

Lessons from the Field: Reflections from the Front Lines of Innovation in the Arts

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Introduction

Helping our clients develop and execute innovative projects has always been part of EmcArts' offerings, but in recent years, supporting innovative work in the arts has become a central focus of our consulting. We have been fortunate to work with orchestras, theatres, opera companies, museums, presenting organizations, and school districts through our *New Strategies Lab*, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, through the *Artistic Innovation Fund* of the James Irvine Foundation, and through other individual client engagements.

We recently took some time to reflect across all our work to identify the critical lessons these projects held for innovation in the arts. This article presents those lessons, grouped into four areas:

- ◆ **Lessons about the Innovation Itself**
- ◆ **Lessons about the Innovation Team and its Work**
- ◆ **Lessons about Implementation**
- ◆ **Lessons about Building Innovative Capacity**

What Do We Mean by “Innovation”?

We need to start by defining what we mean by an innovation. The word is used all the time these days, but we have not found a clear definition in the existing literature, or anywhere else, that is relevant for arts organizations. Consequently, we derived one ourselves, using our research and input from our clients.

First, we distinguish innovation from “creativity.” Creativity is a characteristic or practice of *individuals*; creative thinking certainly sparks new ways of seeing things, and of acting, and it may inform innovation. But innovation itself is an *organizational characteristic or practice*: the discipline of adding value to the organization by conceiving and implementing certain kinds of organizational change. For this, teams of people working together effectively are needed – innovation cannot be achieved by a single individual alone.

In our working definition of innovation, we propose the following:

Innovations are instances of organizational change that:

- 1. provide new pathways to fulfilling the mission**
- 2. are discontinuous from previous practice**
- 3. result from, or cause a shift in, underlying organizational assumptions**



The first part of this definition indicates that innovations are not just new frills or novelties unrelated to your organizational mission, nor are they variations on existing strategies. The second part notes that although incremental change is essential to your organization's effectiveness and competitiveness, innovation is not the result of incremental change, nor is it logically built on "business as usual." The third part – perhaps the most important – suggests that innovations derive from some shift in the fundamental assumptions you have held about your business, who it's for, when and where it happens, and so on.

Most innovations exhibit these three qualities in varying degrees – few possess them all in the extreme. Those that do generally are called "disruptive innovations," for obvious reasons. It follows from this definition that innovation is not restricted only to products and processes that are entirely new to the field, or to the world. Rather, it includes strategies that are new to some dimension of your organization's practice, whether it be production, management, governance, community engagement, or financial structure. In fact, stealing new thinking from others is a recommended approach, so long as you find the way to adapt it to your own circumstances.

Lessons about the Innovation Itself

In the same way that a great meal starts with the best ingredients, we find that the quality of the innovation itself is very important to its success.

- ◆ **In order to be a significant contribution to your offerings, the innovation must advance your organization's mission.** Avoid "change for change's sake" – it will just deplete you with little reward. This is one reason that we suspect innovations that are close to the organization's artistic core seem to be more successful than ones aimed primarily toward advancing a dimension of human resource management, for example.
- ◆ **Be very clear about the innovation's purpose.** What is this innovation supposed to accomplish, and why is it important to your organization? What major challenge(s) does it address, and why aren't existing strategies the right ones to help you tackle these issue(s)? This is a key intellectual task of championing innovation – explaining what the innovation is and why it matters. Groups we work with sometimes look back and recognize that past innovations that had mixed results were often the result of not being clear from the start about what the innovation was intended to do.
- ◆ **Innovative projects are not like "business as usual," with slight differences: They are a completely different game.** This seems obvious, but over and over we see innovative efforts being supported by conventional marketing and development plans, branding efforts, communication strategies, and measures of success, as if they were just different versions of the "same old thing." They're not. An innovative project is a new game, one for which the rules are still being written. Trying to graft tried-and-true approaches from your core business onto an innovation will usually not work – the project will wither on the vine.



Lessons about the Innovation Team and its Work

All the innovative work we see done in arts organizations is done by teams, either by formal teams chartered by an organizational leader and with a specific name, or by informal teams that come together to do the work. Whatever the configuration, the lessons below seem to apply.

- ◆ **Match the team members working on the innovation to the purpose of the innovation.**
That the right team players is a key foundation on which to begin seems like commonsense, but we frequently see teams made up of the “usual suspects,” or teams comprised of a representative from each department, whether or not that department is critical to the innovation’s success. (We like the definition that “a team is a group of people who need one another to succeed.”) We also advise against using team membership to deal with political or territorial issues; resolve these outside the group before it begins its work, if possible.

- ◆ **Bring your community partners close.** Partners from the community can be a big help, if they are the right partners, and you use them as partners. The same rules apply when selecting community partners as when choosing internal members of the Innovation Team: Choose people who you need to make the project succeed.

Remember, partners are not people you simply have exchanges with (“we’ll give you this and you give us that”) – those are vendors. Real partners are full co-equals in planning. They can shock you into seeing new things, and their outside perspectives are valuable for helping you see yourselves clearly.

- ◆ **Get “permissions” from key decision-makers in advance so the project is not marginalized over time.** It’s important that someone in a visible leadership role be the sponsor of the project, understand its purpose, and be kept informed of developments.

Remember that eventually the team will need to be **champions** of the innovation internally. They will need to represent it to people who do not understand it and to ask others to help make it a success.

- ◆ **Protect the team and the innovation.** Many teams need “island time” – long periods in which to cultivate and refine the innovation before subjecting it to the attention of the rest of the organization – to develop their best ideas into new strategies. Allowing the team to operate relatively independent of the full organization will help legitimize “alternative” thinking, and stop it falling back into the habitual patterns that sustain “business as usual.” One museum project we know of developed during a five-year period when most of the organization’s attention was focused on a major capital campaign, allowing the project to mature and refine itself “in the shadows.”

- ◆ **If your team actually is able to function as an “island,” you will need at the same time to build a “bridge” to the mainland to stay viable.** In the case of successful Innovation Teams we have observed, the bridge is frequently a senior person who can represent the team to the organization’s executive level (frequently because s/he is a member of that level) and can deliver resources and influence in the interest of the innovation. The bridge also involves effective communication about how the work is progressing. (A good general rule of thumb is to communicate more than you think is necessary!) Without such a bridge, an Innovation



Team risks getting too far out in front of the rest of the organization and having its work seen as threatening. Then it gets marginalized or simply dismissed.

- ◆ **Use an “Accelerator”** – an event that pushes the project forward quickly in a short amount of time. Although time and resources are always at a premium in the arts world, corporations frequently take teams off-site for days at a time to work intensely on innovative projects. We find that, if a project does not produce a visible output within nine months of its start, it loses momentum, and an accelerator (such as an extended retreat, for example) can compress several months of work – usually done in a two-hour meeting every three or four weeks – into a few days. In our *New Strategies Lab*, we shocked the orchestra field by requiring full Innovation Team participation in five-day residential retreats (dubbed “Intensives”). Now, participants call them “transformative” and “essential.”
- ◆ **Be innovative as a team.** Working to make innovations happen requires – no surprise – innovative ways of working together. Try to use processes that help the team work productively in new ways. We find Edward DeBono’s notion of “lateral thinking” – addressing a problem from a new angle using a novel approach – a powerful way of overcoming assumed constraints and ingrained “mental models.” Allow yourself to not know answers for a longer period of time: Although it may be uncomfortable sitting in the ambiguity, really good ideas can emerge from the tension. And, don’t just assume conversations will be automatically productive: If you can afford it, bring in skilled, dynamic facilitation to enable you to have useful dialogues that stay focused on topic – one of the things that our clients thank us most for.
- ◆ **Do your homework and gather data as part of researching your innovation.** A big difference between innovation in the arts and innovation in the business sector is that business routinely researches competitors and benchmarks “best practices” before developing an innovation. You can do the same. While several possible new approaches are still in the air, take the time to test interest in these possibilities outside your organization – with your target audience, with opinion leaders, with the skeptical. In the *New Strategies Lab* we’ve run, we emphasize bringing experts, identified by the Innovation Teams, to work with the teams for several days at a time. These encounters routinely earn high marks (and the experts get as much out of it as the teams).
- ◆ **Question your own assumptions, especially your “business-as-usual” assumptions.** Innovative projects can sometimes limit themselves by simply extending, without reflection, organizational frameworks and practices from the mainstream of the organization. We know of one museum that decided not to separate children and adults for their innovative Friday night programs – in direct conflict to the normal practice of peeling children off into education programs, freeing their parents to walk galleries unimpeded. By placing children and adults at the same tables for art-making activities, the museum found adults more creative and playful.

In particular, question your assumptions about your audience, especially if that audience is new, because...



- ◆ **New audiences are not your old audiences, only younger.** We notice a tendency to assume that new audiences, the target for so many innovative projects, are simply younger versions of the audiences you have traditionally attracted. They aren't. For performing arts organizations, young audiences have less experience being a "good audience" and are less interested in becoming a "good audience." They are curators of content on iPods and on social networking websites, and they are less apt to be willing to accept another's choices. Equally, they are drawn to being active co-creators, not passive audience members, and are unconsciously multi-disciplinary – happily unaware of the distinctions that many arts institutions reflect in curatorial staff or festival themes. Finally, we frequently see how development and marketing efforts for new audiences based on old models simply do not work.

The best source of information about responding to these new potential audiences is – guess who? – the new audiences themselves. We find many innovative efforts relying on their audiences for feedback, for ideas about future programs, and for creating generationally appropriate "buzz." So significant is this shift that some projects are dispensing with the term "audience" altogether, insisting that their publics be called "participants" (even "animators"), and identifying volunteers from among these participants to assume special leadership roles in evolving the innovation.

Lessons about Implementation

- ◆ **Embrace rapid prototyping.** We are always surprised that rapid prototyping, a central role in for-profit innovation, plays such a small role in innovation in the arts. Rapid prototyping enables you to see the reality of your ideas early, and if it's done intelligently, to "fail safe" before exposing an imperfect execution of an idea to a critical public. When possible, introduce one aspect of the innovation as a small feature of one of your mainstream offerings, evaluate these prototypes aggressively, and revise for the next iteration. Revolutionary ideas can evolve, too.
- ◆ **Enroll others and work with the resistance.** Remember that for many areas of your organization, an innovation is a problem. We sometimes find that operational and logistical members of organizations see the innovation as not only "more work," but "work we don't know how to do," which is even more challenging. Moreover, they may anticipate a loss of quality in the innovative enterprise, which they may fear will open them up to criticism. Good innovative champions view these concerns as valid. They work across departments and constituencies to craft responses to logistical and operational challenges that preserve what is essential about the innovation while satisfying operational requirements.
- ◆ **Experience also teaches to have a deadline for a deliverable** – the more public, the better. It creates a sense of urgency, which in turn focuses the team on getting work done. One organization we worked with planned a series of six small prototypes over eight months, with each one involving a small additional amount of complexity, leading to a major festival. The small projects kept everyone focused on the effort, and created an important "pull" for fixing mistakes – there was, after all, always another prototype coming up soon.



- ◆ **Assess innovations using metrics specific to that innovation.** Another assumption you may hold without your awareness is that an innovative project should “perform” like a tried-and-true core offering. It won’t, especially at the outset. If you hold the innovations accountable to conventional metrics at the beginning, then they will never measure up. One orchestra we know of dealt with this directly, reducing the revenue it expected from a new festival offering, and instead finding initial value in the way the festival reinforced its brand as an innovative orchestra, leading to more sales overall.
- ◆ **Lead your Board.** We find it a rare arts organization where the Board is driving innovation: in most cases, the impetus for innovation is coming from senior managers and/or artists. However, Boards can be led to see the value of innovation and become more comfortable with it. The best practice seems to be to start small and “under the radar,” with individual Board members who are positively disposed toward innovation, and whom it would be good to involve in the Innovation Team.

Lessons about Building Innovative Capacity

Making an innovation happen is a significant accomplishment, but developing the organizational muscles to continually innovate is the bigger fish; that capacity will allow your organization to thrive in an increasingly uncertain future. We find interesting and important differences in those organizations that seem to make it a habit always to be pushing the innovation envelope.

- ◆ **Be willing to view innovations as experiments.** We know of many arts organizations that intentionally see their innovative efforts as “experiments” and that regularly export new approaches developed for their innovative work into the mainstream of their offerings.
- ◆ **Focus on learning from the journey, whether or not your last innovation project was successful.** By maintaining an emphasis on learning from every experiment, and using your increased knowledge to strengthen future efforts, even a failed new strategy can yield real achievements for your organization. In our role, we are often asked to help organizations step back and reflect on the events of the last 6 to 12 months working on an innovation project, and to note significant lessons learned. Teams regularly tell us how helpful these sessions are to their learning. Take deliberate time to debrief, reflect, and plan again.
- ◆ **Build the capacity to champion innovation within your organization.** For your organization to be consistently innovative, artistic, Board, and staff leaders have to sanction the possibility of frequent change and maintain high expectations for innovative ideas. If leaders are appreciative of new ideas from many and unexpected sources (not just a select few individuals) and are open to surprises, then your organization will generate much more raw material on which to build innovations. Consistently innovative organizations are constantly questioning their organizational performance. Notably, they focus on doing this especially when things are going well, not just when a crisis is looming, because a trajectory of success provides the best platform for effective change, even while it can blind us to the need for it.



- ◆ **Develop the capacity to manage your organizational culture to support innovation.** In this context, “culture” is the set of rules, values, and norms that guide behavior in your organization. They may well be unwritten, but they act powerfully on everyone – and you quickly find out when you’ve trodden on a cultural norm at an institution! That’s why it is so important to keep the culture supportive of innovation. Regularly review your core assumptions and values, and re-affirm an overall vision for change. Back this up with internal systems that recognize and reward innovation. Use continual questioning and a search for multiple possible solutions to problems as ways to build tolerance for uncertainty around innovation.

- ◆ **Strengthen the Board’s capacity to support new thinking.** We have noted that it is rare for Boards to lead innovative thinking, but they can be trained to expect it and to take calculated risks to achieve successful innovations. In working with your Board, move beyond always presenting certainties and single solutions to your organization’s challenges: Engage the Board frequently in debating limited sets of possible strategies, so that “business as usual” is located within a larger field of vision. Often these days, the greater risk lies in inaction, with few strategies sustaining their value for long.

- ◆ **Increase your capacity to scan and learn from external trends and behaviors.** Big market research budgets are unlikely to suddenly appear, but there are many ways to get useful feedback that do not depend on surveying huge populations. Nowadays, when cultural and leisure choices are so varied, getting continuous responses from your existing audience remains valuable, but getting outside that group is more important than ever. Do wider surveys and hold focus groups, but try to go beyond that and become a “public square,” a place that invites your communities to converse around, as much as about, your work. Let the voices of leaders who have had little or nothing to do with you influence your planning; it will enormously strengthen your capacity for innovation.

- ◆ **Plan and develop your financial resources in line with your innovation needs.** As a nonprofit, maintaining financial flexibility as you grow can be a challenge. While having more assets may seem to free you up, more often than not, a base of capital funds disables an organization’s ability to move quickly and smartly – for instance, if most of your assets are tied up in buildings and endowment, your financial profile and dynamics will be more and more weighted toward conservation, not exploration. Even when your budget is small, developing an expendable fund for innovative ventures can prove invaluable and serve to focus everyone on responsible risk-taking.

Conclusion

It is being accepted increasingly that change is the only constant in our contemporary 21st-century world. Organizations that learn to adapt to this environment of constant “whitewater” will survive and thrive. Those that do not adapt will get wet at best, and are not likely to survive long. We are convinced that the capacity to innovate is a critical part of any organization’s ability to thrive in such times as these. We hope these lessons from the field are useful to you as you navigate your own turbulent waters.



Acknowledgments and References

We want to thank the many organizations we've worked with for helping us learn with and from them about the practice of supporting innovation in arts organizations. In particular we want to recognize the orchestras of the *New Strategies Lab* and the California arts organizations participating in the James Irvine Foundation's *Artistic Innovation Fund*.

We also have learned a great deal from Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman's study of great groups, *Organizing Genius: The Secret of Creative Collaboration* (1997), Edward DeBono's book *Serious Creativity* (1992), and Steven Tepper and Bill Ivey's recent book, *Engaging Art* (2007). We recommend these books highly.

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EmcArts Inc. is a social enterprise for learning and innovation in the arts. In response to the needs of the arts and culture sector, we have built a service organization of experienced consultants to support one primary mission: to strengthen the capacities and effectiveness of arts organizations.

EmcArts' services fall into three broad organization development areas:

- ♦ *Innovation and Capacity Building*
- ♦ *Evaluation and Research Assessment*
- ♦ *Strategic Planning*

Please contact us to explore how we might work with you to deepen your arts organization's impact in your community and field.

For more information about EmcArts' innovation programs or our other services, please contact:

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