




CREATIVE COURAGE

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES TO BUILD
RESILIENCE AND VITALITY IN
PERFORMING ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

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Introduction

With the performing arts field reeling from a historic economic crisis in the US, 12 mid- to senior-level leaders representing a diverse set of arts organizations across the nation came together under the banner of the Leadership Development Institute. The Institute, sponsored by the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, was designed to develop our individual and collective capacity. The focus was on building resilient visions and missions that could adapt and endure through challenging times. Looking to both learn from the past and to craft a new narrative about what is needed going forward, we experimented within our individual practices and together built valuable knowledge for the field. This report captures our learning and serves as an invitation to join us in building stronger organizations with greater impact.

At the core of this work was a shared research question:

How can we, from our leadership positions, engage our organizations to embody our missions and foster resilience?

A critical component of this question is that it emphasizes personal responsibility and efficacy. The goal was not to provide theoretical advice to others about what should be done but rather to discover what we could do, right here, right now. And, in so doing, we uncovered insights that individuals up and down an organizational hierarchy can use to strengthen their organizations.

We worked together to answer this question and generate the insights shared in this report through a facilitated process of **Collaborative Inquiry (CI)**. The CI process centers on cycles of action and reflection through which a group of practitioners asks and answers a question of shared relevance and burning interest to them in their practice. The action cycles involve participants running experiments in their own work to generate data that the whole group analyzes together in reflection cycle meetings. Our group met four times over the course of eight months and conducted four cycles of action and reflection.

Collaborative Inquiry is a unique and dynamic methodology that encourages the kind of reflection and practices that are central to fostering resilient arts organizations. Four key characteristics of the CI process were particularly meaningful to our group:

- **Grounding us in practice rather than theoretical discussion.** Because CI focuses on working and finding answers within our own organizations, it forced us into action. We experimented with, and modeled, behavior that began to answer our question in the real world.
- **Placing us in the position of being experts.** Rather than looking to outside experts and seeking existing solutions, we were put in a position of authority to discover our own best answers. This was critical to both our question and the process, as there are no experts with ready answers for the challenging environment in which we currently operate. We are all looking for solutions, regardless of our leadership positions within any given organization.
- **Creating an environment of healthy dis-equilibrium.** Because CI work is messy and requires courage, we were asked to trust one another and the process in significant ways. There were many points when the group felt lost and had to negotiate its own next steps, often taking a leap of faith. Many of us are experiencing this dis-equilibrium in our own organizations and have learned that it encourages continued experimentation and innovation over time.
- **Creating a deep sense of personal accountability.** The CI process put each and every one of us “on the hook,” forcing us to take action in our own organizations, modeling the very behavior that we examined in answering our question. We didn’t have the luxury of looking at something from afar, but rather we had to dig in and test our hunches to see if they held true.

The alchemy of trust, self-authorization and active experimentation within our program led to discoveries that have significant implications for our field.

The work began with reflections on our own experience—looking closely at what brought us to the work in the first place and what moves us now to do our best work. We augmented those reflections with a series of readings about mission and vision, resiliency, strategy, and leadership. The final component of our initial inquiry work was an audit. We completed an internal audit of our current organization, its mission and vision, and the ways in which the mission and vision are demonstrated in the organization’s work. We also conducted an external audit of organizations with which we had a particularly powerful arts experience. In the external audit, we asked leaders about their mission and vision and their relationship to the organization’s work. The shared inquiry question and an early sense of five areas for experimentation (arts experiences, values, Safe Space, risk taking and failure, and community engagement) were born out of these initial efforts.

Through the next two action and reflection cycles, we tested and refined strategies in these areas to generate the four experimental practices outlined in the rest of this report:

1. Encouraging everyone to experience the power of the arts;
2. Surfacing and sharing individual and collective values;
3. Facilitating Safe Space for free exchange of information and Courageous Conversations; and
4. Creating opportunities for experimentation and learning.

Participant Reflection

There was a power in being able to sit with a question for eight months in a peer-driven learning environment and reflect deeply. The process went well beyond the standard professional development model. Surveying our conference room in which fully engaged professionals (seated in a circle) utilized creative approaches to problem-solving and team building, I began to imagine what it would be like if all corporate board rooms looked like this! The arts can (and do) offer powerful tools to those working both inside and outside our field.



How can we engage our organizations to embody our missions and foster resilience?

Leadership Practice 1

Encourage everyone involved in the organization to experience the power of the arts

Arts professionals who practice and experience first hand the power of the arts = Arts professionals who are more attuned and passionate about their organization's mission and are more resilient. More attuned and passionate arts professionals = Resilient organizations that embody their mission statements.

While searching for ways to encourage our organizations to enliven their missions and foster resilience, our dialogue often included words or phrases such as “creativity,” “artistic,” “passion for the arts” and “spiritual connection.” We were seeking that difficult-to-explain connection that happens between the audience and those incredible moments in the theater. We wanted to find a way to “bottle” that experience and allow it to infuse our organizations with energy, power and purpose. The very center of our organizations, their purpose for being, is far too often something we do not commit enough time to as staff and

Board members: seeing the art and talking about it. As a result, we researched this hunch: Would a more methodical, conscious, purposeful commitment to “experiencing the power of the arts” help find the answer to our question? Was this too obvious a guess, or were we all so close to the work that we couldn't see that the arts themselves might be the answer?

The Practice in Depth

Keeping vivid and moving arts experiences alive in our daily work can be a challenge. That “art spark” diminishes quickly as staff members experience day-to-day challenges from limited resources to frustrating sales numbers and a lack of good communication—all of which wear on their spirit and energy. It is clear that leaders need to remember to take care of themselves. Our readings revealed that this depleted self energy is a challenge in many different fields. However, arts professionals are particularly susceptible because so much of our work is about justifying our existence and serving the needs of others before our own (i.e., caregiver fatigue). At this time when morale is low from layoffs and the cost of hiring new employees is so high, it may be a smart investment to nurture our human resources.

In our own organizations we have the very thing that can renew the spirit and give back energy: the arts. We also have colleagues with whom to speak about those experiences. This practice could perhaps bring energy and spirit to the staff themselves, which, in turn, would bring energy, passion and resilience to our organizations. As we tested approaches to formalizing this practice in our organizations, we developed insights into its application.

Personal experience. Focusing more on personal experiences with the performing arts brings leaders closer in tune with the impact of the arts in their community. Arts leaders can become cut off from the power of the arts as they work on handling crises and dealing with daily tasks. By realigning focus and building in time and permission for experiences, leaders get back in the “flow,” where they can make better decisions and model behavior for colleagues.



Reluctance to discuss the art. Invitations to discuss arts experiences can frequently be met with personal apprehension, mistrust and skepticism. Perhaps it is not surprising that stepping outside job routines and communication norms can produce a certain level of discomfort. But this apprehension points to a problem within our field: arts leaders may not be bringing their whole selves to the work. A field that is immersed in the performing arts should encourage creativity and expression rather than produce reluctance in talking about experiences with the arts. There is another dimension to this issue too. Arts leaders can experience “expert anxiety”—a feeling that if one is not expert in a particular genre, or if he or she doesn’t have the appropriate language

to express their thoughts about the work, their observations don’t have merit.

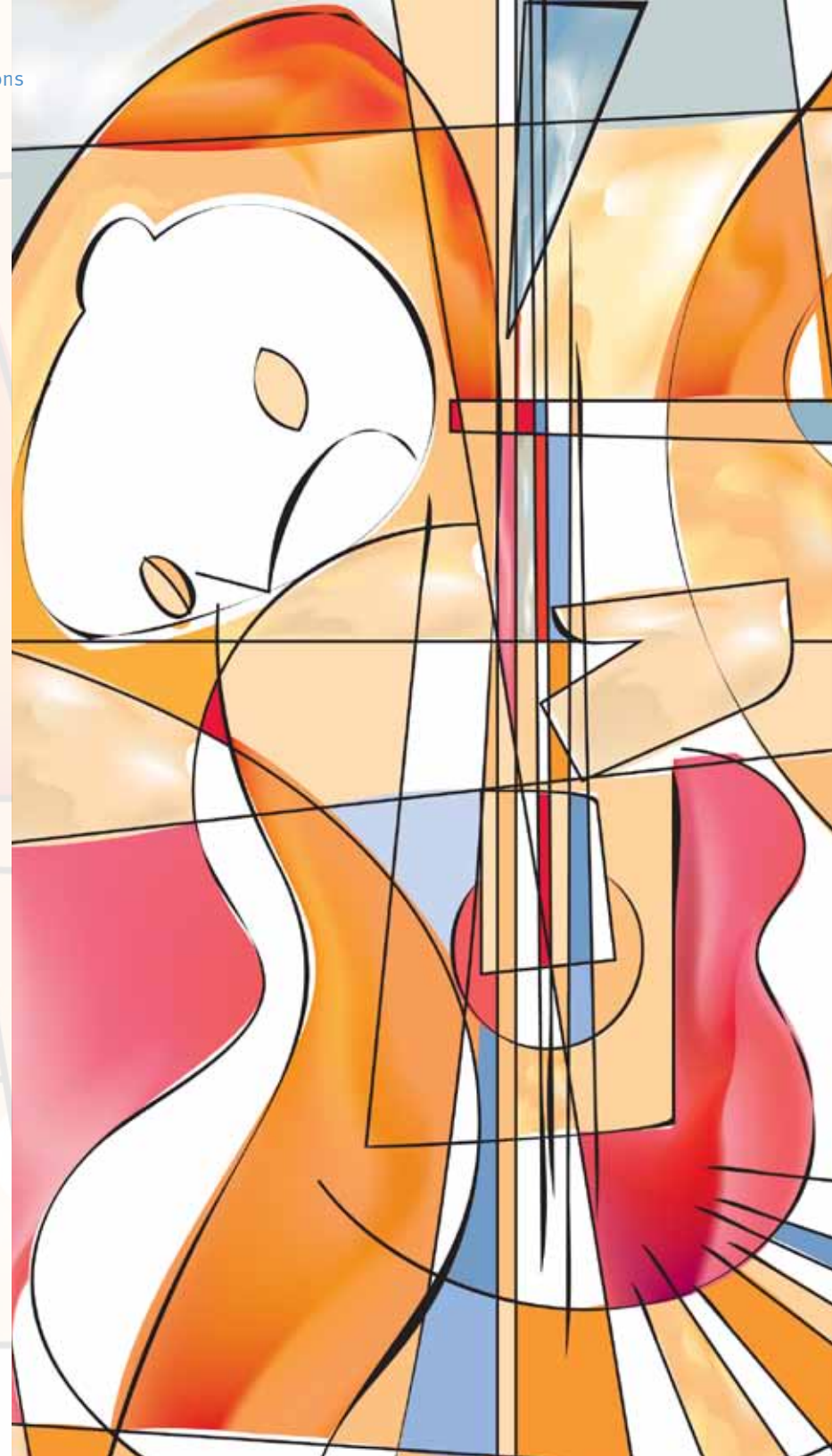
Fear. As arts leaders it is critical to overcome our own fear of sharing. Leaders will never break out of their habits if they do not make a concerted effort. Being a leader is more than just delegating, attending meetings and wishing things could be different. It means taking action, no matter how vulnerable one feels. And leading by example is the first step.

Ultimately, whatever someone’s individual leadership position is, we have the power to shift the energy within our departments, offices and meetings. If we are more positive, alive, present and creative, we can embody our organization’s mission by encouraging others to experience the arts and to engage in dialogue about those experiences.

We chose to highlight this practice first because we experienced it as the hub that holds the other practices together. While there are interconnections among all the practices, it is the experience of the arts that creates a greater whole and provides the potential for transformative impact.

Participant Reflection

For me, sitting on the edge of my seat—my feet not touching the ground—at a Nutcracker performance at five years of age, I was mesmerized by the movement, colors, music and knew I wanted this to be my world forever. I still have moments in the theater that are reasons to wake up in the morning and solve our organizational issues—because when great art is on the stage, I feel goose bumps, my heart beats faster and I am lost in the moment.



Tools for Implementation

We offer five tools for highlighting the importance of the arts:

1. Integrate arts moments. Incorporate “arts moments” into Board, staff and committee meetings. Borrowed and adapted from a fellow LDI colleague’s organization, an “arts moment” is a practice of infusing meetings with a taste of the performing arts. “Arts moments” include playing music, showing video clips or discussing performance experiences prior to the start of business.

2. Be an audience member. Become more disciplined about personally experiencing the performing arts from an audience member’s perspective rather than solely from an administrative capacity. To do this, set a goal to see more performing arts than in the past. This goal, of course, will be relative to the current practice of an arts leader. Any increase, especially in “experiencing” the arts as an audience member (not running in to the performance for a moment, only to return to a pressing matter), will create a shift in perspective.

3. Model the behavior. As a leader in your organization, share your personal thoughts, feelings and observations about your performing arts experiences with your colleagues and/or acquaintances.

4. Invite others. Invite others to share their personal experiences with the performing arts; as a leader in the organization, structure times for these exchanges to occur.

5. Leverage technology. Use social media, e-mail, and YouTube as platforms to experience art, encourage others to experience art and invite dialogue. “Small” arts moments viewed in clips can build virally among staff and ripple from desk to desk, helping focus energy on the arts incrementally. If that is the way your office connects, it is a viable tool to remind staff of the value of seeing, hearing and feeling the art generated in our world. It also creates a mini-break to refresh thinking and refocus on collective goals.

We strongly recommend documentation through journaling or other means to those undertaking this practice.

Sustaining the Practice

After the first cycle of actions, we spent time reflecting on what it would take to permanently sustain the changes in perspective we saw as a result of using the tools we have described. While these strategies require additional research and testing, we offer the following suggestions for using this practice to achieve lasting change:

- The practice of encouraging everyone involved to experience the power of the arts must be viewed as integral and not extracurricular.
- Incorporate the expectation that staff members will experience the performing arts into hiring practices and job descriptions. This needs to be relative to the particular staff position; however, all staff members of arts organizations should have some expectation that they will see the work the organization presents or produces.
- The leader of the organization must set the example by seeing the work, encouraging others to see it, and encouraging and setting aside time to discuss the work.
- There is a need in our field for the development of “Arts Criticism 101” training and resources to educate people, but also to provide a balance between intellectualism and inclusiveness. Our national and/or regional presenting service organizations could take up this challenge. Our organizations could also bring in experts to discuss various art forms and the ways to understand and talk about them, which would be a great benefit to both audiences and staff.

Participant Reflection

My Board Chair and I formed a committee to conduct an in-depth analysis of the theater’s finances, programming, services and facility usage in response to the economic crisis. This analysis would inform our future programming choices and address our unsustainable financial situation... pretty heavy stuff.

Prior to one of our meetings, I asked the committee members to join me at a sold-out student matinee performance. The committee members and I experienced the energy of 700+ students visibly captivated by live theater. The members were absolutely giddy as we left the performance and went back to our meeting space. Taking the time to experience the power of the arts didn’t solve our problems, but it did ground us in our organization’s reason for existence, framing and informing the difficult work ahead.



Leadership Practice 2

Surface and share individual and collective values

Values are at the core of understanding individuals and at the core of individuals understanding the organization.

Early in our inquiry process, we spent meaningful time getting to know one another and exploring the motivations, commitments and values we bring to this work. As a result, we were able to build trust very quickly and begin working as a learning team based on what we saw as a common agenda and shared set of values. Values were at the core of our understanding of one another. Further, our readings not only familiarized us with the current body of knowledge about missions, visions, resilience and organizational excellence, but also lifted up the importance of having a values-driven strategy. We started to wonder: how many of our organizations had written values statements? How many people within our organizations knew where those statements originated? We wondered what impact it would have on our own organizations if we seeded conversations about values—conversations that were not currently taking place.

The Practice in Depth

The practice of surfacing and sharing individual and collective values allows staff members within the organization to identify their own values and to explore how their own values do or do not fit within the organization. Engaging individuals in identifying the values that ultimately embody the mission also creates resilient organizations.

Having formal values statements is not a prerequisite for engaging in this practice. By seeding these conversations, you will find that there are “hunches” as to what the organizational values are, even if they are not formally written. One productive result of the practice can be a clearer articulation of the shared values the organization holds dearest.

Whether or not an organization has a formal values statement or articulated set of core values, there are three primary benefits to engaging in values conversations.

First, you can discover a greater link between individual values and the values of the organization in a way that reinforces staff ties to the organization. More clearly articulating this link and making it explicit for staff helps to clarify direction and build commitment.

Second, by initiating these conversations, leaders are able to create higher-level thinking from all areas within the organization. Practicing values conversations facilitates organizational understanding and gets new staff members up-to-speed faster by providing much of the substance of “teachable moments.” Adding a discussion of organizational values as a contextual layer in typical managerial delegation is a natural extension of this practice. Doing so lays the groundwork for mid- and entry-level staff to begin to think at a higher level about their work and to better understand their jobs in the context of the entire organization. High-level thinking leads to a sense of empowerment and broadens one’s sense of the organization as a whole. These conversations also yield benefits for managers, who gain a greater understanding of their staff.

Third, when done well, values conversations enable leaders to hold up a mirror to the organization in a safe environment, illustrating where there are gaps that need to be addressed.

Participant Reflection

The most immediately useful practice for me has been using values concepts with new hires to stress organizational values and to provide a richer introduction to our organizational culture. I believe it has helped our organization to maintain its standards through personnel changes. I have found injecting organizational values into instruction accelerates the pace of learning and helps new hires more easily predict both the likely organizational response to new issues and the likely range of organizational viewpoints on creative endeavors such as advertising and copy writing. In general this communication tool has helped new employees understand our traditions and practices in a deeper way earlier in their tenure, and I hope it will enable constructive changes to happen sooner.

Sustaining the Practice

By integrating values conversations into new staff orientations, leaders can create longer term change and sustain the practice of focusing on organizational values. While we experimented with having conversations about values during the interview process, we found this to be premature and less productive because of the pressures involved in an interview context. However, it is entirely appropriate to start as early as the orientation process. It is important not to make this a one-way communication about values but instead to use the tools outlined above to create a space for reflective dialogue that enables people to connect their own values to the organization in a meaningful way.

There is a direct link between the practice of surfacing and sharing values and the next practice we discuss—fostering Safe Space and Courageous Conversations. Once people feel deeply understood—that someone has taken time to understand the values they bring to their work—and see alignment between their individual values and the shared values of the organization, they are more likely to feel a connectedness to the organization that can serve as a foundation for building Safe Space. Engaging in this practice, therefore, brings with it serious responsibilities. While these conversations can create buy-in and a sense of openness and safety, you cannot ask people to discuss values and then not do anything with the results. There is also a link back to the first practice of encouraging arts experiences. Through the practice of talking about values, an organization can communicate the emphasis it places on appreciation of—and personal connection to—the arts.

Tools for Implementation

The core tool we developed to facilitate values conversations is an interview and small group dialogue process. This process involves at least four phases:

1. One-on-one interviews. In these initial conversations, leaders engage with individuals at all levels of an organization to explore the values they bring to their work, the personal values they see reflected in the organization, and those values they bring that they do not see in the organization.

2. Data summary and analysis. To discover patterns as well as critical points of misalignment, leaders organize the results of individual conversa-

tions and remove any markers of identity so the results can be shared in a collective and anonymous way with the interviewees.

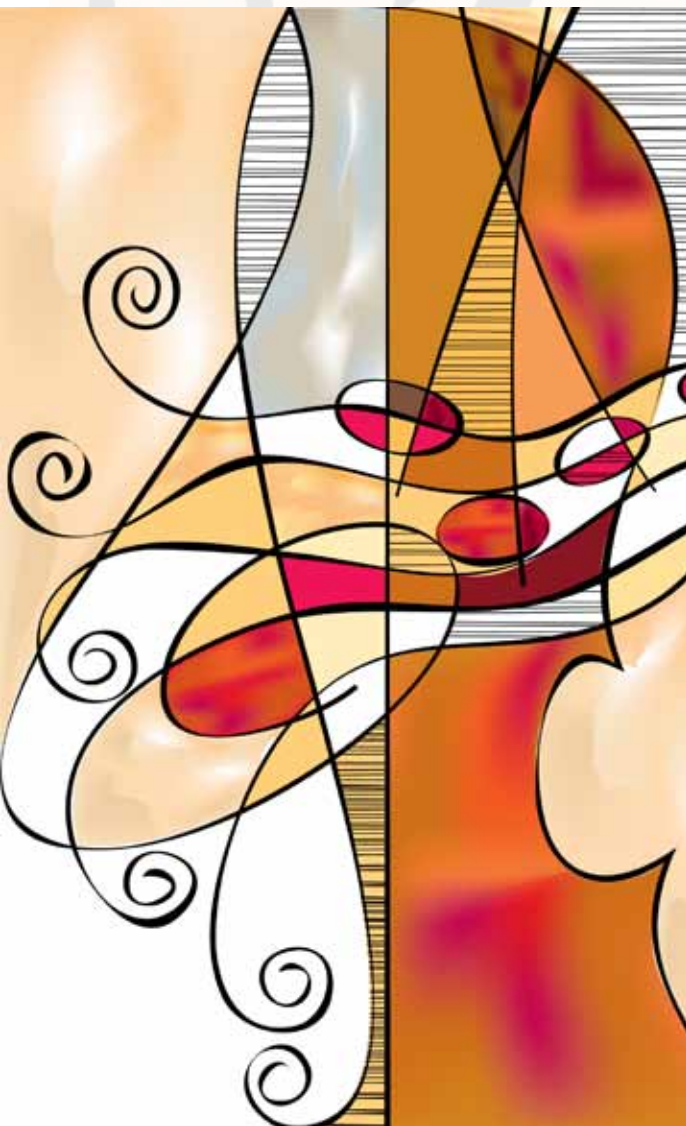
3. Small group dialogue. Once the interview data have been compiled and organized, it is productive to bring the interviewees together to collectively make sense of what they see in the results. They will uncover patterns and insights into organizational dynamics that the interviewer may never have seen.

4. Scaling up. To fully leverage the impact of the values conversations, leaders can widen the circle of people involved in the dialogue until it involves the whole staff and potentially the Board as well. This can be done by taking everyone through the preceding three steps in different configurations, or it can be accomplished much more quickly if there is already a certain level of safety at the organization by bringing the results to an all-staff meeting and engaging everyone in reflecting on the findings and bringing their own sense of values to enhance the conversation.

Before engaging in this process, it is advisable to consider your purpose for the practice and what you will do with the results. While there may be many reasons for introducing values conversations into the workplace, we identified three primary goals the process can serve:

- To create an organizational vision statement;
- To orient new staff and Board members; or
- To reevaluate organizational direction and strategy.





Leadership Practice 3

Facilitate “Safe Space” for the free exchange of information and “Courageous Conversations”

If we could foster Safe Spaces for candid communication about tough issues, then the organization would be able to support collaborative work and creative thinking, which could, in turn, result in a staff and Board that are excited by and ready to “live” the organization’s mission.

When seeking the answer to our question, we often returned to the difficult fact that we do not take the time and space to really communicate with our colleagues. How can we begin to bring our missions alive or create solutions if we can’t, or don’t, practice open, creative dialogue in our organizations? We will only continue to be locked in our same mindsets and behaviors, which, in turn, create no real change.

Throughout our inquiry we discovered how open, respectful, equitable dialogue, with active listening at the center, resulted in powerful idea-building, strong collaborative thinking and knowledge sharing. This type of communication in an organization supports collaborative work and creative thinking, resulting in a staff and Board that are excited by and ready to “live” the organization’s mission and are prepared to find creative solutions to problems.

The Practice in Depth

Two key factors drive our ability to facilitate open communication: “Safe Space” and “Courageous Conversations.”

Safe Space. Safe Space is a physical, mental and emotional environment free of typical organizational or interpersonal threats including: hierarchy, defensiveness, positioning and selective information sharing. Safe Space allows all staff members, regardless of role, to be open and honest, addressing topics that would otherwise be “off limits” in a normal organizational environment.

The practice of creating Safe Space involves consciously shifting or modifying physical, mental or emotional environments to allow for deep trust and open, two-way communication. This shift may be made possible through the dedication of a physical place, enlisting new communication tools, or scheduling specific time. By fostering Safe Space, all staff members have a voice and are empowered to participate in a free exchange of information and initiate Courageous Conversations that tackle big issues and have meaningful organizational impact.



Courageous Conversations. Courageous Conversations are free exchanges of information and ideas relating to difficult organizational or interpersonal topics. Courageous Conversations involve a certain amount of fear or uncertainty, require an element of frankness or bravery, and ideally rely on the use of Safe Space to be successful.

The practice of facilitating Courageous Conversations can involve various techniques (later illustrated) but always employ the following components:

- A purposeful request for dialogue,
- Creation of Safe Space for dialogue to take place, and
- A set of appropriate communication tools that ensure dialogue is open and multi-directional.

Measuring the impact and success of a single Courageous Conversation is subjective but, over time, Courageous Conversations are meant to create both incremental and seismic organizational shifts by fundamentally changing the exchange of information and style of communication.

Participant Reflection

One example of a particularly powerful Courageous Conversation [I had] was with a direct report about an interdepartmental communication and behavior problem. Before this inquiry, I would have likely chosen to take a more comfortable position, addressing the issue indirectly by focusing on the behavior that I wanted to cultivate, taking back some of her responsibilities, and limiting her exposure to the department in question. What I did instead was take the much more uncomfortable and direct position of sitting down, going through all of the grievances, expressing my deep concern and discussing not only the problem but also a path toward the needed solution.

Even though it was difficult, I felt deeply empowered by addressing the situation directly. This exchange facilitated a number of unexpected outcomes that would have never otherwise been possible:

- I learned about my report's blind spots and how to best manage them.
- It provided a meaningful moment of learning that will greatly serve this person's professional life.
- It created accountability for actions in a new way rather than leaving me to carry the burden of the problem.
- I now receive emails asking for counsel about tricky situations.
- We have come up with strategies for self-monitoring.
- It eliminated a problem rather than limiting it.
- Overall, there is a deeper sense of trust and openness when issues arise.

Tools for Implementation

We offer four tools to facilitate Safe Space and Courageous Conversations:

1. Check-in daily. Each day, ideally at the beginning of the workday, staff should engage in informal discussion with colleagues, lasting no more than a few minutes. This can include inquiring about their family, home life and interests outside of work. This sets the tone for promoting a true understanding of colleagues' interests, needs and challenges beyond their roles as administrators and creates a fraternal environment. Please note that daily check-ins are different from staff check-ins where staff give administrative updates.

2. Lead story circles. A story circle is a dynamic process where people gather in small groups to reflect and respond to questions regarding their individual experiences. The story circle is both an effective method to recover personal history and an important tool to build relationships that will ultimately foster better understanding and communication among staff members and the community they serve. The story circle is meant to help people better relate to each other, build relationships through understanding and communication, and address issues impacting your work. In order for the story circle to be effective, everyone is deemed an equal partner and must demonstrate respect for one another by minimizing distractions and not leaving the circle once it has started. They must also practice active listening, including making eye contact and avoiding judgment including negative facial expressions, body language or sounds that indicate disinterest or disapproval. The story circle method proves very effective when staff members are willing participants and are able to

engage in this methodology before structured gatherings (such as staff meetings).

3. Share information. Whether working in smaller or larger organizations, many staff members are prone to share information on a need-to-know basis. Information sharing should happen as part of the regular work process. Sharing of information should take place outside of required forums (i.e., staff meetings) and away from the computer. Sharing of information can be informal and should be interpersonal, promoting a sense of fluid communication between all staff. Ultimately, leaders should create an environment conducive for conversation. A policy or guide on how information should be communicated in your office and among staff can be helpful. This can be posted somewhere in the office or distributed as part of your HR manual.

4. Observe, assess and monitor communications tone. Often people are unaware of the tone they use when communicating. Practicing an even and pleasant tone can create an easier environment for facilitating Courageous Conversations. In assessing your communication style, a self audit can be useful. Create a follow-up checklist on how you handled a situation or communicated with someone. Use the following questions to help assess your communication style:

- Did I use eye contact?
- Did I participate in active listening?
- Was my tone confrontational or agreeable?
- Did I allow other parties to speak without interrupting them?

Sustaining the Practice

We offer the following suggestions for making Safe Space and Courageous Conversations an ongoing part of an organization's practice:

- Create self-empowerment or self-authorization crib notes to remind yourself and others to proactively look for leadership openings in facilitating Safe Space, better communication and Courageous Conversations.
- Develop a communications toolkit that is shared with staff via a workshop environment and refreshed every 6-12 months.
- Use Safe Space/Courageous Conversation techniques at existing meetings (staff meetings, retreats, etc.).
- Adjust the physical environment (by creating a dedicated space, a new collaborative area or alternate meeting locations) to both launch Safe Space/Courageous Conversations and serve as a reminder for continuing this work.
- Create a Safe Space/Courageous Conversations "manifesto" that staff sign on to as part of their work environment.
- Incorporate Safe Space and Courageous Conversations into performance reviews to solidify the importance of both.
- Build a Safe Space/Courageous Conversation plan into each staff person's yearly personal and professional goals and create an expectation of auditing progress, reassessing and adjusting regularly.
- Give each staff member the opportunity to develop their own "best practices" and share with others in the office.



Leadership Practice 4

Create opportunities for experimentation and learning

The arts have embraced a corporate business model for many years, while corporations have been busy changing the way they structure their work to embrace a more creative way of working. We need to lead with what we do best—creative, cross-departmental work and building innovative solutions to the challenges we face.

Early in our inquiry process we read several articles from the business literature that revealed the ways in which corporate culture was shifting toward the use of more creative practices and emphasized the importance of experimentation, risk taking and learning. These readings prompted one participant to share a story of how he introduced a small experiment in his own organization that led to a much more creative environment. His story sparked a broader discussion about how to create conditions that encourage experimentation and in which failure is not an end point but rather an opportunity for learning. (Please see the Participant Reflection)

Participant Reflection

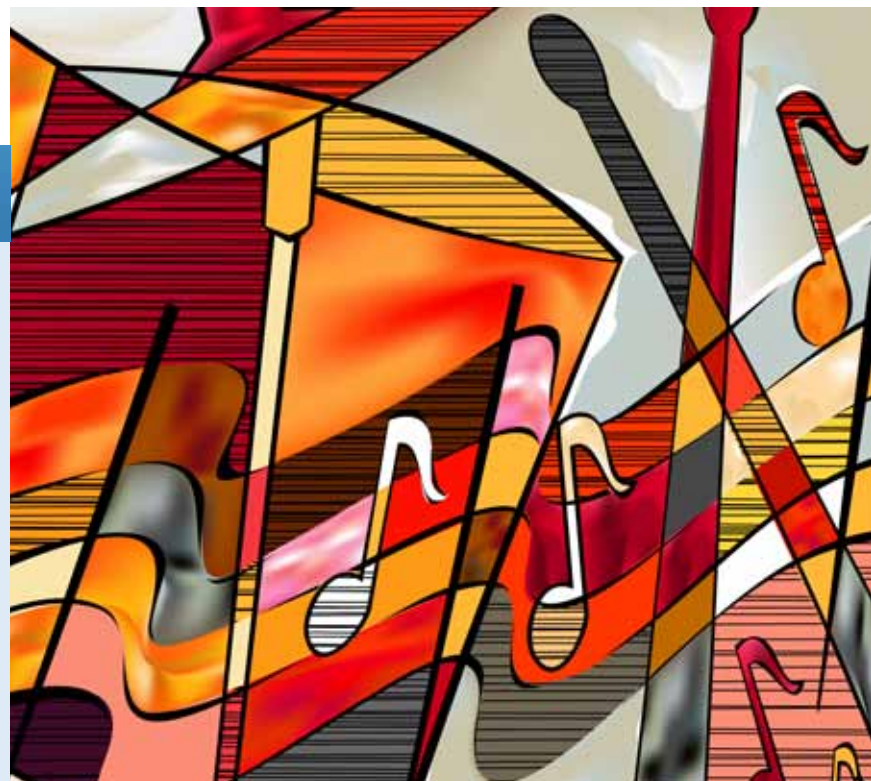
When I moved into my current position as Director of Marketing, I was coming into a department that was very closed off from the rest of the office. Co-workers had to submit written requests to do anything creative, the office was not open to conversation and it was a mystery how things got done.

My one condition for taking the position was to be allowed to make wholesale changes to the role and how it interacted in the overall office environment as well as with the outside community. Wholesale changes also meant changing the actual physical environment. I wanted to experiment with setting up the office in a different way to allow for a welcoming environment to staff and community members to come in, sit down and share.

Not only was this a physical experiment, and an easy one to implement, but it also was a psychological experiment to see if changing the physical environment could actually make a difference in the morale of the office.

I opened up the space, pushed the desks back and put in a conference round for people to come in and sit down ...and I left it open at all times for co-workers and more importantly community members, advertising representatives, the stage crew, etc. to just come in, sit and chat.

Now, all manner of people come in to sit and share...ideas, problems, community issues...anything really. It has become the open spot to come and meet without a schedule—an open, safe place for conversations to take place. It also has become more like a ‘start-up business’ environment where all manner of jobs are shared and cross-departmental creative problem solving is encouraged.



The Practice in Depth

Depending on one's leadership position and therefore one's immediate sphere of influence, grand experiments can be conducted within an organization as a whole and learning can be a large group process. Alternatively, it can begin within a department or even within a single individual's practice. The scale of experimentation is not immediately important. Rather, it is the spirit with which it is taken up that contributes to promoting resilience and advancing the organization's mission. Our field is in a constant state of change. By building a culture of learning, we no longer simply respond to the challenges of the day but create organizations nimble enough to manage the times ahead whether they be difficult or prosperous.

Imagine for a moment that as arts managers we take our cue not from the business world but from science. The scientific method creates a cycle of learning that can be applied to the work we do both inside our organizations and with our communities. It begins with observations about the world that lead us to a hypothesis or a hunch about how things work. That hypothesis then serves as the foundation for an experiment—some action that tests the hypothesis. The experiment in turn yields data that we observe to inform some conclusion and often refine the hypothesis for further testing.

Consider then how the artistic process also can be infused into this learning cycle. Let's return for a moment to Practice #1: Experience the Power of the Arts. The creative process that makes those experiences possible can teach us about experimentation and learning. However, we need to embrace the idea

that creative processes need to happen inside our organizations and in our interactions with communities, not just on our stages. So often in the performing arts field we talk about experimentation solely in reference to our artistic presentations. But the type of experimentation we address here involves all aspects of an organization: everything from a meeting structure to the physical layout of the office furniture. This level of experimentation supports resilience in an organization because it allows us to get the most from all the assets in place, especially the staff. By experimenting with tasks and roles of various staff members, an organization can uncover hidden assets that encourage a thriving environment. It also creates an exciting culture for the people that work

Participant Reflection

Shortly after I came on board, my organization embarked on an ambitious evaluation of all its programs. Almost out of nowhere (well, really because I was new) I was asked to head the evaluation process. I had no previous experience but completed the new task with the help of a consultant and a lot of professional development reading. Now I have a new skill set and my organization can manage the evaluation process without an outside consultant. Trying something new led to increased resources and a stronger, healthier organization.



there. If we enact that first practice and successfully encourage everyone involved in our work to experience the power of the arts, they will be exposed to the very creativity they need to bring the mission into daily work, experiment and encourage organizational resilience.

A learning cycle that harnesses the creative process to allow for experimentation and risk taking does not just “happen.” The organization, or part of the organization engaging in experimentation, must be prepared for the work. There are three necessary conditions in order for experimentation to become a vi-



able organizational practice: a reframing of success and failure, risk tolerance, and structures to support creativity.

A reframing of success and failure. We must establish that success and failure are not end points. They are not the goal of any endeavor. The richness of experimentation is found in what has been learned from the attempt. The cheers from success or jeers from failure often stop us from moving along a continuum toward honest evaluation. The information gleaned will allow for better decision making moving forward. Scientific methods can assist arts organizations in thinking differently about experimentation. In order to determine the failure or success of a new initiative, you must set goals for the project. Being specific about what you hope to accomplish is like building a research question. This clarity initiates a cycle of learning that continues to keep organizations relevant, vibrant and resilient.

Risk tolerance. We recognize that in a time of scarcity it can be difficult to make the decision to try something new. However, we want to be explicit about the fact that risk taking should be thoughtful. Thoughtful risk taking requires being deeply en-

grained in the organizational mission. Staff members who propose new initiatives should understand that the experiment must be tied to the mission and goals of the organization. Organizations may even create a rubric by which they evaluate the endeavors people propose. Every response, to move forward or to table a new initiative, further clarifies the mission for all who work at the organization. It can also be helpful to create specific times at which staff members pitch new ideas they want to try. Even though we work in the arts, due to an often excessive workload, conscious effort is needed to create a culture of learning and experimentation.

Structures to support creativity. Building organizational infrastructure is often necessary to be successful. It may seem odd to encourage structure as a way to foster experimentation, but structure is not the enemy of creativity. The right type of structure gives staff and those invested in an organization time to pause and envision new possibilities. Often there is little room in our work lives for creativity because we are overwhelmed with the nuts-and-bolts work of making organizations run. In order to be resilient, we must focus as much on our environment as the work produced. Building brainstorming sessions into

staff meetings and creating a feedback loop for new ideas will help the staff begin to get beyond the latest email. At times, arts organizations act as if this is an organic process, but that is very rarely the case. Building in structure can support an organizational culture that reinforces creativity.

This cycle of observing and reflecting, hypothesizing, experimenting, and reflecting again is precisely the process we went through as a Collaborative Inquiry group in order to discover the practices described in this report. Collaborative Inquiry is one structured approach to creating a safe space for experimentation and learning. However, there are other ways to encourage this process, as described in the section below.

Tools for Implementation

The following four tools can be employed to enable experimentation:

1. Experiment with small roles and responsibilities. Allowing employees to experiment with and switch roles within the organization includes encouraging staff to take on small new duties that allow them to diversify their own experience and try new areas of the arts. For example, this strategy includes allowing marketing staff to have a small curatorial role, or taking production staff on fundraising appointments to discuss what happens backstage. This experimentation allows for new perspectives and ideas on ways of doing business. It also fosters a small degree of redundancy and understanding of how other processes and programs work. Experimentation can take place throughout the layers of the organizational chart but is particularly important for entry-level staff.

2. Promote shadowing opportunities. Shadowing is when staff members observe or evaluate areas of the organization outside their direct area of responsibility. For example, in one organization a box office staff member recently documented and photographed an educational residency with Bill T. Jones for the Web. This type of endeavor allows for greater understanding about other departments, while also creating the potential for new perspectives and feedback on processes and content if staff members are allowed to provide their own evaluations of what they've witnessed.

3. Brainstorm. A new approach to brainstorming could create space for the free exchange of information and consideration of “out of the box” ideas.

4. Create interdisciplinary teams. Creating teams across departments, functions and areas of expertise allows the group to leverage different skills and ideas. The teams represent all areas of the organization and take on specific responsibilities; quality assurance, workplace morale and online organizational presence are possible areas of focus. A mix of perspectives from across the organization brings new ideas, opens new lines of communication and breaks down silos.

Strategies for Sustaining the Practice

We offer the following strategies for leveraging this practice for long-term impact:

- **Risk management assessment tool.** Developing a risk management assessment tool allows for a balanced portfolio of risk in programming. This tool is a formal model for evaluating the relative risk of artistic programs across a season. The tool is a numbered scale that decision makers within the organization use to evaluate both artistic and financial/earned revenue risk, with defined criteria. Members of the management team score the portfolio of potential programs both individually and collectively to determine what the overall level of risk is within a season and whether it is an acceptable risk level given contributed revenue estimates. The tool helps to make concrete conversations about risk that were previously intangible, and outlines organizational risk as something understood and accepted as long as it is balanced by responsibility.
- **Failure labs.** Creating failure celebrations or a failure lab encourages conversation about what we learn from failure. This involves circulating articles about failure, holding open discussions at staff meetings about failure, and incentivizing both risk and failure. For example, one organization gives out semi-annual rewards to its employees for “biggest risk that failed.” We can learn a great deal from failure, but because this tolerance is new to our field, the process must be delicately and diplomatically managed. One way to start is with external examples for discussion while staff members become comfortable with the idea of a “laboratory” and experimentation. Over time the organization can move toward more open conversations about internal failure.



Conclusion

Through this eight-month inquiry, we took up a large and significant question for our field:

How can we, from our leadership positions, engage our organizations to embody our missions and foster resilience?

This is a question that we want you, in the broader performing arts field, to be a part of answering as well. Therefore, we close this report as we opened it—with an invitation to join our leadership inquiry.

What we have generated is a set of critical practices that leaders at all levels can take up to strengthen their organizations. Ultimately, we discovered through these practices that we can foster resilience for ourselves, our organizations and our field by empowering ourselves and others to lead from any role, putting the power of the performing arts at the core of our work and harnessing creative practice.

This finding has two essential ideas embedded within it. First is the idea that the arts and creative practice are consistently tied to our mission, our purpose, our reason for working in this field and the core of what we do. Too often we're so busy being "administrators" or "managers" that we forget the criticality of the arts experience and the fact that within these arts moments and the artistic process, we might learn a great deal about the way our business needs to evolve to maintain relevance and sustainability. All of the practices we undertook as hypotheses in this CI stem from this idea of arts and creativity at the core of our work—either addressing tools that refocus our energies on the arts, or experimenting and testing new solutions to old problems within a creative framework stemming from an artistic process or mindset.

Second, and no less important, is the concept of self-authorization as well as doing what we can to promote the empowerment of others. No one has to "allow" you to undertake this work. Anyone, in any position, can effect change that moves an organization toward resilient, mission-centered operations. Whether it is attempting one of the practices in this report personally, or encouraging peers, colleagues, supervisors or direct reports to do the same, each of us has the ability to lead change through our own action.



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