**Title:**
*Imagination for Action: nurturing professional values and guiding good actions.*

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**Abstract:**
This paper explores a relationship between imagination and the perceived professional responsibilities and actions of leaders working in the cultural sector in a northern European country. Using a framework of *Imagination for Action* and drawing on the qualitative data from 21 leaders, the paper, firstly, illustrates how imagination is simultaneously a necessary condition and the most valuable resource for a renewal of professional calling, responsibility and motivation in value-driven and humanity-centred actions. Secondly, this paper acknowledges a wider spilling effect that emerges from the act of researching imaginative actions of a group of professionals. Using a poetic and symbolic language, inspirational and reflection-yielding value of imagination is showcased in the form of a reflective epilogue. Drawing on a written poem and visual images created in response to empirical data to re-tell the story of cultural leaders, an invitation to reflect and reconnect with a professional self is extended to the readers.

**Keywords:**
Arts, Imagination, Cultural Leaders, Professional values, Responsible Actions, Reflection

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Imagination for Action: nurturing professional values and guiding good actions.

“The most powerful forces in shaping and motivating people’s behaviours and the shape of our society are all products of our imagination.” (Reich, 2017, p. ix)

INTRODUCTION

Imagination is defined as a mental capacity that “works with our reason and emotion to create images that enable us to grasp and express what we see and understand” (Magill 2015:88). As a typically individual capacity (Gaut, 2007; Reich, 2017), imagination can occupy a spectrum of different modalities. It can manifest itself through production of mental images and constructs that may be a vivid and coloured extension of reality, or which may not at all reflect real-life (Rozuel, 2012). Gaut (2007) suggests that a pattern of natural variability in human imaginative capacities exists, pointing out that some people have greater imaginative talents than others. On the contrary, humanistic and experiential approaches – which are growing in popularity – advocate the inherent creative disposition of humans to experience, imagine and tell stories (Dewey, 1934; Green, 1995). This sentiment is echoed in Reich’s assumption that “everybody is born with an extraordinarily powerful tool to dream up things” (2017, p. xi). However, our innate imaginative capabilities are often suppressed by the political, economic and socio-cultural factors, creating what Reich calls, an imagination gap. Perhaps Gaut’s observation of variation in imaginative capacities should always be explained in relation to societal and institutional conditions. If unfavourable, these conditions can either prevent individuals from fully recognising the value of imagination, or using it purposefully to inform their personal choices and professional practice.

A diminishing use of imagination in a context of many crises of today is a serious worry because imagination can enable and drive change. It can fuel creation of new individual and collective solutions to a range of local and global problems. Reich considers imagination to be “a natural resource” and “a raw material” (Reich, 2017, p. xiv), which needs to be, firstly, nurtured and developed, and secondly, actively utilised to bring real and sizeable benefits to individuals, communities and society. Gout (2007) observes an essential role of art in learning and self-development through deployment of imagination. Participation in creative process is often discussed as an authentic and meaningful way to engage imagination for personal fulfilment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), vocational identity development (Higgins et al., 2010), economic development of regions, places and communities (Sacchetti et al., 2009; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010) and a wider societal good (Dewey, 1934; Green, 1995; Reich, 2017). There is no surprise that humanity flourishes better in societies with unlimited access to arts and arts education (Ng, 2011), and where imaginative thinking is encouraged and nurtured. Evidence suggests that, beyond its purely expressive and aesthetic qualities, imagination is considered to have a significant educational purpose in both child (Jovchelovitch et al., 2018) and a wider human development (Rozuel, 2014). Literature makes it apparent that exploration, criticality
and reflection activated by deployment of imagination are important anchors for appraising one’s place in the world and informing one’s actions.

Some opportunities that imaginative perception brings about have been harnessed by organisations, particularly the idea of using imaginative capacity of individuals to produce creative outcomes (Thompson, 2018). Similarly, an imaginative vision of a possible future is considered a key motivational factor in influencing actions of entrepreneurs (Cornelissen, 2013; Shackle, 1979). Yet, despite this generative potential, the importance of imagination in professional practice is often misunderstood (Weick, 2005). Neither are all the opportunities for transformative actions fully accounted and harnessed by individuals and organisations during the formation of professional identity. Although not all imaginative thinking produces practical solutions, nor should it, the imaginative perception can be a useful resource for professionals in making sense of their work reality and in their quest for deep meaning (Rozuel, 2014). This seems particularly important during a structural change or a major crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, when individuals search for practical strategies for coping with pressures and contradictions typically experienced in a changed context. As those major events shake up a familiar organisational reality (as it is known), the idea of imagining different scenarios becomes essential in reconciling personal values with professional responsibilities.

This paper has two main aims. Firstly, to showcase the role of imagination in nurturing professional identity, informing choices and driving meaningful change through ethical, visionary and imaginative leadership practice. In achieving this aim, the paper will illustrate how imagination is simultaneously a necessary condition and the most valuable resource for a renewal of professional calling and motivation in value-driven leadership. A framework of *Imagination for Action* will be outlined and applied to an example of leaders working in publicly funded arts organisations in a northern European country. This is to capture manifestations of imaginative action during a moment of a poignant sectoral change and to propose that deployment of imagination helped leaders fulfil their perceived professional and societal responsibilities by reconnecting with their values. After a brief outline of methodology, three scenarios accompanied by original images will be presented as a symbolic representation of leaders’ experiences. A discussion will conclude this part. Secondly, this paper will discuss a wider spilling effect that emerges from researching imaginative actions of professionals in any given context. The paper will therefore finish with the author’s personal reflection in the form of a reflective poetic epilogue, which provides an example of arts-based format to provoke critical self-reflection. A poetic language will be used to re-tell the story of leaders and shed a light on the inspirational value of imagination to enhance one’s practice and strengthen professional identity. Courageous “dreaming up” will be recommended as a regenerative reflective practice helping to reconnect with a wounded or neglected professional self.

**IMAGINATION IN BUSINESS AND ORGANISATIONS**

Imagination and imaginative actions tend to be associated with artistic practice. It is true that artists draw on imaginative resources to express themselves through their work, which in return guides and furthers the imaginations of others (Gaut, 2007). Literature emphasises this very role of art in the development of imagination,
aesthetic appreciation and in learning more generally. For example, narrative fiction and literary work have been appraised as aids to better imagining. This happens through character-driven storytelling that describes possible lives of others to deepen people’s understanding of the world (Alvarez & Merchán, 1992; Gaut 2007). Similarly, theatre (Zittoun & Rosenstein, 2018) and musical imagination (Klempe 2018), are considered to help spontaneously evoke emotions by creatively mixing fantasy with reality. Klempe (ibid.) considers imagination to have a polyphonic nature allowing complex and often superficially contradictory “languages” of expression to be united. These symbolic forms inform the production of images that draw on rich and complex dimensions of people’s reality, which remains in an ongoing conversation with imaginary possible scenarios. Exposure to arts and engagement in creative practice influences people’s sense of the world of possibility that projects hopes and dreams novel scenarios, subsequently shaping new futures. It supports individuals and communities in fulfilling their essential needs for deep meaning and understanding of their experiences (Zittoun & Glaveanu, 2018). But an artistic realm is not the only one where imagination emerges and feeds real activities.

Imagination has been considered valuable in other professional contexts. Some of the opportunities imaginative perception brings about have been harnessed by organisations. For example, management research has widely explored the importance and value of engaging and facilitating creative thinking in driving business innovation (De Bono, 2017; Majaro, 1988). A variety of creative methodologies have been suggested as useful to stimulate developments of organisational strategies, or to generate solutions to commercial or social problems (Reich, 2017; Shoemaker, 1995; Wade 2012). One such method is thinking through scenarios, which involves creations of possible futures (ibid.). On the one hand, organisational creativity deployed in the exercise of imagining the future allows to weigh environmental opportunities and business constraints when planning organisational activities. On the other hand, creativity informs complex internal interactions helping to overcome differences in the knowledge, backgrounds and ideas of organisational members (Majchrzak et al., 2012). Because organisational members can “imagine and share possibilities”, they find a common language and grounds for effective collective action (Thompson, 2018, p. 231). Imagination seems to release organisational creativity, which further shapes the imaginative capacity of individuals and their practices. In this way, imagination becomes a situated and embodied mental power that is shared within a professional context, or a community of practice, which can be deployed to initiate a radical or gradual organisational change (Morgan, 1997; Morgan, 1988; Thompson, 2018).

Similarly, research in entrepreneurship emphasises the role of imagination in envisioning new opportunities and guiding creative economic behaviours (Cornelissen, 2013; Cornelissen & Clarke 2010; Shackle, 1979). Creativity is commonly understood to be exploited in the context of resource scarcity, especially when underpinned by environmental constraints, risk and uncertainty (Shackle, 1979; Shoemaker, 1995). Those constraints tend to catalise development of new solutions aligned with a vision imagined by entrepreneurs. Interestingly, in both management and entrepreneurial literature, that vision is developed by a guiding image created not purely by rational reasoning, but largely influenced by emotions, moral values and a quest for deep meaning (Cornelissen, 2013; Rozuel, 2014). It also appears that imagination often manifests itself as a shareable collective practice transgressing
individual minds and singular contexts. Thompson (2018) suggests it is a relational entity that emerges in-between states of real and possible as the nexus between people, places and objects. This insight paints imagination as a mental power reaching towards the future, yet embedded in the actual embodied social reality of an organisation. It links agents, spaces and resources, and deploys relationships to galvanise opportunities for transformative actions to better the imperfect reality (Magill, 2015; Morgan, 1986).

Despite this generative potential, managers tend to be wary of imagination for its mistaken association with fantasising (Weick, 2005). The roots of such popular misunderstanding might come from a fear of imagination as a creator of illusion that tricks the mind to depart from the safety of the physical world. Arguably, as imagination facilitates the escape of human intentions from the imperfect or constraining reality, it seems to offer opportunities for resisting or transgressing the pressures of work reality. This suggests that imagination is not simply a resource to generate creative outputs such as new products and business ideas. It is an invisible force helping make sense of self and one’s working life (Rozuel, 2014). In this way imagination becomes an essential resource for developing and nourishing a professional self that gives sense and value to one’s life. A professional self has a work identity that can be understood as “the constellation of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role” (Ibarra, 1999, pp. 764-5). The identity enables one to remain ‘true-to-self’ and acts as a guardian of the individuals’ self-concept (ibid.). This entwinement of personal and professional self-concepts suggests that imaginative perception nurtures and helps develop both, pertaining to a two-way relationship between qualities of a person and a professional. However, a productive role of imagination remains underexplored, particularly in relation to ethical and authentic leadership practice. The next section outlines the paper’s analytical framework that proposes to see imagination as an inherent part of concrete ethical, responsible and transformative actions.

**IMAGINATION FOR ACTION**

“[Imagination] not only facilitates holistic perception of complex situations but also inspires concrete action” (Magill, 2015, p.97).

This section draws on ideas from two scholars - Gerard Magill and Gareth Morgan – to propose that imaginative perception generates positive outcomes for society, organisations, communities and individuals. Both scholars stress the undeniable connection between thought, perception and action and suggest that imagination can provide an outcome-yielding “framework for action” (Morgan, 1986, p. 343). For Magill this central premise is evident particularly when enacting moral practices. Magill (2015, p. 90) explains that the reality with “a myriad of dilemmas” and “complex scenarios” is a stage for sense- and decision-making. Both processes require a careful weighing and balancing of the benefits and costs. In a complex world of work, Magill argues, imagination can become a resource for nurturing personal virtues and guiding moral choices. This means that exactly in the moment when individuals navigate through challenging situations, they also have to reconnect with their own values and spiritual beliefs, which inform their professional conduct.
Magill’s (2015, p. 88) understanding of imagination as always in relation to actions and values, implies it “is crucial for morality and spirituality”. This suggests a perpetual dialectic process in which strong moral and spiritual beliefs guide imagination and actions, which in turn further develop and nurture these beliefs. This process repeats itself always following the same pattern. Firstly, the imagination helps individuals to perceive a complex reality and interpret it in a meaningful way. Secondly, it inspires action aligned with one’s moral values and spiritual beliefs. Thirdly, human actions renew or re-shape one’s moral and spiritual beliefs.

This imagination-led urge to action points out the importance and usefulness of the imagination for all professional contexts, not only for artists and creators. Morgan (1986, p. 343) proposes that an imaginative process helps to fuel the formation and identification of concrete solutions, because the images and mental constructs provide insights that “allow us to act in ways that we might not have thought possible before”. It is the intensity of images that create an interpretative frame to enrich perception and guide actions in a meaningful and purposeful way (Magill, 2015; Morgan, 1988; Morgan, 1997). Morgan’s idea that images can shape new actions aligns with Magill’s dialectics of imaginative moral actions. This simply means that the imagining is always deeply rooted in one’s worldview that makes people to see and act in a novel way, yet congruent with their values, beliefs, feelings and thoughts. Accordingly with Morgan’s premise, different images encourage enactment of different behaviours in organisations. Depending on which lens is applied to interpret organisational goals, strategies and problems, a different set of actions will emerge because, as Morgan (1997) proposes, we act as we imaginise. Furthermore, as Magill suggests, this process assists the ongoing (re)formation of spiritual and moral values of actors who imagine, believe and act.

Morgan (1988) summarised a range of images-metaphors as tools for capturing and interpreting the nature of organisational dynamics and interactions. In his view, a purposefully chosen metaphor-image can do more than assist interpretation of an existing organisational reality. Morgan suggests it can alter the way organisational actors behave and interact with each other. For example, an image-metaphor of an organisation as a machine can make people enact the logic of efficiency, while an image-metaphor of an organism would call for a holistic approach that acknowledges the needs of the entire system. As these images guide “the way we see and act in everyday life” (Morgan, 1988, p. 382), they can make a real impact by leading change within organisations and beyond. Consequently, it is proposed that imagination serves as the most valuable resource for shaping identity, nurturing morality and informing professional practices. Imagining helps individuals to understand complex phenomena and cope with paradoxes present in their professional realities. It is a sublime force that renews intrinsic motivations, recharges beliefs and activates actions for humanity. This premise sits at the heart of the paper’s framework referred to as Imagination for Action.

The framework captures an important role of imagination in facilitating holistic perception and urging to concrete actions. Applying this framework to the empirical context of leaders in the cultural sector will imply a relationship between imaginative ethical vision and deep spiritual beliefs effective in their leadership practice. Essentially, it will suggest that images of a desired future created and held by leaders helped them initiate purpose- and mission-driven actions for the benefits of what they
envisaged and articulated as a thriving ecology. This image portrays the arts sector as a symbiotic system made by a diversity of forms that all together create effective opportunities for meaningful participation in arts for personal expression and self-fulfilment. Such a vibrant diverse ecology thrives by utilising connections between artists, organisations, spaces, audiences and communities. It depends on the abundance of these elements to maximise and enrich people’s lives. Its purpose is also to guide professional identity development to inform leaders’ decisions and facilitate a sector-wide change. It is argued that the imagined vision of a thriving ecology - like a mould – shaped the actions of cultural leaders. The next section will illustrate a three-step process during which their imagination manifested itself as such an inspiring and action-focused resource on which they drew extensively when navigating through ambiguities of their leadership practice.

SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF CULTURAL LEADERS: PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND IMAGINATIVE CHOICES

This part of the paper explains the methodology and illustrates the imaginative action of cultural leaders, which emerged against a backdrop of cultural politics. This interplay between the pressurising context and cultural leaders’ professional aspirations, values and responsibilities, have surfaced after the changes to the sector’s funding. The experiences of cultural leaders in this situation have been interpreted accordingly with the Imagination for Action framework. In addition, the original artwork was developed in response to the stories leaders told and with an aim to capture a universal symbolic meaning of a reflection-to-action journey undertaken to restore and preserve the sector’s societal mission.

Methodology

The empirical research followed an explorative qualitative methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and included 21 semi-structured interviews with leaders of publicly funded cultural organisations based in a northern European country. These cultural leaders were chosen purposefully in line with the judgment sampling criteria (Ritchie et al., 2003) as a well-informed group of stakeholders directly affected by a new funding regime and governance in public arts. These actors represented a homogenous sample (Holloway & Wheeler, 1996; Patton, 2002) of professionals occupying senior management and decision-making positions by holding an artistic or administrative joint-leadership role. In small cultural organisations with limited resources, one person enacted both leadership roles (managerial and artistic). Many administrative leaders had previous artistic careers or self-declared as art enthusiasts. Few of these leaders were still actively engaged in performance. The role-division is highlighted, but the study found no apparent difference in the attitude of administrative and artistic leaders. Both groups shared a public service ethos and had similar beliefs around the societal role of arts in fostering human development and fulfilment. It is highly likely that professional identity nurtured through the length of artistic training and professional practice have strongly influenced leaders’ worldview and imaginative capacity, and vice versa. Collectively experienced fragility and
insecurities during the funding crisis could have further contributed to the emergence of a rather strong united voice.

Cultural leaders’ rich emotive narratives showed a threatened world of professionals who were dedicated to the provision of arts for a wide range of publics. They were originally analysed through the framework approach that generated a range of themes (Furber, 2010; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). One such original theme explored the role of values in cultural leaders’ responses to the changing context of their work. The theme was revisited and interpreted accordingly with the proposed framework of *Imagination for Action*. To bring about a deeper layer of meaning, original artwork with a series of self-composed images and a poem was developed to further illuminate leaders’ experiences (Lapum et al., 2011). The process of creative analysis sought a fuller understanding and exemplified ongoing interpretive dialogue with leaders’ stories. It invited the researcher’s own reflexivity through metaphorical interpretation and allowed a symbolic language to help elicit a universal meaning that could be grasped and shared widely (ibid.). The images and the poem highlighted the main narrative ideas. They captured tensions in leaders' experiences and represented their metaphorical journey from imaginative reflection to action. This started from a tedious negotiation of one’s position in a ‘frozen land’, where arguably, nothing can be changed, where hopes and dreams are crushed, and where any human/professional agency seems futile. However, thanks to a persistently vivid image of an alternative reality in which a vibrant arts ecology could thrive, leaders believed that change was possible. ‘A flame of fire’ represents hope and signals a moment when choices form, and actions emerge. It symbolises dedication needed to ‘warm up’ the ground to bring a dream into reality. It initiates the process of ‘thawing out’ that signifies a journey towards a full awareness and readiness for action, despite the barriers and obstacles symbolised by a layer of ice. Warm ground free of ice is where the dream can truly happen.

Views and experiences of cultural leaders, interpreted through the *Imagination for Action framework*, showcased the important role of imagination in guiding their transformative actions symbolically represented in three scenarios. “The Real” is described first, pointing out the pressures and constraints of cultural funding landscape. Secondly, “the Ideal” reality expressed through an ecological image signifies a departure from their current (full of constraints) reality towards an imagined (desired) scenario, that could materialise under favourable conditions. It is observed that imagination enabled a mental shift from Real-to-Ideal by feeding leaders’ motivations and beliefs in the arts as a cultivator of social and civic values. Imagination further facilitated a concrete change by bringing the imagined scenario to reality through deliberate responsible leadership practice. Lastly, a few examples will be given to illustrate specific Actions that leaders pursued to fulfil the vision they imagined. These scenarios illustrate a three-step journey from the Real-to-Ideal-to-Actions in this unique leadership context.

**Empirical illustration of Imagination for Action**

*‘The Real’: the Arts Sector During the Funding Crisis.*
A decade ago, a reorganisation in the governance and funding of the public art sector took place in a northern European country. A new national cultural agency was brought to life to oversee the sector and align it with the direction of the national economic strategy. Like many other European countries, it intended to capitalise on the potential of arts in generating wealth and positive social impacts. Exploiting the arts and creativity to increase the country’s cultural export, international profile and tourism, were also key driving criteria of this reorganisation. The arrival of this new agency (the funder) marked a structural and cultural change in the sector. The funder’s programme of change initiatives was outlined in its corporate strategy and new objectives were announced as ruling criteria for obtaining funds for arts and cultural projects.

To achieve the government’s productivity targets, the funder envisaged that the sector would operate on a more effective business model. A key factor in achieving these aims was to capitalise on the capability of cultural organisations to act as businesses. It meant that the national arts companies, cultural organisations and individual artists were to present themselves as either profitable, or at least “investable”, businesses capable of demonstrating multiple contributions to the socio-economic development of the country. This new approach shifted the way the arts sector was to attract and secure public funding. As such, it initiated fundamental transformations in the everyday operations of many small cultural organisations. Cultural leaders felt the unsettling impact of the prevailing economic logic and pressures of bureaucratic time-consuming directives underpinning the new process of applying for funding. Monica, one of the leaders, described this new reality in these words:

*We are currently in an environment where business success or a commercial success is considered a good thing and anything that is not commercial is considered as a failure. (Monica)*

Commercialisation was a key dimension that leaders collectively assessed as dramatically altering the professional reality in which they had to perform their daily work responsibilities. Securing increasingly competitive funds became an ultimate challenge. Leaders felt that the less money there was available to the sector, the higher were the funder’s expectations. In their eyes, the funder adopted a utilitarian assessment model, using creativity for political and economic gain. Leaders voiced their reservations towards this changing approach in the public arts policy and governance, because to them cultural utilitarianism represented a potentially threatening shift leading to artistic outcomes being overshadowed by all the other obligations. This is how Robert explained the utilitarian trend in the funder’s preoccupation with measuring the work of artists and arts organisations:
Value for money is the utilitarian need for measuring, seeing immediate and direct effects that [in arts] can’t be measured. This is why the funding disputes are so contentious and making arguments for arts becomes a high up on the agenda of many artists and leaders. (Robert)

It seemed that since the policymakers realised that arts could generate economic and social benefits, they started to expect artists and cultural organisations to deliver more than simply artistic objectives. Leaders disapproved not so much of these different sets of expectations, as pro-social motivations were considered as fundamental to the ethos of public arts, but rather needing to justify the cost and all outcomes of arts activities, before these were even realised. William explains:

*The sector is facing a continuous problem with an obsession of the government and bureaucrats with measuring things, while arts are exactly about what cannot be measured. There is little predictability in arts, even with regards to prestigious organisations - in one season they might be great, the next one, not so good. It's about the false security of the funder, their accountability. Their goal is to avoid failures, but art is about experimenting, making choices, failing, trying by error!* (William)

In William's view, the sector constantly “fights battles” with the current political obsession with measurable gains, which leaders felt sits at odds with the sector’s mission. He added:

*It fights the bureaucrats who want to measure things, it fights the politicians who want to get re-elected in the few years’ time, and it’s fighting spending rounds that are based on one year, two years, three years, where actually arts need five, ten, fifteen years. Art is disruptive and unpredictable. It is not about strategies, cultural plans and targets - this loses the point of what art is for.* (William)

Cultural leaders shared a view that a mission of arts is to stimulate human development and enhance the lives of individuals and communities. They were unanimous in thinking that artistic activities have a different purpose and therefore should not be evaluated in accordance with a short-term investment approach. No wonder they were confused how best to demonstrate “a success” expected by the funder. According to William and his peers, the new approach undermined the central position of the artistic rationale, favouring the assessment of artistic practices on non-artistic grounds instead. The utilitarian approach to valuing culture was noted as inappropriate. Leaders expressed their dissatisfaction with principles such as ‘return on investment’ and ‘value for money’ deriving from an over-simplistic, measurement-focused economic thinking. In addition, this approach threatened the supply of financial support for ambitious and experimental arts projects and undermined the ethos of serving humanity by nourishing people’s souls. In these challenging conditions, that pressurised the resilience and sustainability of the arts sector, cultural leaders had to find ways for their organisations to survive and continue their aesthetic and civic missions.

‘The Ideal’: *Arts Ecology Generating Spiritual Food for Humanity.*
In the context of scrutiny of funding assessments and burdensome tasks of writing convincing funding applications, cultural leaders never seemed to completely lose sight of the ideal scenario in which arts can thrive for the benefit of individuals and society. Thanks to their deeply held beliefs in the value of artistic expression and aesthetic experience, they imagined a new kind of reality in which people’s deep needs for connection and development are fulfilled, not threatened. This ideal reality in which arts matter was for them synonymous with a fairer and more equal world. A cohesive respectful world without social inequalities, where humanity can thrive. Amber’s words clearly express how much leaders’ understanding of the role of arts centred on it being a spiritual food and a healer, and how much such a view differed from the views held by funders and politicians:

The rationale and dominant encouragement for various initiatives to make arts commercial and business-like might be beneficial in terms of more robust management, but the balance sheet will never balance without a subsidy. It won’t and it can’t because the value of work and what people do is so much more than just the product that comes out at the end. That’s why artists make work - it’s because they feel compelled…it’s a call, and it’s not about being famous, making money etc. It’s about healing people’s souls and make them feel better. (Amber)

The commitment to the “healing of people’s souls”, as Amber said, was an imperative guiding the activities in the public art sector envisaged and articulated by leaders as a vibrant, diverse ecology. This image suggests a perceived responsibility of leaders for ensuring support and developmental opportunities for artists, so audiences across all societal groups can feed on their work and nourish their souls. These concerns seemed to be mobilised by a deep care for the sector, which Kelly simply called her “personal ecology” entwined within a network of relationship with staff, partners, sponsors, audiences, projects and places. This ecology, as Craig pointed out, prioritises connections (through making and sharing of arts) because it is “fundamentally about humans interacting with humans”. Then, he added:

If you are working in the arts ecology and you care about it, then you have responsibility for it because the actions you'll take will have an impact and repercussions [for everyone]. (Craig)

This greater need for belonging to a professional community that values and supports each other commonly featured in leaders’ narratives. It also signified a symbiotic condition for growth in the powerful image of arts ecology, of which being a part was important. For John it meant that “we all have place in there, that we can all fit in and
that our place is valued”. It meant more than awareness of each other, but rather an active responsibility expressed through the acts of collegial support. Such vision of connectivity in a shared ecology translated to a communal purpose and values focused on bringing people together to help them fulfil their needs and aspirations. Leaders pictured this ecology as vibrant and stimulating as it promoted a vision of a world where everyone had a right to access arts because of its healing and nurturing qualities. Arts participation was understood to be an invaluable source of strength for navigating through the complexities of making sense of the world. As visible in Katie’s response, cultural leaders thought a need for engagement with arts was inherent to human nature and thus seeking to fulfil such need was essential.

Arts is what distinguishes us! It shows what is special about our life that takes us beyond simply being able to feed ourselves, cloth ourselves, shelter.... It's about taking life beyond basics of human existence. You can exist if you get sufficient amount of nutrients and sleep - that's the basic- beyond that is what makes us distinctive in terms of our worldview. (Katie)

The quote above exemplifies the sentiment unanimously shared by the cultural leaders. Its essence can be captured in the postulate expressed by Lena, who said: “we need arts as much as we need food!” It derives from a deep belief in arts as a basic human and developmental need. It symbolises a commitment towards a vision of a healthy, creative and playful society but also more equal, fairer and caring, which leaders believed can be fostered through engagement with arts. Despite the daily pressures experienced and the complexities of manging arts organisations in an increasingly political context, cultural leaders shared a dream of arts always prevailing over the superficial battles “allowing people to play, to express their creativity, to explore” (William), or “trying how far one can go... pushing things... experimenting...” (Brian). The vision of arts as a plentiful and supportive ecology, is a quintessence of an environment that nourishes spirits, strengthen human connection and mutual respect. It’s an image of individuals who take responsibility for developing their potential and co-create a caring society that celebrates individuality and diversity. It’s a big dream!

‘Actions’: Cultural Leaders as Social Change Agents.

Everyone needs art. We need arts as much as we need food. Our responsibility is for that to be possible - for artists ... but also for the community. (Lena)

Thanks to this deeply treasured image of a vibrant arts ecology, leaders were able to take concrete actions. They focused mainly on the organisation and production of ambitious artistic work. Despite the unfavourable and stifling conditions, they aligned their responsibilities and took actions, which had three clear aims: inspire and give people hope; educate and encourage creativity; and represent unheard voices and untold stories. Like Lena, all leaders understood their responsibility as two-fold, taking care of artists and the audiences/people. “You have to care for more than just you, you have to care on a more global scale about a wellbeing of the arts community”, said Monica. Such a greater-than-self concern transpired through many activities that leaders led in a conscious effort of bridging the real and the ideal worlds. Here are some examples of focal initiatives that illustrate leaders as change-makers striving to create opportunities according with what they dreamed up, and thus fulfilling their wider civic responsibilities.
The cultivation of talent and development opportunities for artists were at the core of what cultural leaders did daily. However, interesting examples emerged showcasing their wider civic contributions. The first such example relates to planning and organisation of ambitious arts programmes. In the context of theatre, this includes professional staged performances as well as outreach projects focused on audience education and community engagement. Leaders would spare no effort to ensure the work across all these areas can be financed. In the circumstances of dried-up public funding, they tasked themselves with raising money from other sources, forming new partnerships, or producing on a shoestring. Giving up was not an option because they strongly believed that the very essence of producing art is to fulfil cultural audiences’ aesthetic needs. They saw them as people with common existential problems, hopes, dreams, desires, aspirations, not just as consumers who pay for performance tickets. This perceived moral and civic duty urged them to find ways to give people access to art especially during difficult times.

In difficult times people need to go to the theatre, need to go to the concerts, need to get involved in arts to survive! (…) Arts always existed alongside human beings, there always have been rituals, story-telling, there has always been arts carved in stones - if nothing else the arts is there! (Lena)

Interactions with arts was considered as nutrient for awakening spirit and helping people to cope with everyday reality, particularly - as Lena pointed out - in economically difficult times. Leaders shared the view of arts as an important material and symbolic reality – “a part of an everyday experience of people” (John). In their opinion, this reality is “deeply rooted in human experience because it says something universal about life” (Lena) and because “through the arts you can understand what it means to be human” (Craig). For all these reasons, and as John simply summarised “because culture matters!”’, leaders appeared to feel greatly responsible for enabling a wide-reaching participation in arts.

The second primary focus of cultural leaders in enacting the imagined ideal world was placed on the educational and awareness raising power of arts. In the eyes of their leaders, cultural organisations have responsibilities to challenge people’s perceptions and facilitate important inclusion-focused work. Thus, leaders committed themselves to inspire the new generations of citizens through the means of creativity and artistry. They pursued this idea not simply through joy and pleasure, but also through an invitation to a deeper reflection. As Garry admitted,”we put stuff out here [on stage] influencing people's thinking, asking them to engage, comment - it's a big responsibility!”
A commonly expressed ambition of leaders was to shape the nation’s thinking, aspirations and values by presenting stories that are “strong and compelling for people to engage with” (Katie), stories which make audiences “feel a bit different about stuff” (Craig). A whole spectrum of social and civic values and responsibilities clearly emerged from the leaders’ responses. Craig understood such responsibility to be achieved through the idea of creative disruption. This involved showcasing artistic content that is intentionally original and thought-provoking, and which stimulates reflection by inviting the public to challenge all preconceived beliefs, tastes and views. Moreover, cultural leaders’ sense of social responsibility emerged as linked with their active involvement in promoting social justice and driving social change through the medium of arts. Garry expressed such deep intrinsic motivation in these words:

There is a need for understanding different audiences, and hence changing other people's perceptions and beliefs. Theatre is the place to make these changes. If we can't achieve that in the theatre, it will be difficult to achieve it anywhere else. It doesn't matter in what artform, but we need to make sure that everyone is represented. (Garry)

This perceived deeply social human need constituted another focal point for leaders’ actions. They felt obliged to ensure all people’s experience mattered and was represented. “My primary responsibility is to tell these stories with sensitivity and confidence”, said Garry. Story-telling with wide cultural and experiential perspectives was considered an important artistic mission in the process of critical reflection and development of citizenship. Both were found to be crucial in actions centred on promoting social change and overcoming social injustice. Leaders’ narratives showed great sensitivity towards the dreams of less privileged citizens. All of these actions reflect the ideal image of a thriving ecology where arts are at the core of strong societies because they foster development of individual and societal values.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This example of cultural leaders illustrates the importance of imaginative reflection and action in response to a funding crisis in arts. It shows how the state of possible, brought about by an act of imagination (Magill, 2015; Morgan, 1986), transcended a volatile reality to satisfy personal and societal needs for wellbeing, prosperity and fulfilment (Ng, 2011). Imagination helped leaders to appreciate the complexity of their practice entangled by conflicting logics, multiple demands and financial pressures. It helped them see opportunities for good action, which were anchored in their strong professional values and personal beliefs (Magill, 2015; Morgan, 1986). Leaders’ imagination emerged as their most precious resource feeding their intrinsic motivations and strengthening their professional identity. The aspect of imagination as a resource for professional activities undertaken in challenging conditions seems particularly poignant (Magill, 2015; Reich, 2017). Perhaps because in a crisis, unlike in normal conditions permitting many choices, there is no option other than to give up or fight. The leaders’ decision to focus on enabling positive social change began by foreseeing beyond the struggles and obstacles. Perhaps the funding crisis further intensified a necessity to imagine an alternative scenario leading to solutions inspiring responsible actions (Reich, 2017; Wade, 2012). The crisis seemed to awaken
individual imaginative reflection that in turn was sustaining their professional calling and strongly informing their leadership practice in the organisational and wider sectorial contexts.

The three-step transformational process from Real-through-Ideal-to-Actions, as experienced by leaders, highlighted an important role of imagination in connecting perception, reflection and action in value-based manners (Cornelissen, 2013; Magill, 2015; Morgan, 1986; Rozuel, 2014). Professional and spiritual boundaries, demarked by their work identity and a strong sense of self (Ibarra, 1999), determined leaders’ responses to a crisis based on what they were prepared to accept. The nature of the conflict with the funder meant the resolution could only be achieved by finding “another way” (Morgan, 1986). In making sense of troubling context, leaders imagined a scenario in which the sector is recognised and valued for its unquestionable contribution to individual wellbeing and social prosperity (Ng, 2011). This possibility was brought about by an image-metaphor of ecology that captured values of connectedness and mutual dependence in achieving good artistic and societal outcomes. As Morgan (1986) suggested, this metaphor implied specific choices around leaders’ priorities because of the underpinning values and beliefs they held. A vibrant and diverse arts ecology signified the most favourable conditions to satisfy essential human needs for belonging and connection, which leaders felt personally and professionally responsible for. This metaphorical image-construct emerged organically amongst this professional group, who dedicated their professional selves to create widespread opportunities for meaningful engagement with arts. Unsurprisingly, it reflected the public service ethos and aligned with leaders’ pro-social and civic aspirations. It showcased a link between their ethical practice, authentic values and beliefs in the developmental and nourishing dimension of arts considered “as spiritual food”.

Aligning with Magill’s (2015) principle of perpetual dialectic cycle of imagination-driven action, strong values and moral beliefs were crucial for nurturing imagination and keeping leaders motivated in their pursuit of social change. The imagination, in turn, further developed and nurtured these beliefs. As Thompson (2018) suggests, imagination enabled leaders to see a bigger picture showcasing important links between people and places, thus becoming a generative force with ever-renewing capacity for nurturing professional calling and identity. Harnessing the relational quality of imagination that occupies the state in-between possible and real, supported the leaders’ self-reflection and galvanised opportunities for their transformative actions (Magill, 2015; Morgan, 1986). Imagination deployed by leaders transcended their organisational boundaries. Through observable actions and socially shareable understandings, an indivisible ideal of reality for the whole sector emerged in the leaders’ minds and hearts. It offered a real possibility for individual, yet collectively accepted actions. As leaders acted what they believed in, it seems the imagination of the Ideal world was a necessary predecessor of purposeful motivated actions in the face of constraints, risk and uncertainty (Shackle, 1979; Shoemaker, 1995). The evolving nature of reflection-to-action enabled leaders to shift from the problematic Real world to the desired Ideal one. Furthermore, it seemed to provoke a sectoral response suggesting that an imagined scenario can be shared by a collective to inspire and facilitate positive action. Regardless of whether this happened organically or intentionally, imagination emerged as an individual capacity situated in a social
embodied reality (Thompson, 2018), where values and professional identity of leaders were developed and shared (starting from training and throughout their careers).

A symbiotic relationship between imagination, morality and values enabled leaders to reconnect with their strong civic beliefs and focus on social good. This greater-than-self-concern corresponded with an ideal image of the possible world in which unrestricted engagement with arts and creative expression brings nourishment and a sense of belonging to a place-community (Dewey, 1934; Green, 1995; Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Therefore, imaginative capacity became an important contributor to a renewal of cultural leaders’ professional values and conduct. It inspired leaders to take facilitative actions focused on promoting diversity, inclusivity, societal openness and respect. This plentiful, polyphonic and resourceful nature of imagination that draws on past experiences, yet is open to unrealised future possibilities (Magill, 2015; Klempe, 2018), provided a valuable inspiration for a type of dreaming with a power to actively shape society (Reich, 2017). This is an important learning, particularly in the recent socio-economic crisis caused by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the sector has been particularly hard-hit by the social distancing rules, leaders will need to find effective strategies for recovery. They will have to once more find ways to feed human souls dispirited by the lack of connection and economic struggles. Envisaging positive future scenarios, by deploying imagination and engaging professional, moral and civic values, appears to sustain motivation for professional practice. A belief that under favourable conditions and with purposeful commitment, a new vision might be accomplished, will help urge today’s and future leaders to concrete action (Magill, 2015).

Professional contexts are increasingly political and thus more difficult to navigate through. It seems that the ability to imagine scenarios and actions congruent with one’s values and beliefs, will be a paramount capability for self-preservation and career longevity. The case of cultural leaders showcased argument for the usefulness of imaginative perception in informing professional choices. As imagination enables to make a leap to a preferable reality (Gaut, 2007; Reich, 2017), the example of leaders shows a practical value in drawing on imaginative resources in one’s professional practice. However, imaginative actions need to be socially, culturally and institutionally supported. It seems this is an area of joined responsibility. Professionals have an individual responsibility for conduct of their practice. They are expected to strive for excellence and critically reflect on impacts of their practice, particularly those in leadership roles. However, they must be supported to act well. Educational and training institutions, as well as organisations, should all contribute with a programme of initiatives to encourage imaginative learning and promote responsible ethical decision-making. Moreover, organisational cultures need to change to facilitate cultivation of personal virtues and professional values, and to inspire commitment to acting with a concern for others and care for the environment. This is to be achieved by enabling meaningful and soulful professional engagements that protect professional identity and respects ethical values of organisational actors. A shared responsibility for the deployment of imagination in work and professional context could help generate ethical solutions to many crises organisations and society face today.

To conclude, application of the Imagination for Action framework in the cultural context showed imagination as the most valuable resource to inform, shape and
nurture personal and professional values of leaders. The framework has its limitations. It is not a prescriptive how-to tool for a development of professional imagination. Neither is it a model for management of professional practice. In its simplicity, the framework explains mechanics of action fuelled by individual imaginative capacity and strong values. It hopes to provide useful insights for professional reflection, help to reconnect with one’s beliefs and renew motivation. The experience of cultural leaders demonstrated a united vision, which might have been accidental, but it is likely that it mirrored a specific set of values of this professional group during a distinctive moment in time. An inquiry into a deployment of imagination in a different professional context could have yielded very different images-metaphors. It’s likely that leaders working in commercial arts would have also presented a different pattern of imaginative action, or indeed the same group of leaders studied under different political and economic conditions. Perhaps their strong views of arts as a universalising force for good would have not emerged as clearly. This ‘homogenised’ community with a shared strong public art ethos might have skewed the focus of interpretation towards a single collectively shared image of ecology that led to positive actions. However, the framework makes no predictions of specific outcomes, neither whether the same or different images should emerge. It simply acknowledges the essential link between the strength of values and images produced and held by professionals that directly influence their motivation for good ethical action. In this light, the practical implications of using this framework as a reflective tool could be plentiful, from individual and professional development to purposeful redesign of organisations and societal systems to promote wellbeing, creativity and resilience.

REFLECTIVE EPILOGUE: A SPILLING-EFFECT OF IMAGINATIVE ACTION

What can be learned from the experiences of cultural leaders as they embarked on their leadership journey steered by their professional responsibilities, personal dreams and aspirations? Their story of navigating through the stormy waters of their professional reality strongly resonated with me. I, an academic researcher, find myself bewildered and inspired at the same time, with a sense of renewing admiration for their relentless bravery and awe for their exceptional commitment to making engagement in arts widely accessible. A deep spiritual connection with the idea of arts as a civic space, and a tool to transform individuals and communities, made leaders dream, believe and act to pursue a greater-than-themselves concern, and consequently, to ensure future possibility of these important human and communal experiences. Admiring someone, or being inspired by someone’s values and conduct, is a strong foundation of self-development. In fact, across many areas of human activities, and particularly in education, inspiration matters and is widely encouraged to help students of all ages and backgrounds achieve their potential. Yet, there are fewer platforms available for researchers to reflect upon and discuss such unacknowledged personal impact of their research practice.

Conducting research accordingly with the principles of qualitative methodology offers only a partial solution. It invites researcher’s subjectivity, values and reflexivity, and acknowledges that a ‘bias’ is an inherent feature of embodied and context-based inquiry (Morse et al., 2002; Janesick, 1994, 2001). However, despite the flexibility of
the research process that supports an ongoing self-reflection, reflexivity in the qualitative management and leadership research tends to be limited to the process of interpretation and presentation of emerging stories. There is rarely an outlet allowing a researcher to present a personal impact of an inquiry in relation to one’s professional practice. Arts-based research practice (Finley, 2011; Kara, 2015) seems to fill in that gap by drawing on artistic forms of expression that include a researcher’s personal voice in a flexible and accommodating format. As this paper showcased imagination in reflective action, it seems appropriate to include here a personal imaginative reflection. Particularly because cultural leaders themselves advocated the value of reflection. Like Garry, Craig or Katie, I believe in the power of stories to stimulate reflection. I believe they can force us to “feel a bit different about stuff”, as Craig stated. For that reason, I finish this paper with an illustration of spillages of imagination pertaining to leaders’ courage to dream up in the face of constant struggles, dilemmas and pressures. In a dialogue with memories of our conversations, and through the process of reinterpreting their narratives, I wrote a poem about them, and for them.

**A courageous Dream**

Some people say when mornings wake up dreams fade away... But do they? One morning, an old stubborn Dream hides underneath a bed. It waits and sizes the moment. When nobody sees the Dream runs across the room and safely reaches the hall. It flexes and stretches its toes, then suddenly jumps up into your jacket's wee pocket. Unnoticed the Dream travels with you, quietly observing the world from the inside of your pocket. At first, unalarmed, it watches you in the morning rush of quiet exchanges of digital pings. At midafternoon it notices you rolled up your sleeves as a phone rings louder and your office heats up. First, second, third daily battle commences. In the heat of the moment, your words slip from the desk igniting the invisible flame. Anger, sadness, frustration and fear are all dancing away feeding the flame. Failures and errors - not even yours - now also feed the flame. A play of mighty pressures is lighting up the room, yet a sudden darkness arrived. Your body shrinks, your heart sinks, your head bows. Your hands helplessly reach the safety of your jacket's pockets. In that very moment, you find It. You touch the Dream and you now remember what you momentarily forgot. You tenderly place the Dream on your shoulder - right by your ear. A few seconds later the Dream sings to you the same songs you hear every night. Each tone ignites the fire in your heart and helps you see - a better tomorrow. The light of the inner flame catches your cheeks. Your shoulders press down, chin lifts up and heart reaches forward. You make a leap towards your Dream. All the possibilities emerge on a sharp horizon one by one. A beautiful world awakens anew. Can you all see it now? If you can't- Check your pockets!
This poem points towards a surprising but significant moment when imagination appears to re-ignite one’s passion, helping to re-connect with the purpose and values cultivated in one’s dream. The flame that generates heat is a central metaphor that signifies conditions for imaginative change-making. As much as it can be dangerous, heat has potential to be restorative and regenerative, because it offers an opportunity for transformation. The power of imagination can set fire to fears and helplessness, creating instead a space for reflection and action. By igniting the flame to un-freeze the bold dreams and aspirations, all limitations symbolised by the coverage of ice can be removed to uncover fertile futures. The strength of a spiritual connection between one’s mission and responsibilities distributes the renewing quality of heat enabling it to penetrate to the deepest layers of one’s calling and free up possibilities for more desirable outcomes.

Imagining, like dreaming, provides a channel to a possible future that is dearly held and deeply cherished. What leaders dreamed up nurtured their imagination and guided their responses through what must have often felt like a lost battle. The vision in which arts are seriously recognised as spiritual food for humanity had a power to melt the ice, which represented all difficulties that new measurement-focused bureaucratic funding regime brought about for artists and arts organisations. These barriers, like the symbolic layer of ice, covered the arts community and locked it in the state of action paralysis extenuated by uncertainty that evoked emotions of distrust and anger towards the funder. A powerful image of a little whispering dream is a reminder of the reality that is possible, as long as it is considered an essential element to sustain the vibrancy of living and depth of human relations. And as long there is bravery and authentic commitment to dreaming and imagining. It is also a necessary assurance for one’s chosen pathway of change-making because the appearance of a dream signals care and concerns for the types of future cultural leaders envisaged would serve humanity. Even a shadow of appearance of what is dreamt can be a powerful inspiration for renewing resources necessary to fight all the battles that stand in the way of realisation of the dreamt reality. This seemed particularly important in the moments of professional doubt, exhaustion and/or exclusion.

Cultural leaders’ experiences retold poetically become a universal story that is likely to resonate with many professionals who have to navigate through ever-increasing complexities and work-related challenges. Writing and pondering on the poem has become an invitation to myself to reflect on my own work context. It made me ask myself multiple questions about vision, values and choices in my professional academic practice, but most of all about my own awareness of the imaginative resource that I can draw from. These are the type of questions that surfaced after my
personal reflection in the light of cultural leaders’ imaginative approach to coping with major dilemmas in their practice:

- What does my imagination dream up?
- What does this dreamt up and imagined reality look like?
- What difference can it make and to whom?
- Which of my professional battles do I have the courage to take up?
- Do I allow myself to be nurtured by all the stuff that I dream up?
- Do I draw on it and treat it as the most powerful resource?
- Do I have the courage to be inspired by the dreamt-up even in the moment of crisis?
- Do I nurture the ‘imagined’ so it continues to nurture me?
- How do I do it and through what means?
- How do I make the imagined an integral part of my professional academic practice?
- How can I share it (and with whom) in my community of practice?
- How do I protect it and against whom?

There are many more questions that could be listed here. They all can help to initiate a thoughtful reflection, particularly around the awareness of the imaginative resources that I can draw on - perhaps more often, perhaps with a greater confidence, and perhaps with a stronger conviction. What emerges as imagined and dreamt-up is often discrete and needs time to crystallise before it can become a powerful and deeply felt vision. Once this crystallisation is achieved, those felt images can become signposts to what really matters. They can trigger a quick access to important personal values and goals, helping to make right choices. This symbolic reminding seems to play a vital part in sustaining focus and professional identity over time. Therefore, making imagining a habit and consciously committing to imaginative reflection in my academic practice is my personal learning from researching cultural leaders. I hope this shared lesson will also inspire You.

REFERENCES


