

## **Learning from the Past to Compete for the Future: Learning histories as a Performative Intervention**

Karen Ayas & Philip H. Mirvis

The transformation story of VdBN illustrates how a workforce and its leaders created growth, energized a market, and brought fun and excitement to a heretofore traditional and tired organization. This is a story developed and told through a deliberate process – a learning history. Everyone in the company was invited to reflect on their history together and develop the lessons as individuals, for their work teams, and as a whole organization.

In the desert of Wadi Rum, some 180 VdBN team leaders, grouped in their work units, shared personal experiences, “highs” and “lows,” and learnings from the past five years. In preparation for this exercise, each completed a time-line of key events for themselves and their business. In Jordan, they found many similarities and some differences in their history lines and in their interpretation of the meaning and significance of events. What they found in common was that most had experienced breakthroughs--in their business and in their personal lives.

Nestled into the mountainside, talking, arguing, sometimes laughing, sometimes tearful, work units created banners that highlighted their most meaningful experiences from 1995 to 2000. They then reported them to other teams around a roaring campfire. The wind was still, the talk was reflective, and the listening was intense. Everyone understood that they were not only learning from history, they were making it.

During the next three days, in discussions on rocky cliffs, while walking or riding in jeeps, and by firesides in the desert, team leaders cycled between individual and collective consideration of their history, the lessons, and needed actions and next steps. These conversations were influenced by travel to a location far away from home, by meeting amidst geologic beauty and historic significance, and by living close to nature like a Bedouin tribe. This was not only a physical journey, but also an intellectual and emotional journey; and some would say it was a spiritual journey, too.

Following the Jordan gathering, team leaders took their insights and learnings back to the organization for a company-wide learning conference. Set in a big convention center, Learning Conference 2000 engaged all 1800 employees of VdBN in assessing their past experiences and identifying future implications. Says the company Chairman: “Ongoing transformation requires reinvention of the old business units--at the level of people’s core values and beliefs. We needed to know what worked well and what took each unit from a period of no growth to a time of growth. Reflecting on what we did—key events, milestones, and breakthroughs—helped to build that understanding and develop the lessons for the future. All VdBN people needed to be involved in capturing and sharing the history.”

## Learning from the past

For the past several years, VdBN managers had traveled afar to talk business and share personal stories. What was new in 2000 year was the use of the learning history to document experiences and derive lessons systematically and with rigor. Our hope was that the methodology would help people to carefully assess and gauge their experiences and then intelligently apply the knowledge gained to their agenda of growth. Says a plant manager: “Some things after a while seem quite natural and become the way we do things around here. It is not obvious that you are doing things in a different way unless you deliberately look back. For new people coming in, who have not been part of the process, some of the learnings are not so obvious. You have to remember them and share them. Otherwise, you will make the same mistakes again.”

At the Learning Conference 2000, board members, managers, line workers, and office staff -everyone in VdBN- shared their history lines and stories and listened as each of their teammates did the same. Based on the highs-and-lows, each team then constructed its own collective time-line and prepared a log of breakthrough stories. Some 180 team history books were created that covered key events, lessons from the past, and visions for the future.

The breakthroughs reported in team history books were often quite moving. Among the business achievements cited were successful product launches, factory productivity improvements, organizational and team accomplishments. Personal breakthroughs were equally compelling. They were traced to mentoring, participation in team leader events, team training, and everyday personal development. (see Table: Breakthroughs).

**Table 1: Breakthroughs**

### **Business Breakthrough**

In the first quarter '99, we experienced the sweet taste of a step-change in performance. We all discussed the state our factory was in. It was easy to see where we would end up if we continued the trend through the year. This created a sense of urgency and we focused on critical success factors in production to be able to show improvement as soon as possible.

Due to this focus, there was no gap between conceptual ideas and the priorities of operators. Many improvement ideas came bottom-up due to our culture change – fewer layers, open and informal atmosphere.

### **Personal Breakthrough**

During the last few years I realized that in working with people it's not about who is right or wrong. What counts is building working relationships with people to achieve that “end-in-mind.” I learned to choose my battles more wisely, to value personal differences more, and got a sixth sense for where the other person is coming from.

My development was very intense because:

1. I worked in a team where “being yourself” was a pre-requisite.
2. My (boss) created “space” and showed trust in me.

People communicating ideas were heard and understood. By the end of the year all the negative trends had turned positive: a step change in efficiency, less waste versus the norm, an A-status quality, and good levels of cleanliness.

The lesson I learned is that you will not achieve step-change by debating it or preparing it for a long time. You should look for big hits, agree to focus on them, and then just start and follow up.

As soon as you have shared some successes, the agenda on what to do next will be filled with good ideas. Now it is regarded as normal that everybody volunteers to drive a part of the agenda.

3. We evaluated ourselves on almost a continuous basis (what are our roles, telling honestly/vulnerably how irritating we each sometimes were, feedback on how to improve, etc.).

My lessons for the future:

1. Only in a safe environment where leadership is sincere and professional can people really be themselves, challenge issues and take initiatives. This brings out the best in people.
2. The emotionally appealing parts of leadership should be valued as much as the intellectually convincing parts.
3. Bosses should be coaches. This requires sincere interest in personal development and continuous honest feedback.

## About the Learning History

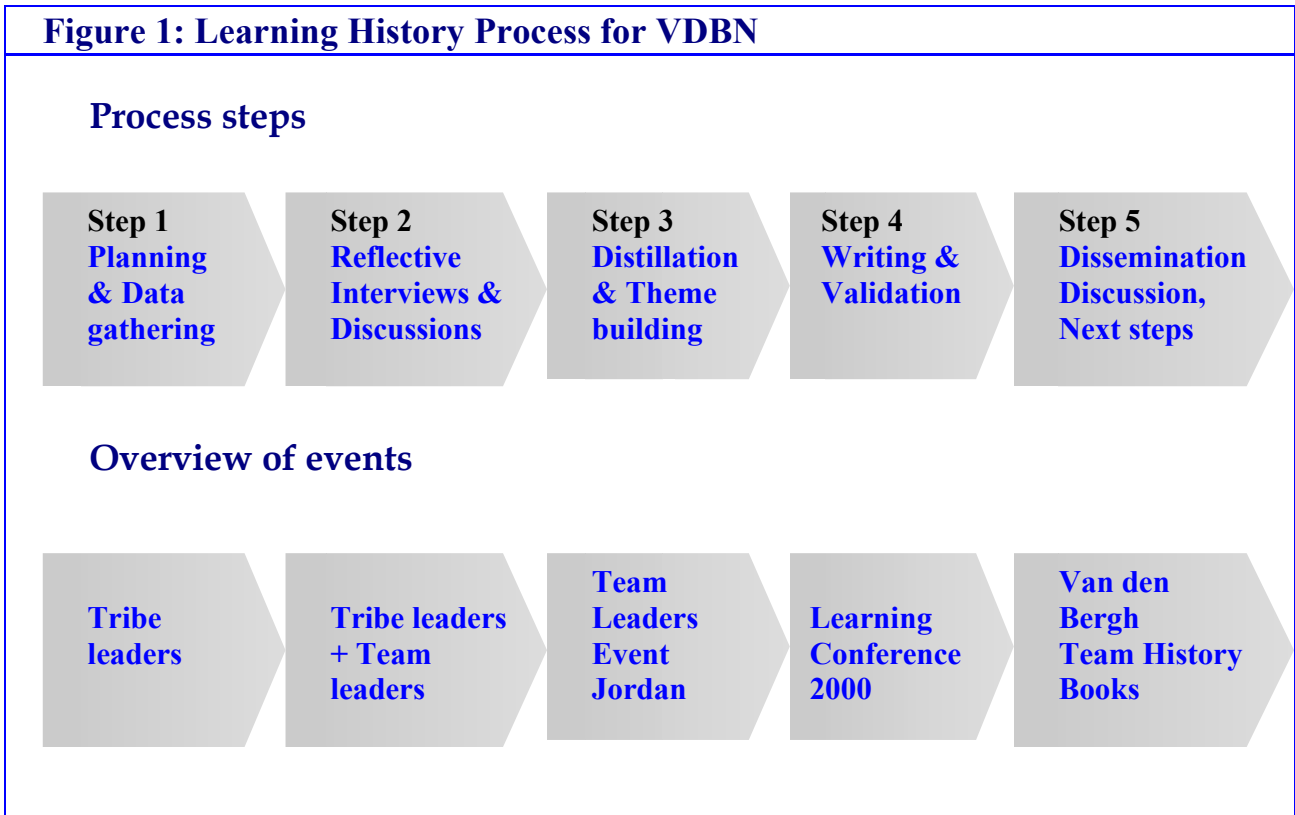
The time-lines, breakthrough stories and history books were not the only input into this document (see Figure: LH Process for VdBN). In parallel, researchers and a small team of people inside the company conducted interviews of key individuals and led discussions with workgroups.

The sources of data for this learning history are as follows:

- Interviews and focus groups with VdBN managers and staff and with other executives and consultants who have worked with the company (over 120 in all).
- Preparation of history timelines and breakthrough stories that were created for and shared in the February 2000 team leaders event.
- Personal and business breakthrough stories prepared by all VdBN employees and compiled into team history books at the 2000 Learning Conference.
- Audio and video tapes, copies of presentations, and background reports of various management meetings.
- Discussions with company leaders, consultants and others about the events and findings.
- Our own experience, notes and records from participating in some of the events.

As we interviewed people for the learning history, it allowed them to reflect on what had happened in the past five years at VdBN and to see the larger change process in the company.

**Figure 1: Learning History Process for VDBN**



## **The Transformation Story**

The learning history is a chronological story of events and experiences from 1995-2000. It includes two major cycles of change. The first transformation concerns UVGN or Unox (after its renowned brand), which has meat, sauce, and soup factories in Oss, south of Holland. The second transformation involves the merging of UVGN into VdBN, headquartered in Rotterdam, to create the largest food manufacturer in Holland. Of the total current workforce in VdBN currently facing the challenge of revolutionary growth, about 800 employees have lived through both transformations. The third transformation is launched in 2000 with Jordan.

The history begins with the appointment of Tex Gunning as chairman of UVGN in 1995 and the turnaround of the Unox factories and brand. It continues with the merger of several Unilever food businesses under one flag in 1997 and the decision of the management board to run the business with 180 leaders. The period from 1998 to 2000 finds business units replicating major events and cascading practices through staff to deepen changes. The efforts of business units and factories in this period have some common points and some distinct features. The history concludes with the trip to Jordan and its aftermath.

**Figure 2: Cycles of Transformation**



The two cycles of transformation that were launched had a unifying vision, captured in the slogan “Competing for our future.” This appeared on hats and clothing, on the company flag, and as a recurring theme at company wide gatherings. The growth message was also expressed in the aspiration to achieve a “legacy of growth” and in demanding performance targets.

Tracking these two cycles of transformation suggests that VdBN leaders over the five years learned to manage change more proactively and effectively. The change management methods introduced in the first transformation were replicated in the second one. Efforts to mobilize people were similar in the two cases, albeit more encompassing and engaging in the second.

While some facets of change management at VdBN were carefully planned, others were more or less improvised. The real story of leadership and transformation at VdBN is the “holistic integration” of activities or, more colloquially, the art of management. This was the result of continuous experimentation and learning, a mix of planning and improvisation, and space for serendipity.

### **Top Line Growth / Bottom Line Results**

One unassailable conclusion is that this business grew during the five years. The Foods business unit, which introduced several new products, entered new markets, and used new channels to fuel the growth engine, grew by 13% in 1999 and by 11% in 2000. The Fats business unit, after prior years of decline, stabilized volumes, increased market share, and grew several of its brands. Efficiencies in several factories improved from 60% to more than 80%, and trading losses decreased dramatically. These summary statistics are one way to describe business results; others come from the people in the business.

Buying director: “This is a success story. If we look into the foods business it is a remarkable success story. It was a market with big losses, with declining volumes, etc. They relaunched products and they became very innovative and every year the turnover increased by ten percent.”

Sales director: “If you look from the outside in... and you do hear it once in a while from someone, like the chairman of another business, something like “You are far ahead of everybody else.” I

believe that is the case if not with everything certainly in our whole approach to transformation and growth. I think we learned loads the past few years.”

Finance director: “What really changed is the authority level in terms of “who do you need to talk to get going?” Not everything was referred back to the board anymore or to the unit. Individuals or smaller teams could take initiatives and just do it.”

In addition to these changes in the organization and business, there were also personal achievements of note and a heightened sense of community feeling in VdBN.

Marketing manager : “ If I look back over the last three to four years, it has been ultimately personal growth. It has also been great for the business. We built very strong personal relations, which were beneficial for the business in the long-term and for me personally. “

Plant manager : “ I must say I have been very fortunate to be part of Van den Bergh over the last four years because I have learned a damn lot. In many areas – whether it’s change management, or being responsible for a site. And also I have grown as a person – to be able to deal with people, not being afraid to speak up, to tell your own opinions without necessarily having to hurt others. And finally since last year I have been involved in a project that gave me the opportunity to get a good understanding about what it is to run a total business.”

IT manager: “ There is now an interconnection between people. I know you better and I know who you are. And so if I want to talk to you, okay, go ahead because I have met you. I know that you are part of the meetings and I have heard you talking about ideas and thought, “Well, that’s an idea I like.” I can call you and talk with you. We have in fact been building a community.”

A key conclusion of the learning history is that these results were neither predictable nor a matter of tried-and-true management technique. On the contrary, they were produced by innovative leadership and bold business ideas whose features we preview in the next section.

## **The transformation theme and timeline**

The chronological story of transformation in VdBN was punctuated by several action cycles—each with its own themes and characteristics (see Table 2: Timeline and Themes). For instance, the turnaround in UVGN commenced with a dramatic call to action to “Prevent the ship from sinking.” Then people were mobilized to grow volume and regain market share, a phase labeled “Building the business.”

This cycle was repeated following the merger with VdBN - “A new beginning.” The combined company intent was “Competing for the future.” In subsequent years attention would be given respectively to building community (inside the company) and to reconnecting with customers and consumers (outside the firm). The team leaders event in February 2000 marked the start of a new transformation cycle where people would be asked to face the challenges of the new economy and reach for “revolutionary” levels of growth.

There are many models of the dynamics of transformation cycles. Psychologist Kurt Lewin, for instance, uses unfreezing-movement-refreezing to represent stages of change in the physical and psychological states of living things—from organisms to social

systems. William Bridges, surveying these phases as expressed in literature and in life, speaks of endings, transitions, and new beginnings. And anthropologists, documenting the sweep of change in cultures and societies, see periods of upheaval, followed by conflict and reordering, and finally reintegration.

Over the past several decades, business and the social sciences have defined processes for managing these phases of change. Among the driving elements are the following:

- ❑ **Wake Up Call** – Awakening people to the need for change
- ❑ **Current Reality** – Analyzing the current situation and possible options
- ❑ **Vision for Future** – Defining aspirations and a dream for the future
- ❑ **Mobilizing Support** – Enlisting followers and dealing with resistance
- ❑ **Implementing Change** – Changing hard and soft aspects of the business

Each of these is well known in generic form to business leaders and change agents. And they were all a part of the process at change at VdBN:

Consider, for example, the efforts to unfreeze Unox in 1995 and VdBN in 1997. In each case, there was extensive written and face-to-face communication to awaken people to current problems, break through denial, and create urgency for action. Attention-getting events, rich in substance and symbolism, helped to ensure that all employees understood the depth of problems and need for change. These emotive experiences were complemented by intellectual rigor: Strategy consultants and other experts worked with the leaders to analyze each situation thoroughly and identify areas for change.

A mission of doubling volumes in Unox (Grow X 2) and building a legacy for growth in Van den Bergh meant developing an organization capable of growing year after year. But most of the current leaders and staff had developed their mindsets and skills in declining or, at best, low growth market segments. Thus transformation called not only for reinventing strategy but also for devising new structures and developing new capabilities at every level in the company. The effort featured a mix of “hard” and “soft” changes. At UVGN and later VdBN, the hard side of change involved restructuring, asset sales, and staff reductions, along with the formation of business units and introduction of profit-and-loss accounting and responsibilities. On the softer side, new types of management meetings, staff training, team building, learning conferences and other organizational development efforts were launched.

While many elements to move VdBN forward represented tried-and-true change management practices, their integration into a whole, with replication across businesses, and with cascades of activity down the organization, had some novel and distinctive features. This shifts attention from the rational process of change management to its more artful and “performative” dimensions.

## Key Events (or Performances)

In each phase of the transformation timeline, there would be key events and experiences that dramatized what was happening and signified turning points for the business and company culture. For example, an event “staged” in a warehouse near UVGN (in 1995) was designed to shock employees and add a loud alarm to their wake-up call. This theatric-like performance was held in a specially constructed venue with rows of stacked pallets of spoiled food (staging and scenery). Managers in white lab coats pointed visibly to the scale of the waste and called for remedial action (costumes and scripts). The effect was dramatic and provoked anger as well as shame. Further along the timeline, major marketing events, including an ice-skate across Holland (early 1997) and a “Big Night” party for grocers and retailers (early 1999), brought employees together with consumers and customers. The overall intent was to punctuate and energize the change process with “memorable experiences” (see Sidebar: From process to performance).

While some of the events staged at Unox and VdBN were one-time-only happenings, others were integrated into the business calendar. For instance, learning conferences brought all employees together to hear about current realities and future directions, and to be trained, experientially, in new ideas and practices. These conferences would be held annually. At each, executives talked about the state of the company, team leaders shared their own experiences, and small working groups carried on discussions and worked on exercises led by their team leaders. Sophisticated live video of the goings-on, TV monitors in many locations, and high quality audio and sound systems kept everyone connected during the daylong program. This, plus high quality entertainment, take away gifts, good food and plenty of fun turned learning conferences into real extravaganzas.

In the language of the arts and the discipline of performance studies, VdBN events might just be termed “performances.” The actions taken by leaders and staff were more or less scripted and unfolded through scenes. The events themselves were staged with scenery, costumes and props, and the chairman cum director exerted a stronger or lighter hand depending on the performance. In general formulation, the parallels between process and performance are striking: both involve an arrangement of activities across time and space, sequences with a beginning and end, and activity, termed by scholars of the genre as “performativity”, that conveys movement and pulls everything together.

Events became even more momentous when managers and work teams began to go on “outbreaks” to appealing, exotic, and sometimes rugged locales.

Team trainer: “You’re in a complete different area. There are no anchors anymore. Traveling the way we did in Scotland: flying in an airplane, biking, canoeing and walking, is not something you do every day. For a couple of days you are in a complete different surrounding. You’re more or less lost, the experiences have an impact on you as a person, and an impact on you working with your colleagues.”

Team leader: “The factory and the office had separate cultures. There was a lot of resistance against anybody higher in the hierarchy, and distrust towards each other. What I learned in that first team



leader event is that we can listen to each other in a different way. After the Ardennes and Scotland I was convinced that together we would grow this company. There was openness and trust. I started thinking about these events and realized that they had a larger purpose.”

Despite budding interest in the performativity as means of stimulating action and, more broadly, in its central role in the “experience economy,” there is not yet much received wisdom nor tested practice on how to stage and script such experiences in companies. There are some reference points, notably Noel Tichy’s depiction of planned change as a “three act drama,” but most often the idea of “drama” is used as a metaphor for change activity. At VdBN, by comparison, the drama was real and the events were transformative: Managers were both directors and performers and employees were both audience and cast. Furthermore, the performances were, in substance and symbol, to be a bridge from current realities to future visions and a means to begin or continue the journey.

The memorable events at VdBN were scripted with the following guidelines:

- ❑ the event and its staging were ‘themed’ to the business and the vision;
- ❑ leadership performed actively and participated visibly with staff;
- ❑ experiences were staged to engage individuals, groups, and collectives;
- ❑ each scene stimulated multiple senses, and drew on multiple media; and
- ❑ the overall appeal was to the head and the heart.

But the magic in these events, or the “miracles” as some referred to them, were the result of continuous experimentation, a mix of planning and improvisation, and making space for serendipity.

### **Process versus Performance**

The idea that leadership, change management, customer promotions, indeed almost any kind of organizational behavior can be understood as a performing art has conceptual merit for scholars and practical appeal to many managers and change agents. Much has been written about the processes of management. Here we have seen parallels between them and theatric-like performances. Consider some of the following process versus performance distinctions:

<b>Process</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Plan	Script
Steps	Scenes
Staff	Cast
Do	Act
Manager	Director
Deliver	Delight

## Plan v. Script

Processes are based on plans. Mission statements, the goals that they express, and the activities needed to reach them lay out what has to be done and the steps involved. Although the inputs, throughputs, and outputs differ in, say, strategic, financial, and operational plans, what they specify in toto is *what* has to happen to get the job done right. Scripts serve this function in performances. But the script goes deeper and further by elaborating and detailing *how* things should be done. One could quibble about this what/how distinction by referencing tactical plans, instructions, performance requirements, and the like by which plans are elaborated, activities specified, and controls designed. Instead, see it as a matter of shading and intention. Consider, for example, the high compliments we apply to plans: a good plan is logical, sensible, sound. While a script conveys a plan, it speaks of and to the expression of emotion, suggests how to bring activity to life, and reminds that “art” is to be performed. That’s what makes a good script beautiful

The performances at VdBN were partly scripted and partly improvised. The presentations of lifelines in the Ardennes and 1998 learning conferences, for instance, were planned as a means to “open up” people and were scripted, individually, to reveal the highs-and-lows of people’s lives. The emotional revelations, however, were authentic and of-the-moment and the audience’s reactions to their leaders’ stories showed deep empathy and genuine feeling.

In turn, there was no real script for the “passing of the torch” in Petra, but there is no question that it was artfully staged. Many hours went into the design of this experience to create the right setting and mood to produce hoped-for results. All the participants – team leaders in the business plus executives, various facilitators, and a support team – together created the performance. They played their parts well and the actions unfolded in a manner that was moving and right.

## Steps v. Scenes

In comparing process steps with performance scenes, we find that same relative emphasis on what versus how. Both dictate sequence, flow, timing, and the like. Attention to the scene also stresses the emotive aspects of action and aims at the experience of being there. In this light, one could argue that the awakening in the warehouse was powerful precisely because it began with a bus ride to an unknown destination, unfolded through a tour with shocking sights, sounds, and smells, and concluded with the burial of waste. A video of the day added the sounds of Mozart’s Requiem – further dramatizing the experience.

This reminds of the importance of staging and scenery. The team leader’s ’99 hike up the Corrain on the Isle of Sky in Scotland, for example, provided an uplifting close to an otherwise flat and soggy two days prior. The desert of Wadi Rum is one of those majestic places where you feel immediately in harmony with the universe. Your frame of

reference shifts: There is something much bigger than you are and you feel a part of it. Engaging in dialogue and addressing business issues in such a place opens up new possibilities. VdBN team leaders could reflect with their minds and their hearts; and their reflections, as evidenced by many quotes in this learning history, were both thoughtful and soulful.

### **Staff v. Cast**

Working and acting join in reference to the “roles” people assume on the job and on stage. Indeed, the organizational use of the term borrows from theater precisely to put work into a performance context and communicate fully its performative standards. Still there is a different social significance to being a member of a cast, rather than part of the staff. The work of the actor getting into character, with the attendant imagining, rehearsing, costuming, makeup and the like asks more of people than, say, standard job descriptions and demands more presence of them than simply showing up.

Working as a cast involves teamwork and, like any high performing team, a theater troupe has inescapable interdependencies: Everyone has to play their part for the show to succeed. But, more so than most teams, theatrical performers have to rehearse their work and the performance of the collective is so important that everyone gets listed in the credits. Being seen as a cast is also distinctive – whatever the circumstances or audience. Recognizing this, top entertainment, dining, and transportation companies (Disney, Hard Rock Café, and Southwest airlines among them) have dramatized their customer service and stage it every day.

The value of being “part of the show” extends backstage and even into the audience. The production crew at VdBN, some of whom had other “day jobs” in the company, increased in its size and aspirations even as the events increased in their scale and artistry. The outdoor event organizers and group facilitators integrated their separate expertise and adopted that to the themes – competing, teaming, clanning – of the transformation. Furthermore, employees would alternate as audience and actors at all company learning conferences, whether sharing life stories, working on team exercises, singing songs, or reflecting on their lessons learned on camera. And, at the Big Night events, grocers throughout Holland, from storeowners to shelf-stockers to cashiers, took their turns as customers of VdBN and contributors to its transformative events.

### **Do v. Act**

While do and act seem synonymous, acting, as performativity, has some distinguishing features. Consider, for instance, the “playful” aspects of performing. The creation of an alternative reality through play frees up imagination, generates energy, and opens possibilities for new directions. In turn, precisely because actors are playing, and the experience is “make believe,” they can reflect on what is happening from some distance and, in so doing, learn something about their art and themselves. Certainly the use of role plays in management training and of psychodramas in clinical settings are based on these assumptions.

Acting out new behavior can have impact on individuals and companies that extends beyond any particular performance. Events at VdBN encouraged people to follow a path of personal growth and helped to align individual and business goals. Sharing one's deepest fears and aspirations—in business and in personal life--built a strong basis for trust and community. And working on vision in this context created an inevitable connection between personal breakthroughs and breakthroughs in the business. Consider the impact of such acting (and its limitations) through the eyes of one manager.

### **Manager v. Director**

We do not need to repeat the countless tracts telling managers to orchestrate, choreograph, coach, and in other ways add to the artistry of organizational performance. But it is worth reminding that managers cum directors benefit from artistic sensibilities and skills. They have the authority and responsibility to ensure the integrity of a performance – its narrative, presentation, and flow. It also helps to have an eye for symbolism and ear for when things go flat. Hear Gunning on his practice of leadership.

Chairman: What people seem to miss in their philosophy of leadership, in their vision, in their implementing of change, is the managing of intangibles. And it is the integration of these intangibles that makes the difference. I can work on people's emotions; I can work on people's intellect. But in the end, I want to integrate this at continuous higher levels. So the cumulative effect of events, of walking your talk, of being consistent in your beliefs is integration at a higher level.

### **Deliver v. Delight.**

This last distinction between the sought-after end of process versus performance is admittedly arbitrary. Nevertheless, there is a tendency in process management to focus so much on concrete, measurable deliverables that creativity and fun are simply driven out of the process. Indeed, in service of efficiency and with an eye to gaining predictability and control, processes become compartmentalized, routinized, and lifeless. In many instances, processes are equated to bureaucracy and to put an idea “into a process” is akin to slowly killing it.

Performances, by comparison, aim to delight in their delivery. This reinforces the aesthetic agenda and reminds us of the life giving power of art. Of course there are many “mass produced” performances and many creatively fashioned ones that prove mediocre or miss their mark. Many of the ones that we have looked at here have tried to embody and carry forward aspirations for change. These deliverables and their delivery, necessarily includes elements of both process and performance, the intangibles that Gunning speaks of and the tangible sense of giving and getting a gift.

Chairman: I always see three major things in these events. One is that you bring the people in a certain space so that you can approach them emotionally. You cannot do this in the office. And therefore you start to integrate intellect and emotion.

The second thing is that you benefit from the dynamics of large groups. You can, in an organization, work on transformation, one by one, team by team. But that is not fast enough. Plus you have to manage the skeptics. By bringing the cynics and skeptics into these events, you see that they begin to

move with the large group. Everyone becomes connected to the transformation process.

And the third point is that it is a gift. If you do it properly, people accept this as a gift. It is a reward of sorts—the travel itself, the experience, and the investment into personal growth.

## Performing and Learning

At VdBN, we helped to create a learning history about two transformations that had unusual features and compelling results. To the extent that the methodology differed from the standard format (which is itself still novel and experimental), it is appropriate to close with some thoughts about the change process here, the research effort, and their co-mingling as performances.

First, when it comes to lessons learned about the transformation at VdBN, the best practices identified by the learning history, both soft and hard, are familiar to academics and experienced change managers. Indeed, discussions of them produced a lot of head nodding among team leaders in Jordan and at the 2000 VdBN learning conference. This is another indicator of how team leaders in the company have learned about change over the years. Yet systematically identifying key transformational periods, documenting the actions involved, distilling conceptual themes, and deriving lessons learned added rigor to understandings about change management on site and weight to conclusions about its impact on people and the business.

Our emphasis on the artful combination of practices, or “holistic integration,” as key to success is no doubt agreeable to most managers. But the research yielded no “models” on holistic practice per se. It is at best speculative how artful actions connect causally to changes in people’s attitudes, behaviors, and business results. And, in the same way, it is foolish to assume that the practices documented can be applied in a “cookbook” fashion. As the chairman remarked, “I have tried the cookbook. It doesn’t work.”

Marking progress and creating change in organizations via events is still a new idea. As noted earlier, the performances described here shared some design characteristics:

- Leadership performed actively and visibly with staff. Some of this had to do with legitimizing theatrics and some with role modeling and setting a tone.
- Experiences were staged to engage at individual, group, and collective levels. The rationale here is to build capacity from the bottom up and stimulate change from the inside out. That said, the performance also has to work from the top-down and energy and direction may have to come from the outside in.
- Each scene engaged multiple senses, and sequences employed multiple media. One way to describe the Dutch company’s leader outbreaks and all staff learning conferences is as happenings.
- Appeal to the head and the heart. With reference to change management, this was expressed as the need to affect both the “mindsets” and “heartsets” of people. In terms of performance and its aesthetic impact, twin criteria for judging success were: Is the experience “intellectually convincing” and “emotionally appealing?”

Our history validated that many of the events in VdBN met these criteria and more. What was behind the “magic” or, as some termed them, “the “miracles” that resulted:

- In “producing” change: A mix of planning and improvisation that lead to timely action allowing the desired change to unfold;
- In “performing” change: Intense and profound engagement in the change process, as individuals and as a community;
- In “experiencing” change: Creating space and allowing serendipity to work.

As to the overall significance of the performative events, the jury is out and must remain so. Certainly the notion that organization change follows non-linear, reciprocally causal, and unpredictable directions is not a novel conclusion. Nor is the idea that to understand and appreciate such patterns, we might turn to non-traditional forms of assessment, such as story telling, video documentary, and performance art. In viewing VdBN’s transformation as a series of performances, we suggest that it be judged partly in *aesthetic* terms. After all, it unfolded through different acts, sets, and scenes. The improvised script built on prior events, dramatized current situations, and set the stage, figuratively and practically, for what happened next. The methods and criteria of literary and theatric critics, and of the performing art scholarship more generally, would provide a rigorous if subjective means for gauging the transformation of VdBN in its aesthetic dimensions.

When we assess this transformation as an art form that has engaged and changed a community of people, however, it seems less appropriate to use these tools or to tease out the key performative elements that made it work. Like when looking at a painting, we could attend to details such as brush strokes, lighting, colors, and shapes, or focus on the arrangement of the canvas and its framing, but in the end, what matters first and foremost is how the painting as a whole strikes the viewer. In his commentary on the validity of art, Polanyi observed that its “truth” lay in the *experience* it creates for those who see the art work or, in this case, participate in the performance.

The learning history was both a part of and a contributor to the transformation of VdBN. When performing, actors tend to take on and become their roles, and with artistic license dramatize and orient themselves for the effect of it all. Certainly this concern was with us as researchers when we heard rapturous accounts of the Ardennes or watched evocative videos of other meaningful events in the company’s transformational timeline. In so doing, we would check for bias by probing into people’s positive experiences about events and challenge them to show us demonstrable results of their impact. At the same time, the goal of helping people to look inward, backward, and forward to learn from experience is one that we identified with and tried to bring about. Thus our probing and challenging had less to do with objectifying the experience for academic purposes and more to do with advancing the learning agenda on site.

Now conflicts between action and research are commonplace and create their share of dilemmas. The twist here is that in Jordan and at VdBN’s learning conference, we

ourselves were part of the show. We were assuming roles, performing on stage, had license to dramatize, and had effects we wanted to achieve. Clearly this is not the norm for fieldwork, and our participation in staging a meaningful event no doubt influenced the way we saw things and report on them. In that way our experience is parallel to that of staff and managers at VdBN. And we have to check our own biases in reporting what happened in the company and what is to be learned.

Let us be straightforward on these counts: Not all aspects of the performances at VdBN, including the time in Jordan, were intellectually, emotionally, or aesthetically compelling. There were flops. As producer and director, Gunning had his own failings and, as he has said here, his performance was not always on the mark. Of greater concern going forward has been his centrality to the transformation. We wonder whether change management by performance is possible without a compelling and theatrical in charge.

In many companies, planned change processes seem rote and the experience is grinding and ultimately defeating. Adding performativity to the change process at VdBN made it more playful, meaningful, and ultimately rewarding. One indication of the validity of this approach is that select team leaders at VdBN began to stage learning performances for their own businesses and teams. We hope leaders in other companies carry performativity even further.





**Table 2: Transformation Theme and Timeline**

<b>Transformation themes</b>	<b>Preventing the ship from sinking (ch3)</b>	<b>Building the Business (ch4)</b>	<b>Merging: A new Beginning (ch5)</b>	<b>Competing for the Future (ch6)</b>	<b>Community: Deepen passion for growth (ch7)</b>	<b>Reconnecting: Grow together (ch9)</b>	<b>Passing the Torch (ch13)</b>
<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>1996-7</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>
<b>Process</b>	Wake Up I: Face reality	Vision: Grow X 2; Mobilize	Wake Up II: Face Market	Vision: Legacy of Growth	Cascade: 180 Team Leaders	Replicate: We all have to contribute	Wake Up III: Reinvent Yourself
<b>Key Events or Performances</b>	Warehouse of Waste; 1400 people on 40 buses	LBO letter: Fix or sell. Unox Learning Conf; Skating event	VdBN goes into therapy; LC 97—2000 points of light	Revolution in foods; Mgmt Conference—The Abyss	Ardennes offensive. LC 98—Teams make the difference.	Scotland: ‘Mcvan den Bergh’ clans; ‘Big Night’ for Customers	Jordan. Learn from the past. LC2000; Big Night II
<b>Symbols</b>	Stacks of bad food pallets; Bulldozer burial; Old must Die	New tricks – Juggling; Unox hats on skaters Dive into Sea; Rebirth	Vulnerable Volume; Trust falls, breaking boards, party	Planet VdBN logo. Index 100 targets	Cynics vs. Believers; Emotional lifelines; Board fishbowl	Flags & Songs; Young leaders and teams take charge	Tribes in Petra New leader takes the torch
<b>“Hard” Change</b>	Layoffs and Delayering, Business Thinking	Profit & Loss Responsibility, TPM Program begins	Strategic Review	Organization Review; Stretch Goals; Scratch Quality	Business Units: Value Creation & Value Delivery		
					Growing Market with Foods (ch8)		
					Growing Share with Fats (ch10)		
					Sourcing Units: Cost & Quality (chs11-12)		
<b>“Soft” Change</b>	Hands on engagement; Informal style	Teaching and inspiring. Young leaders	Countering the Culture Clash	Spread of 7 Habits; Angry young men.	Team training and Community Building	Missionary Work: Circle of Disciples implements vision	“I am leaving, You can do it.”
<b>Holistic Integration</b>	Creative Destruction	Empower/ Disempower	Changing Mindsets			Organized Chaos	Back to the Future
			Changing Heartsets				