

## Vision in verse from boardroom bard

By David Honigmann

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Twenty years ago, David Whyte, a Yorkshire-born poet, was invited by a consultant into the world of business. Ever since, he has made it his mission, through corporate speaking tours and seminars, to help businesses harness the insights and metaphors that poetry can offer to broaden their language, improve interaction within the workplace and stir imaginations.

His first serious in-company work was with AT&T and, over the years, he has worked with corporations from Boeing to Microsoft and organisations from Nasa to Kaiser Permanente. He is an associate fellow of Saïd Business School in Oxford, and is about to talk to MBAs at Stanford.

A poet's craft, for him, is as "a maker of identity". Sometimes he is a guest speaker running through a conference; other times he will give seminars in-house. Typically, he has about five long-term clients at a time and he works with their senior management.

He begins with poetry (his own and that of Rilke, Wordsworth, Yeats and many others), and then broadens out into conversation and reflection. "I do everything from 45 minutes to three days," he explains. He recites the poems slowly, repeating lines until he is clear that his point has hit home. He does not work in soundbites, but through a scrupulous precision over language, listening and talking to a group until he is able to articulate an uncomfortable and unspoken truth.

"All these organisations are like Shakespearean plays writ large, with the nobles telling their truths from the podium while the gravediggers are telling it like it really is in the bathroom. And every epoch ends with a lot of blood on the floor," he says.

With non-Anglophone audiences, different material comes into play. "When I'm working with German

audiences, I will call on my Rilke and Goethe in the original. I was just in Spain, so I was using a lot of Machado and Neruda, as a way of saying that not everything is going to be interpreted through the Anglo-Saxon mind.”

The differences are not limited to repertoire. “In Germany they have great difficulty with anything that smacks of cultism or messianic leadership. You can’t talk about leadership in its charismatic forms.”

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But one constant is that poetry is a language for talking about the nature of managers’ work. “One of the great difficulties as you rise up through an organisation is that your prior competencies are exploded and broken apart by the territory you’ve been promoted into: the field of human identity.”

Poetry, for him, is the appropriate tool with which to analyse the conversations that novice managers desperately avoid. “The idea is to get deeply into experiences where they have different images and metaphors to use out of the poetry. A lot of the images will have to do with being lost, with not having the usual bearings, and therefore looking at the world in a different way.”

Economic turmoil has not reduced the demand for his services. “I find this an incredibly fascinating time to talk,” he says, explaining how the feeling of being lost has “never been as palpable in the room as now everyone is feeling robbed of a certain foundation”.

Ultimately, though, he treats today as an opportunity to reassess where we all stand: “Sometimes you have to make a complete disaster of your life in such an epic way that it will be absolutely clear to you what you’ve been doing.”

His new book, *The Three Marriages\**, explores and rejects the notion of work-life balance. Each of us, he says, undertakes three marriages simultaneously: with our partner, with our work and with our self. Trading off the three is fatal. “It’s much more accurate to treat these three commitments as three love affairs, in which all the disappointments and reimaginings you have in an ordinary relationship have to take place.”

Of the three, he says the hardest is the relationship with oneself because “it’s weighted in the mystery of death and our own mortality”. Deepening the conversation with oneself is hard. “[The poet] Wallace Stevens – who was a great [company executive] – said, sometimes the truth depends upon a walk around a lake. It’s very interesting to ask yourself what the equivalent of that lake is in your life. For some people it’s literally switching off the radio in the car on the morning commute, to get a little perspective on what the hell is going on around them.”

*\*The Three Marriages: Reimagining Work, Self And Relationship, is published by Riverhead.*

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