As the financial crisis unfolded, Professor Gary A. Hamel, the James C. Ghosh Professor of Accounting, Economics, and Finance at the Yale School of Management, grew increasingly concerned with what he considered the failure of business education to develop reflective leadership qualities in students. He decided to look to humanism, with the idea that, in thinking, speaking, and writing about value, purpose, and values, the students might better cultivate leadership skills, such as communication and creativity.

Professor Hamel first turned to literature, theater, and film but soon became an enthusiastic proponent of bringing his students to the Yale University Art Gallery to engage with original works of art. Every fall since 2011, he has brought his classes to the museum as part of his innovative seminar Management Leadership and Literature. As a world-renowned accounting theorist and experimental economist, Professor Hamel admits that his expertise ranges more in statistical theory of valuation and design of electronic markets than Abstract Expressionism or classical sculpture, but he is a passionate museum visitor. "Art makes us think," Hamel explains. "It introduces us to new ways of seeing things. That is important because it is all too easy for most of us to fall into familiar ways of thinking about the world around us. New ways of thinking are critical for leadership in management, and sometimes it is easier to see this when we operate outside our own immediate context."

David Ricks, the Bradley Assistant Curator of Academic Affairs, and Melissa Theodore, the Gallery’s former Louis B. and Dorothy Cranston Senior Fellow in the Education Department and current Associate Curator of Programs, a new position funded by Peter and Gerald Kavaler, have worked with Professor Hamel to help his students move away from their comfort zones and encourage them to consider art and artists who have changed the way we see the world. Looking closely at masterpieces from the collection—such as Benjamin West’s monumental historical painting, "A Trip to10tarylowing the Atlantic Ocean with the Duke of Cornwallis" (1779) and Vincent van Gogh’s vivid self-portrait (The Night Café, 1888)—students are given a framework for approaching art. They learn to focus on what they see, begin to develop a vocabulary to discuss their observations, and begin to draw parallels between artistic innovation and leadership in a business context.

Students then select a week in the Gallery’s collection for their own study. At the conclusion of the seminar, they submit an essay and give a presentation in the museum about their chosen work, discussing how it demonstrates an aspect of leadership and how the object helped them to reflect on their own qualities of leadership. As Nicholas Grish, M.B.A. 2013, a recent seminar participant who is now working as a strategist for a technology firm, says, "the final project was thoughtful—providing, engaging, and well outside the conventional notions of business training. More specifically, it highlighted how adding value to business and society requires more than acquiring and distilling isolated sets of information. Tomorrow’s thought leaders must master more nuanced concepts, including interpretation, reflection, and active curiosity."