the sequence of actions is very different from the usual approach. Here is an example of the way Chuck Close develops his very large portraits in a photo-realistic style. While he develops details, he keeps the entire painting in mind so that the result has great compositional and expressive unity.

7. The lesson driving spirit and the creative cycle

The creative process goes through a predictable cycle. It begins with the generative stage in which we have the excitement of a new idea. It can feel like the thrill people experience in the beginning of a new romantic relationship. This stage is rather short and is followed by a deepening understanding of your vision. This is the assimilation stage in which the vision becomes integrated into your consciousness. Finally, there is the completion stage in which the process is brought to its conclusion. For most artists, the completion stage is followed by another germination stage as they get new ideas for other creations.

Each stage of the cycle has its own unique energy and rhythm. In the germinational stage the energy is high, vibrant, and exciting. Like anything new, there is a feeling of freshness and the excitement of a new involvement. It is entering into a new intriguing territory in which anything might be able to happen and anything may be able to be created. Usually during the germinational stage, the idea seems like the best one you've ever had.

By its nature, this stage is short because the unusual becomes usual when you live with it. Because the germinational stage is exciting, many people try to "run" on that excitement. But as time passes the germinational excitement wanes. If a person bases his or her motivation on the experience of a hit of germinational energy, once the germinational energy subsides, he or she loses interest. Such a person runs after one thing and then another, always hoping that the initial excitement they first feel will not end. But it does because it has to. Germination will lead to assimilation, and if you must be ready for the change in mood and energy. If germination does transform itself into assimilation, the creative process will end.

In the assimilation stage of the creative process, the vision begins to grow within you. It is similar to the gestation period of a pregnancy. At first, it may seem like there's not a lot going on. But there is. You are building inner strength and knowledge of the vision. You are deepening structural tension which creates a state of inner power and resolve. This is the true foundation of commitment.

People talk about commitment as if it were something you could take on like putting on a coat or a hat. That which is so easily taken on can be just as easily taken off. Managers who try to get their people to be committed to the project or the brand or the company often fail to inspire true commitment. This is because true commitment comes from a fundamental choice one makes

achieve the vision. This is a personal matter. A group or team itself cannot be committed unless the individual members personally are committed.

Commitment comes from assimilating or deepening the vision within the person.

What true commitment provides us is a source of energy and inner strength that helps reach our goals. The conditions in reality change all the time. Sometimes those changes are reversals, difficulties, problems, discouragements, and dilemmas. The inner commitment that grows during the assimilation stage helps us face these complications effectively. We are able to be inventive rather than reactive, level headed rather than explosive, clear rather than confused, and bold rather than impotent. It's in the assimilation stage that we are able to reach down in ourselves and rise to the occasion.

The completion stage has it's own rhythm and energy. As we reach the final period of a project the energy changes. It gets quicker, more intense, and more exciting as the end is in sight. Some people have trouble with endings. They don't want something they have be so deeply involved with to be over. They may experience a sense of loss or emptiness. So they avoid endings, even when it means that they will have created what they want.

Since a painter can always put more brush strokes on the canvas, the painting might never be done. It is the job of the painter to determine when the painting matches the vision. When the painter signs the painting, he or she is declaring the painting complete. It is good to declare a creation complete. We may celebrate with champagne, or throw a party. We may smile at each other, or simple say, "done." However we do it, we are taking a formal step in the creative cycle.

Throughout the creative cycle the painter does something that managers need to learn to do. The painter refreshes the energy and spirit of the painting by consistently reestablishing structural tension. The painter refocuses on the vision rather than simply remembers the vision. The vision is rethought as if it were the moment it was crystallized. The painter then studies the current state of the painting and reflects and evaluates how close he or she is from the final result. This act generates fresh energy because the painter is in touch with the reason to paint in the first place, which is to bring into being the painting he or she envisions. They are in touch with the spirit of the painting while they work. The manager who adopts this approach will be able to be self-motivated and help others in the team be in touch with the most vital force there is, a reason to act.

The reason will be to accomplish the vision. Too often, managers lose touch with the spirit of the vision, and fall into the trap of process serving process. They become like rats trapped into running in a maze. They lose the point of their actions. Once that happens, it is impossible for them to generate any real enthusiasm for what they are doing.

How can we spend extended periods of time focused on something that wasn't important to us? We can't. But sometimes something may be vitally important to us, and yet we lose sight of it. This is something we can ill-afford to do.

So one lesson from the painter that is of vital usefulness is that managers not only need to change perspectives, keep their eye moving, reflect and evaluate, but they also need to refresh the project's spirit and purpose regularly throughout the creative cycle by rethinking the vision and the reason we are involved which is to create the vision. We need to be consistently in touch with that reason.

Review of the 7 major managerial lessons from the painter.

- 1. Establish structural tension by creating a vision of the end result you want, and becoming fluent in current reality in relationship to that result.**
- 2. Create systems that can provide quick feedback so you can monitor reality as it changes. Within the context of structural tension, evaluate and then adjust your actions so that you become more effective and efficient over time.**
- 3. Come to understand that you and the project are separate. This will give you the ability to be more objectively and subjectively involved with the project.**
- 4. Move away. As painters often move away from their canvases and study the painting, as managers we can move away from our work and reflect on the current state we are in. It might only take a few minutes for reflection, but it refreshes our energy and gives us ideas about our next steps in the process.**
- 5. Use corrective adjustments to learn. The lesson of corrective adjustments and learning helps the manager use mistakes and successes well. While the painter can learn easily because of a fluid and instantaneous feedback system, managers must invent ways they can understand the "early returns" of their actions. But its important to not get lost in the details in your pursuit of good feedback standards of measurement.**
- 6. Keep your eye moving. The lesson of the moving eye can help managers keep looking at the whole picture rather than trapped in smaller sections. When painters lose sight of the whole picture by not keeping their focus moving, they get stuck. They develop details that don't fit in with the unity of the painting. Managers can do a similar thing -- get lost in the details and disconnect with the larger picture. The lesson is to keep that eye moving all the time! Painters often develop shapes and later develop details. This is a good practice for managers who are confronted with great complexity in their work**
- 7. Refresh the spirit throughout the creative cycle. Painters refresh their inspiration by understanding the creative cycle. They are able to move from the germination stage to the assimilation stage and continue on to the completion stage. By understanding this cycle, managers can better stay in touch with the vital impetus of their work. Then they are able to refresh the spirit and purpose of their actions.**

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Recommended Reading:
"The Path Of Least Resistance For Managers"
By Robert Fritz



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