

What is Innovation in the Arts?

EmcArts' definition

"Innovation" is talked about all the time now, but with little consistency. We thought it might help to establish a clear and straightforward working definition, so we reviewed the literature, failed to find one, and used our research and experience to develop this new one:

Organizational innovations are instances of organizational change that:

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

Lessons Learned about Innovation Projects

In the last three years, EmcArts has supported more than 50 arts organizations in uncovering new creative strategies or responding to challenges. Here are just a few of the instructive approaches we've found:

Be very clear about the innovation's purpose:

What is this innovation supposed to accomplish and why is it important to your organization?

Innovative projects are not "business as usual only different": they are a completely different game, and trying to graft tried-and-true approaches from your core business onto an innovation will usually not work.

Question your own assumptions, especially those that drive business as usual.

Match the team members working on the innovation to the purpose of the innovation. Do not settle for the usual suspects.

Get "permissions" from key decision makers so the project is not marginalized over time.

Bring your community partners close. Real partners are full co-equals in planning. They can shock you into seeing new things, and their outside perspective is valuable for helping you see yourselves.

Protect the team and the innovation. Teams need "island time" to develop their best ideas – long periods to incubate and refine projects before subjecting them to the attention of the full organization.

Build a "bridge" to the mainland to stay viable, frequently a senior person who can represent the team to your organization as a whole and deliver resources and influence in the interest of the innovation.

Use an "Accelerator" – an event that pushes the project forward quickly in a short amount of time, telescoping months of meetings and transforming momentum.

Be innovative as a team. Try to use processes that help the team work productively in new ways. Practice thinking laterally by addressing a problem from a new angle using a novel approach, living with ambiguities, and involving skilled facilitation.



Embrace rapid prototyping. Rapid prototyping enables you to see the reality of your idea early and, if it's done intelligently, to "fail safe" before exposing an imperfect execution of an idea to a critical public.

Enroll others and work with the resistance. Remember that for many areas of your organization, an innovation is a problem. Good innovative champions view these concerns as valid and work to preserve what is essential about the innovation while satisfying operational requirements.

See your innovative efforts as "experiments," and regularly export new approaches developed for your innovative work into the mainstream of your offerings.

Do your homework and gather data as part of researching your innovation. Benchmark best practices early on, and talk to your target audience, opinion formers, and skeptics.

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.

Focus on learning from the journey, successful or not, to generate knowledge out of every new strategy, even those that fail to achieve traction.

Make it Stick: Lessons Learned about Building Innovative Capacity

When the organizational leader is a champion of innovation, and capable of building momentum around new ways of doing business and taking calculated risks, meaningful innovation has a much more secure foundation for success. The skills needed to fostering innovation are very different from those of the traditional manager:

Champion innovation within your organization. If leaders are appreciative of new ideas from many and unexpected sources, and constantly question organizational performance, then your organization will generate much more raw material on which to build innovations.

Manage the culture to support innovation. Regularly review your organization's core assumptions and values, and re-affirm an overall vision for change. Back this up with internal systems that recognize and reward innovation.

Develop your Board's capacity to support new thinking. Boards can be trained to expect innovation and to take calculated risks to achieve successful new strategies. Engage the Board frequently in debating limited sets of possible strategies, so that business as usual is located within a larger field of vision.

Build your tolerance for ambiguity. Use continual questioning and a search for multiple possible solutions to problems as ways to build tolerance for uncertainty around innovation.

Build flexible financial resources in line with your needs. If most of your assets are tied up in buildings and endowment, your financial profile will be more and more weighted toward conservation, not exploration. Developing an expendable fund for innovative ventures can prove invaluable.

Scan and learn from the "public square." Getting beyond your existing audiences is more important than ever, when cultural and leisure choices are so varied. Try to become a public square, a place that invites your communities to converse around, as much as about, your work.