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CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

A woman with dark, curly hair is looking intently at a string of cards hanging from a line. The cards are clipped to the line with clothespins. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an indoor setting with other people and structures.

AUDIENCE & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 2018

AUDIENCE BUILDING/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES AS CHANGE AGENTS

While many continue to look for new operating models or promote the idea of disruptive change in the nonprofit arts sector, one area of practice has been quietly changing the way that organizations operate. When we started to look at the body of work around audience building/community engagement, we were encouraged to see organizations embracing new ways of working around these priorities. It is notable how many organizations began the work expecting to change their communities and ended up transforming themselves in the process.

Most organizations do not initially engage in audience building/community engagement in order to transform their organizational structure or practice. Rather, this work usually arises from a desire to address a perceived need – either a financial one in terms of increasing earned revenues or a mission one in terms of engaging targeted communities. While the initial impetus may not be organizational change, often one of the most striking impacts of these initiatives is the changes they effect in an organization's culture, programs and relationships. In some cases, this change is truly transformational.

In fact, for many funded projects, the impact of the work on the artists and organizations involved was equally or more significant than the impact on community members. In these cases, it could be said 'We set out to change them but realized in the process that we were really changing ourselves.' In some of the most strikingly successful initiatives, organizational reports speak of transformation of perspective or identity for the organizations and their artist partners.

INTEGRATION OF EQUITY, DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND ACCESS VALUES.

As we look at the practice of audience building/community engagement, it is clear that, intentionally or not, this work is fundamentally linked to EDIA values. Many funding programs both prioritize and attract applications focused on engaging historically disconnected community members. Community engagement helps to shift the power dynamic in relationships between institution and individual, offering a means to start to dismantle some of the historic barriers and systemic inequities that exist. As organizations establish relationships with new communities, they often become aware of different perspectives, built trust and began to value community input. This new awareness makes its way into organizations through changes in structure, relationships, programming and planning.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE.

Audience building/community engagement is work that requires dedicated time and effort. It is human resource intensive work. As organizations embrace these practices, the most common structural change is the addition of new positions to manage relationships and develop programs. Adding these new positions is not simply a matter of tucking someone new into the marketing or education department as this does not fully reflect the whole organization commitment to the work or the mission priority that it takes on. As a result, other structural changes may follow such as the development of a new department to focus on engagement activities or the establishment of a cross-departmental portfolio to coordinate activities organization-wide.

RELATIONSHIPS.

Changes in how and with whom an organization builds relationships may also emerge from a commitment to this work. Instead of focusing only on partners with financial resources, organizations tend to see new possibilities and start to embrace working with more grassroots organizations and leaders who bring networks and experience with community engagement. The work also opens up a broader range of potential partners as practitioners look beyond arts-based collaborators to other sectors. Further, the nature of these relationships tends to differ from traditional transactional partnerships to sustained connections featuring resource sharing, co-leadership, a commitment to learning and ongoing communication. Building these longer-term relationships for mutual benefit becomes a priority when organizations see themselves as part of a larger system.

PROGRAMMING & PLANNING.

Perhaps the most significant changes that come about as organizations shift into greater awareness of and connection to their audiences and communities are changes in planning and programming. When plans and programs start to reflect new perspectives or values, change is taking hold in the organization. This may be something as significant as a transformation of the kind of work that is seen on stage and the types of artists who are engaged in that work but it also might be a shift in the schedule or timing of events to accommodate community needs or the addition of programming elements around the primary artistic programming to provide context or make space for dialog.

One of the interesting aspects of studying the nature of organizational change instigated by audience building/community engagement is that it provides a greater understanding of how change proceeds in organizations in general. In this way, learning from the process of engagement and change may provide the means for organizations to consciously pursue change in other ways and in other areas of their operations.

PERHAPS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGES THAT COME ABOUT AS ORGANIZATIONS SHIFT INTO GREATER AWARENESS OF AND CONNECTION TO THEIR AUDIENCES AND COMMUNITIES ARE CHANGES IN PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING. WHEN PLANS AND PROGRAMS START TO REFLECT NEW PERSPECTIVES OR VALUES, CHANGE IS TAKING HOLD IN THE ORGANIZATION.

EMERGENCE & ADAPTIVE CHANGE.

The approach to change varies across programs, ranging from those shaped by theories of change (Building Demand) to those rooted in emergent change (Innovation Labs for the Performing Arts).

The nature and process of change was particularly fundamental to the EmcArts Innovation Labs. The very premise of this program is developing and disseminating a process to support adaptive change in organizations. They distinguish between processes that help address “complex” challenges (where an unprecedented adaptive response is needed) and those that are focused on “complicated” challenges (where incremental changes and technical improvements are typically sufficient). EmcArts has written effectively about the process of organizational change in their publication “*Somewhere Becoming Rain: Adaptive Change is the Future of the Arts*”.

Regardless of whether change is directed or emergent, it is almost always the case in these initiatives that change proceeds not as a singular large leap but rather as a series of small iterative changes over time.

CHANGE FROM OUTSIDE IN OR FROM INSIDE OUT.

The change within organizations proceeds in different ways in different organizations - sometimes starting at the center of the organization and working out, other times launching at the organizational fringes (or with artist and community partners) and working in. What we have learned is that organizations can and do integrate change successfully regardless of where it begins as long as new ideas are allowed to develop and not shut down by the status quo. Anyone, no matter their position, hoping to make changes in their organization with regard to the relationships and approach to community can affect that change if they are able to build a critical mass of support around a new idea or approach.

QUESTIONS & CONSIDERATIONS

- ❓ Are there solutions to the diversity and equity challenges of the field to be found in the body of work around audience building/community engagement? How can we expand these approaches throughout the sector?
- ❓ What can we learn about the conditions for and process of organizational change from audience building/community engagement work?
- ❓ How sustainable do these changes prove to be over time? Are there ways to ensure ongoing change and/or to build cultures of change within organizations?



Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company – Connectivity

Connectivity started as an exploration of how Woolly could fulfil its two core founding goals of aesthetic innovation & experimentation and asking hard questions about American moral values, behavior and politics as the organization shifted its operations to a new center-city home in the mid-2000s. It turned out to be the company's most successful attempt to make the case for the civic relevance of the work on their stage. Connectivity linked community programming directly to performances through:

1. Intentionally designing the audience for each show
2. Finding the hot point of intersection between the artist's inspiration and the community's interests and concerns
3. Building a total audience experience

Connectivity is an ongoing process for Woolly. This profile captures a moment in what is an evolving body of work. What was particularly significant about the initiative was that it was adopted as a fully integrated strategy across the entire enterprise, and positioned as a stand-alone senior level department with a director. For Woolly the strategy not only contributed to the vitality and diversity of their audience, it also resolved the mission duality of aesthetic and civic and gave everyone in the organization a deeper sense of purpose.

[Learn more about Connectivity in the case study](#) →

[Learn about Woolly Mammoth and their work](#) →

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation has worked with five re-granting partners to support the exploration and implementation of new ideas in audience building and community engagement. Since 2001, the foundation has supported almost 60 rounds of funding in nine different funding programs. These programs, in addition to the foundation's own *Building Demand for the Arts*, include Dance/USA's *Engaging Dance Audiences*, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters' *Creative Campus* and later *Building Bridges*, National Performance Network's *Performance Residency Fund* (now *Artistic Engagement Fund*) and *Community Fund*, Theatre Communication Group's *Future Audiences* and later *Audience (R)Evolution* and EmcArts' *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*.

Through these programs, more than 300 projects have been supported involving more than 220 performing arts presenters, producers, universities and service organizations in thirty-five states and DC. The total financial investment in this work exceeds \$42 Million.

This series of articles shares the learning from this body of work and recognizes the considerable contributions of the foundation's grantmaking partners and the commitment and creativity of the artists and organizations who have continued to advance audience building and community engagement through initiatives undertaken with the support of these granting programs.



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