

BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Viewpoint: Making the business case for poetry

Apr 13, 2017, 3:52pm EDT

By Steven H. Biondolillo
President, Biondolillo Associates Inc.

According to management consultant and best-selling author Deborah C. Stephens, who studies the human side of business, including the pastimes of executives, I am one of a dozen CEOs she's interviewed over the years who both write and employ poetry as a regular part of staff management and customer relations.

For my part, that means using poetry in meetings, seminars and workshops to foster personal growth, leadership development, and team-building. My job is to set up and present the poems. The team's job is to absorb, analyze and discuss them. Notably, the poems I use would probably not be your Aunt Tillie's favorites:

- **“480 B.C.”** captures the story of the 300 Spartans who saved Western Democracy at the Battle of Thermopylae, and enables a team to dissect the role of leadership in life-and-death situations.
- **“For the Athletes Unsung”** tells the story of the last three individuals cut from the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team, and serves as a reminder that we all contribute to success in enterprises greater than ourselves.
- **“The Man in the Alley”** is a dramatic statement about the governing power of thought, as well as the importance of nurturing one's youthful dreams.

Other poems I've used successfully include ones ranging from the magic of city playgrounds and realities of elite athletics to heartbreaking current events.

You might be asking yourself what any of this has to do with business, staff management or customer relations. The answer that I would offer is ...

everything. If the essence of good management is good communication, and good communication is dependent on language, then workplaces should be full of our culture's most powerful language — language that communicates the most content in the most concise form — poetry.

In the title of an award-winning essay, Dana Gioia — a former advertising executive and chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts — famously asks, “Can Poetry Matter?” As Gioia knew when writing the essay, his rhetorical question had been even more famously answered decades earlier by William Carlos Williams, a medical doctor and poet from Patterson, N.J., who declared: “It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.”

Writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, author John Coleman echoes Gioia. In his article titled "The Benefits of Poetry for Professionals," Coleman makes a compelling case for the use of poetry in the workplace to foster qualitative, creative, and leadership skills. Keep your "colleagues invested with wonder and purpose," Coleman exhorts.

Most would agree that any individual able to operate from a “place” in which he or she feels centered, balanced and whole is likely to be more effective than one who isn't. Most would also agree that at least one of the roles of a CEO, or any manager of human resources, is to create that literal and figurative “place.”

April is National Poetry Month — a very good time to create a “place” for poetry, thereby deepening the dialogue with staff and customers. A recent national study conducted at the University of Arizona reports that individuals who spend more of their day having deep discussions and less of their day making small talk are happier. This study, it could be argued, makes the scientific case for poetry in the workplace.

According to Google, the word “poetry” is searched in the United States over 5 million times per month. Reportedly, it is among the most-searched words online in the English language — a fact that expresses the natural intelligence of a public in search of deeper communication and closer connection in stressful times. Business leaders, then, should consider seizing the facts and answering the call. Poetry. Key it in. There's an astonishing amount there to engage.

Steven H. Biondolillo is the president of Biondolillo Associates Inc., and the author of a volume of poetry titled Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto.