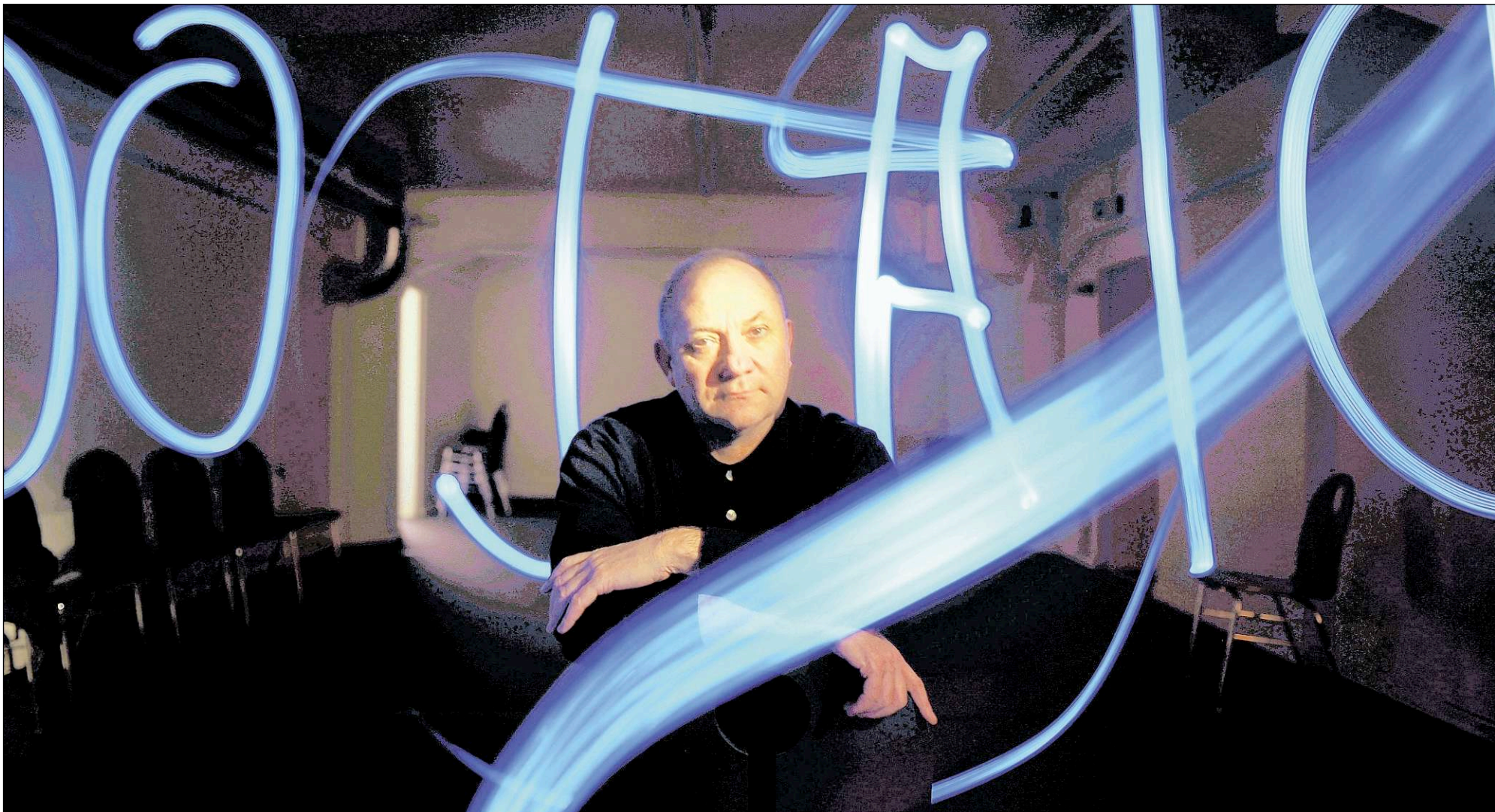


The art of darkness



Dialogue in the Dark takes creative thinking into the corporate arena by teaching the arts of listening and communicating in a group atmosphere – in total darkness – writes **Alanna Gallagher**

TEACHING YOUR STAFF to listen requires a very fine tuning of the ear. Dialogue in the Dark is an immersion in darkness exercise that is the brainchild of social entrepreneur, German-based Dr Andreas Heinecke.

Discover the unseen is Heinecke's *modus operandi*. He has taken the term "blinded by the light" and turned it on his head to create a business workshop environment that is engineered to make staff communicate in a world without pictures. It also creates jobs for those with vision impairments.

In these purse-tightened times, Dialogue in the Dark offers big businesses value for money because participants learn to become active listeners. They will only succeed in their tasks if everyone in their group is in the picture, explains Andreas Heinecke.

The organisation has had a boom in business since the downturn. "Companies were looking for a new orientation and needed a new incentive for both clients and co-workers," he adds.

The premise is thus: A group is led into a darkened space. "Inside it is pitch black, dark like you could never imagine," says Tony Ward, an Irish man with the degenerative eye condition retinitis pigmentosa, who works as one of Dialogue in the Dark's facilitators. "Society's built environments don't cater for people like me," he says. "But in the darkness, I was the person with the advantage and that was very empowering for me."

All facilitators leading the groups have impaired sight. Once inside the participants are furnished with canes – a white stick – to understand how useful a tool it is and to understand its meaning. It also helps minimise accidents.

A one-day darkness session starts by asking the group to reflect on who they are. They also discover what the darkness means to them. All status is challenged, explains Andreas.

Half of the participants will become at ease with their situation. The other half will be scared. It's a psychological setting and a stressful situation, he continues. "Each group is asked to take a



Dialogue in the Dark is 'about learning to listen – and to admit to not understanding, if you don't', says Dr Andreas Heinecke (top)

seat, but you can't see where the seating is – much less the fact that there are also tables. There is a lot of bumping into each other."

Each member of the group then has to arrange themselves in alphabetical order, clockwise round the table. It starts off as chaos but we underestimate the speed at which everyone adapts, says Heinecke adding: "You get to know who's on your left, your right and who the leader is."

Then you're asked to build a rainbow using 11 half-circles. These are designed to fit into each other in increasing size and order of colour. In the darkness, you have to try to arrange the colours in the order they appear on the rainbow, but you're not allowed to touch any of the pieces except your own, Andreas explains.

"The exercise is all about communication. The

group has to agree to the order of the rainbow pieces and is only given one attempt to get it right. Ninety-five per cent of people fail this exercise because they effectively fail to describe their piece a way the rest of the group can process and understand." One might mention height, another width and another diameter. They have to understand what each of the group is saying, Heinecke points out adding: "This is about learning to listen – and to admit to not understanding, if you don't."

The task translates really well into the business world, where conference calls are the most expedient way of intra-office communication. "Where you're physically separated, how do you know that the eight other people on the call have understood what it is you ask of them?" asks Andreas.

The rainbow exercise is not about colour, but

communication. "Sometimes our content is too complex and we assume others understand," he says. Dialogue in the Dark is changing communication culture. "We're creating a more creative and better workforce, who've been humbled by their experience."

A leader is lost if he doesn't get feedback, Heinecke continues. What's key to understanding this concept is the fact that "you don't have any visual insurance so you have to be able to communicate successfully and in these instances up to 90 per cent of participants don't".

The journey into darkness takes you from being in control to being uncertain and scared to regaining control – generating, en route, a wonderful sense of cohesion within the group.

Allianz Global Investors is one corporation that has embraced the DITD thinking, and its tutelage now forms part of their overall training programme. "The feedback we've received from Allianz is that it's the best training they've ever done," says Heinecke.

"They've just realised the added value a vision impaired person can bring to their organisation and they're now actively looking to recruit vision impaired and deaf employees," he says.

In some instances, they've already succeeded. "While some people have been surprised by the company offering such a bold programme, they realise that it adds enormous human value to their structure – it's not just about cold figures," Heinecke rationalises.

On Dialogue in the Dark workshops, participants learn empathy, says Heinecke. "Through that, there is human and social appreciation of the other, creating a 'we' rather than an 'I' corporate hierarchy."

■ Dialogue in the Dark is a platform for communication and a close exchange, provoking a change in perspectives. Corporate training days cost from €15,000 per day, with some places still available on forthcoming weekend workshops in London. For more details see dialogue-in-the-dark.com or tel: 0049-403 096 3471