

A Proposed Job Swap To Save American Capitalism

By Liz Lerman

Do Wall Street executives deserve big bonuses during hard times? Does increased arts funding have a place in an economic stimulus package? I'll leave it to others to debate these controversies. Meanwhile I'd like to make a modest proposal to solve some of our economic problems: Let's do a job swap. We'll put the corporate executives to work as artists while the artists run Wall Street.

Since their first task will be getting economic markets back on solid footing, I'm convinced that artists have the perfect resumès for their new jobs. Here's why:

1. Artists work ridiculous hours for no pay. And most of the artists I know will keep working until they get the job done right.
2. Artists do not need fancy offices. In fact, they usually work in the worst part of town ... until that part of town becomes fancy because the artists are there. Then they have to move because they haven't paid themselves enough to afford the new rent.
3. Artists throw everything they earn back into the store – which is why they haven't paid themselves enough. (I will admit that there was one time I didn't do this. When I was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship back in 2002, I decided to open my first retirement account. I put the money in "very safe" stock market investments. I would have been better off putting it into my next dance.)
4. Artists do not need financial incentives. Artists do the work they do because they love it. Or because they believe in it. Or because they think it is a social necessity for our communities. Or because they know when people make poems or pictures or dances, our best human spirits emerge.
5. Artists do not expect to get anything if they do a bad job. Except maybe a bad review.
6. No artist gets a bonus because there is never enough money at the end of a project.
7. Artists keep very tight budgets. They know how to spend the same penny over and over (not by cooking the books, but by pinching, recycling, borrowing, bartering and plowing their economy-airline frequent-flyer miles back into the next project.)
8. Artists have a rightful reputation for fresh ideas combined with a capacity for self-evaluation that borders on recrimination.
9. Artists play well with others, having evolved highly efficient collaborative techniques in the service of their visions. But they are also very independent, delivering great things even when they work alone.

Meanwhile, in their new capacities as painters, poets, cellists and choreographers, our Wall Street executives might be experiencing a combination of culture shock therapy and ethical boot camp. Artistic practice may force them to discover what they really believe in, because the combination of introspection, discipline and craft that fuels an artist's work (oh, and it is work) puts people in a very demanding state of truth. Doing what artists do every day, some might find themselves in overcrowded classrooms, excited to share their practices to help young people discover that they actually can learn. Others might be sparked to help communities solve problems by bridging differences through the unique power of their art forms. Those who have been lucky enough to get funded for their work will likely be staying up nights, filling out multiple forms to prove the exact use of the money they have been granted. All will find their moral compasses tested as they balance the demanding loyalties of pursuing personal vision and creating value for an audience.

The job swap I propose might have a final payoff: With artists in charge of Wall Street, you might even see people donate to the cause because artists know how to inspire others to participate together, to work for something that matters, to build on the intangibles of the human experience, to make a difference.

Imagine that kind of Wall Street.