If the topic of innovation isn’t at the top of most business leaders’ agendas today, it’s certainly not far down the list. How can we create better products for less money? How can we unleash the creative power that resides within our people—at all levels of the organization? How do we build a culture that supports and sustains innovation throughout our plants and offices, wherever they may be located—across the country, around the globe?

According to General Electric’s 2012 Global Innovation Barometer, which polled 2,800 senior executives on the state of innovation around the world, 92 percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “Innovation is the main lever to create a more competitive economy.” And 86 percent agreed with “Investing in innovation is probably the best way to create jobs in my country.”

Today’s focus on innovation plays to what has historically been one of America’s greatest strengths. For more than 200 years running, the United States has been the world’s hotbed of innovation, producing a seemingly endless supply of groundbreaking inventions. The list of revolutionary technologies, products, and processes invented or first commercialized in the United States—from the lightning rod and bifocals (both devised by Benjamin Franklin in the 1700s) to the telephone, the laser, the assembly line, and the personal computer—is staggering. Even as our country gradually lost its edge in manu-
The bottom line is clear—a dangerous innovation gap has emerged in American business; it is growing with each passing day, and unless the gap is addressed, our nation risks falling behind the rest of the world when it comes to innovation.

To meet the challenge, today’s most effective leaders are sharply focused on developing more-innovative employees and innovation-friendly organizational cultures. It’s no longer enough to have a skilled and technically proficient workforce—employees also need to be creative, collaborative, and communicative. But accomplishing this is much easier said than done.

The solution? The arts.

A New Intersection for Arts and Business

In recent years, the use of the arts by corporations to meet a wide range of employee training and organizational development needs has grown remarkably. Why? Because artistic processes and experiences are by their very nature creative endeavors, and many of the innovation skills lacking in today’s American workforce—including creative and critical thinking, problem identification and solution, effective written and oral communication, teamwork, and collaboration—are deeply rooted in the artistic tradition.

As a result, more and more business leaders have turned to the arts to help bridge the gaps between the skills their employees need and the skills they actually possess. In the process, they have discovered that valuable lessons about innovation can be learned from the practices and insights of artists—lessons leaders can use to help their companies stay profitable in these challenging times.

A couple of years ago, IBM’s Global CEO Study—which surveyed more than 1,500 chief executive officers representing 33 different industries and 60 countries worldwide—found that creativity is the most crucial factor for future success. Specifically, the CEOs believe that creative leaders will be able to handle a highly volatile, increasingly complex business environment by

- Expecting to make more business model changes to realize their strategies.
ership models, and strengthen employee skills in critical areas such as collaboration, conflict resolution, change management, presentation and public performance, and intercultural communication.

In the United States alone, more than 350 of the Fortune 500—and countless smaller firms—employ arts-based learning in participatory workshops, skill-based training programs, hands-on consultancies with business units, individual and team coaching, case studies in action, and lecture-demonstrations at leadership conferences. Events that combine learning with entertainment are also growing rapidly in popularity.

Clearly, arts-based learning—where the arts and artists are used to teach skills that have broad and immediate applicability for workers in any industry and sector, including for-profit, nonprofit, and public, and at any point on the organization chart—has emerged as an important new tool for today’s businesses. And for good reason. According to Terry McGraw, chairman, president, and CEO of The McGraw-Hill Companies, arts-based learning is key to unleashing creativity and innovation within his organization. Says McGraw, “Creativity is essential because it is at the heart of innovation, and innovation is a growth driver and, therefore, a business imperative. That is why, for several years, The McGraw-Hill companies has been using arts-based learning as a training tool in several key leadership initiatives. . . . The arts have served as a complementary vehicle to more traditional learning approaches. They have helped to change attitudes by letting employees confront their assumptions in a nontraditional and non-

Many innovation skills are deeply rooted in the artistic tradition.
The highest art form is really business.
New business models based on entirely different assumptions...

down. Want to tell your story—write it down. The pen, paper, and volumes of the written page would be the thematic element that would run through the entire drawing.”

To bring GE’s employees into the picture, the artists created tape images of people with hammers and chisels putting the final touches on the statue—images that represented the General Electric employees who create the company’s legacy every day. In addition, the artists built a tape art library on an adjoining wall, representing the more than 7,000 manuscripts on the subjects of leadership and management that used to reside at the Crotonville facility. (Today, ebooks, Kindles, and touchscreen computers have replaced most of these hardcopy manuscripts.) According to a Tape Art participant, “To address the idea of how this knowledge is disseminated beyond the Crotonville campus, we added carrier pigeons to deliver the word. We wanted to reinforce the ideas of collaboration and teamwork and their collective results.”

The Boeing Company is going a step further, using arts-based learning within the organization, while reaching outside to gain the attention of future employees as well. According to Sarah Murr, Boeing’s community investor for arts and culture, her employer dedicates millions of dollars to arts education in the belief that this investment will pay off in the form of more creative graduates—some of whom will one day work for the company. In Sarah’s Southern California region alone, Boeing funds classroom-based arts education to the tune of $750,000 a year. Boeing considers the arts essential to a complete education because it believes the arts can provide students with the skills they’ll need to succeed in life and successfully navigate careers in the 21st century.

Conclusion: An Inspiring and Entertaining Learning Process

But arts-based learning doesn’t just teach these skills, it inspires workers to become creators, and it engages them in entertaining ways that other forms of learning can’t easily match. This powerful combination of teaching desperately needed work skills in ways that lead to long-term impact is one that can no longer be ignored. Indeed, today’s leading organizations have already discovered the power of arts-based learning, and they are using it to their advantage. 

Harvey Seifter is one of the world’s leading authorities on business creativity and arts-based learning. Over the past decade, he has brought arts-based approaches to innovation, high-performance teamwork, and cross-cultural communication to corporations such as IBM, AstraZeneca, Morgan Stanley, GE, Siemens, Real Networks, Alcatel-Lucent, Honeywell, Johnson & Johnson, Chrysler, Novartis, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, GlaxoSmithKline, BMW, and McGraw-Hill. In 2010 he founded The Art of Science Learning, a National Science Foundation–funded initiative that uses the arts to spark a creative and innovative 21st-century STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) workforce.