



## EmcArts Inc. Lessons from the Field – January 2010

Lessons From the Field is an occasional communication from EmcArts, sharing stories and insights from our work helping arts leaders and organizations realize new possibilities through innovation.

### Enrolling Others in Your Innovation Project How COCA St. Louis used a creative approach to anticipate concerns and champion its new project

**Melissa Dibble, Director of Client Partnerships**

What does group work look like in your organization? Imagine that you are trying to solve a problem or work with others to realize a new possibility for your organization. How do you go about doing this? Let us consider the following scenario:

*A group gets together because they have "heard a call" to solve an issue that needs more than one person to find and implement the solution. Generally, within a meeting or two, the group comes up with a plan of action and assigns steps to implement. With only a few hours of face-to-face time, the group journeys back into the larger organization, carrying out their newly assigned work when their workloads permit them the time to do so. Those at the organization who are not involved in the project are confused about its purpose and grow impatient with the sense that resources are being redirected. Gradually, resistance hardens and eventually the project is shelved after complaints from numerous non-participants.*

**Sound familiar?** In guiding our partners to develop their own innovation projects, we see work that is by definition new and uncharted for the organization undertaking it. These unique projects require extra effort to nurture them and special attention to gain the necessary "buy in" from fellow organizational stakeholders.

Small groups of people who are designated to work on special projects often, in the process of their work, go through a unique and transforming experience that moves them to a different place from the rest of the organization. Innovations are tripped up, perhaps more than in any other way, by the failure of the team to recognize this issue and act on it. You need to spend a lot of time in the implementation phase dealing with skeptical, even hostile, colleagues for whom the innovation is basically a problem: someone else's idea that is not only "more work" but "work we don't know how to do," which is even more challenging. Real champions of innovation recognize these views as valid and systemic—not just curmudgeonly or misinformed individuals.



## The Story of COCA Biz

Recently, the Center of Creative Arts (COCA), based in St. Louis, embarked on a journey to develop and bring to fruition a “half-baked” idea of using the arts to teach and train members of the corporate community in areas of leadership and creativity. The project is now known as COCA Biz.



“We knew that corporate leaders were looking for new ways to train and inspire their co-workers and we know that COCA has programs and teaching artists that do just that: we just needed to re-calibrate our programming to tap into our corporate community’s needs,” said Pam Mandelker, COCA’s Development Officer. “The strategic thinking we needed, informed by research, wasn’t going to happen in a few two-hour meetings.”

To help kickstart the project, COCA was selected to participate in EmcArts’ *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*. They first assembled an Innovation Team, a group to serve as leaders of the project, comprised of St. Louis’ corporate leaders (a few of whom are current COCA board members), COCA staff and COCA affiliated artists.

As part of the Lab’s framework, COCA’s Innovation Team participated in an “Intensive,” a five-day retreat held off premises in which the Team focused solely on the project. The Intensive served as an “innovation accelerator” – an event that pushed the project forward quickly, helping to telescope months of meetings.

“It was challenging to have such diverse perspectives, experience and vocabulary in the room, but we really needed all of them to work out what this COCA Biz program should embody and why COCA should deliver it,” says Kelly Pollock, COCA’s General Manager and Innovation Team leader.

It WAS a transformative journey for the 11 participants, with many challenges around different uses of language, individual passions and group misunderstandings – all of the terrain that makes up a rigorous, purposeful retreat. But what about the passionate, involved corporate committee members who had been part of starting this program but who didn’t attend the Intensive? How do you enroll them upon your return without leaving them behind, going back to earlier discussions or unraveling all of the good work that was done during the retreat?

Enrolling others—and anticipating the questioning, resistance and fear that will likely be encountered upon returning home—is a key focus of the Intensive. COCA’s Innovation Team knew that they would need the support, energy and commitment of the full corporate committee to succeed with implementation. A few weeks after the Intensive, a meeting was scheduled to give the committee and COCA staff an update on the project’s development. For COCA, it was vital to demonstrate what the Innovation Team had learned and built during the Lab to date, as well as to

*“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.”*

– EmcArts’ **Lessons from the Field: Reflections from the Frontlines of Innovation in the Arts**, [www.EmcArts.org](http://www.EmcArts.org)

establish real next steps for their corporate committee members and staff who were being asked to participate in the launch of the new initiative.

“There were so many players that contributed to this project’s evolution over the past two years and we wanted to make sure that their voices and contributions were acknowledged,” says Pollock. “Additionally, we wanted to share the transformative journey that the 11-member Innovation Lab team had experienced. Our challenge was to figure out an abbreviated, but meaningful, approach that would put us all ‘on the same page’ with forward momentum.”

COCA’s approach to enrolling the support of the committee and staff members who weren’t part of the Innovation Team was a breakthrough.

Kathy Cramer, COCA’s board VP of strategic planning and founder/managing director of The Cramer Institute, used a technique from her private practice. “The Hero’s Journey - An Organizational Odyssey on Change” was presented as a mini-theatre piece with a rotating cast of COCA characters. The piece depicted the project’s history, the Lab process, the COCA Biz program model, marketing and communications plans, and the timeline and plan for prototyping – and involved various staff, artists and committee members in the telling of the COCA Biz Creation Story. By conceiving of the Innovation Lab as a journey, and using storytelling to depict the tensions and joys of the process, those that had not been part of the Lab process to date got up to speed and felt part of the sense-making journey. Also, by putting the information and decisions into an artistic format, a sense of shared experience was created for all who attended this update meeting.

COCA’s corporate committee responded to many questions and observations throughout the meeting... and there will be many, many more questions, especially as the actual operational requirements, budgets and other logistics of implementing something new present themselves during the prototyping phase. But if you take the attitude that COCA began with – thinking creatively about how to intentionally and proactively enroll others into a project and next steps – you will begin to build understanding of your innovation’s purpose across your entire organization. Likely, you will not only convert the naysayers, but, more importantly, discover those who wish to be *heroes* and participate in the unfolding chapters of your innovation journey.

## Resources

- COCA’s website  
[www.COCastl.org](http://www.COCastl.org)
  - EmcArts’ Resources on innovation in the Arts  
[www.EmcArts.org/index.cfm?pagepath=RESOURCES&id=7384](http://www.EmcArts.org/index.cfm?pagepath=RESOURCES&id=7384)
  - More information on the Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts  
[www.EmcArts.org/index.cfm?pagepath=INNOVATION\\_LAB&id=89](http://www.EmcArts.org/index.cfm?pagepath=INNOVATION_LAB&id=89)
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