

Introduction

The most awe-inspiring artistic visions and declarations fall flat without a clear and sustained way of acting on them; and the most beautifully prepared planning document is little more than a temporary desk ornament (often a heavy one) if it is not a living, breathing extension of artistic vision and intention. Plans are often driven by funding and community partners pursuing symbolic gesture rather than by arts leaders engaging in the real need and role of planning. In spite of all the planning demanded and produced, it seems that the greatest challenge is the simple process of connecting what we believe with how we act on those beliefs. To engage effectively in planning we must first understand and encourage our partners to embrace the difference between “industry correct” symbols and the practical but vital substance of connecting an arts organization’s beliefs and behaviors.

The need to create art and the need to plan are derived from the same impulses – to learn and grow, to analyze and solve problems, to understand and synthesize, to discover and invent, to communicate and interact positively with the world. Yet there is a persistent belief by many that the same arts professionals who excel at producing art are incapable of making good plans. There is a curious notion that planning is a discipline apart from what arts professionals understand and do; and that therefore they must be taught how to plan. In fact, arts professionals plan all the time: seasons are produced, exhibits are mounted, marketing campaigns are launched, services are provided, and money is raised. Most arts professionals are more effective at planning behind the organizational facades than they realize or recognize.

We constantly observe – not just in a crisis, but in the ongoing work of making and connecting art with an audience – that the most effective arts leaders and organizations are characterized less by symbolic gestures than by value-based behaviors. This behavior is exemplified by the ways that leaders recognize realities, distinguish and understand challenges and changes, understand and manage risks and act accordingly to adapt and reshape the situation to advantage. Such behavior is complex not reflex, strategic not prescriptive, systemic not situational, studied and deliberate not imitative and tentative. Most of all such behavior is *process intense*, connecting beliefs and behaviors, and is led from the inside out by the professionals and not engineered from a distance.

ARTS Action Research's Beliefs and Approach to Planning

We believe that planning is the organizational expression and extension of the artistic process. In the same way that the *artistic process* is a combination of creativity, intuition and collaboration balanced with craft, technique and discipline; *planning* is the articulation, aspiration and assertion of artistic vision combined with the organizational craft, technique and discipline to support and act on that vision. Indeed, an arts organization's skill, passion, facility, creativity and quality in planning should not only reflect but equal their art producing abilities.

The AAR approach to planning is based on a number of fundamental beliefs:

There is no such thing as a universal approach to planning. As each arts organization is unique in the art it creates, it is likewise unique in its planning processes.

One of the more popular approaches promoted over the years involves a planning ritual familiar to many arts professionals. According to this planning ritual, an organization projects where it wants to be in three to five years, then works backwards year by year, setting goals and objectives that quantitatively connect the future and the present. This ritual is usually characterized by facilitated retreats, group "visioning," committee structures, and group processing. Of course the main beneficiaries of this ritual are the manufacturers of newsprint and felt-tip pens. The whole affair draws enormous time, energy and resources from the organization's work and needs, and exhausts the arts professionals and the best board leaders.

This approach was always unrealistic. In today's volatile environment it is particularly inappropriate because it is based on the premise that an organization can predict the future, envision itself in that future, control the external forces over that period, and realistically detail goals, strategies, finances, and activities for each year. The resulting plan usually bears little or no resemblance to the way things really get accomplished. This archaic view of planning is characterized by Ralph Stacey in *Managing the Unknowable* as a "fantasy response to the anxiety of being unable to know and control the future."

The plan should be as dynamic as the budget. The professional staff is constantly going back into the budget and making adjustments as new information is acquired. The budget exists as a point of departure and return, a through-line on which to base decision-making. The plan serves the same purpose. No matter what happens in the environment or what new information is available, the plan is a base line to return to for making informed strategic and tactical decisions.

An organization can have an effective process with an excellent result; however, within a couple of months something may happen that could never have been anticipated which will require revision.

In a professional arts organization, the professional arts leadership must be at the center of the organization, leading and directing the planning activity.

The professional arts leadership must articulate the vision, set policy and direct planning. When we refer to arts professionals or professional arts leadership this means different things to different organizations. It may refer to a single artistic director, executive director, managing director, producing director, or an artistic collective. In the case of arts service organizations, public arts agencies, or presenting organizations, professional arts leadership refers to the professional administrative staff responsible for leading and directing the entity. An important understanding about "professional" in this context is that it reflects the skill, knowledge, and professional intention of the leadership rather than an arbitrary industry or trade designation.

Leading and directing a planning process is non-transferable. Too much energy is still being expended creating the illusion that the board and others are actually leading the process. The board, the staff and particularly invested friends and partners from the community will play important roles in shaping elements and implementing the plan. But they cannot effectively assume the responsibility for leading and directing the process in the place of professional leadership.

Likewise, no consultant can fulfill the role of the professional arts leadership in a planning process. There are consultants who create an "event mentality" around the planning process, generate a flurry of activity through public meetings and interviews, and then write the plan for the organization. These consultants and their techniques can be extremely attractive, even seductive, to arts professionals who don't think they have time to do one more thing, and to boards who just want a product. But the process and the end result are inorganic, incomplete, inappropriate to the organization's true nature, wasteful of resources and ultimately unusable.

There are roles for consultants to play in a planning process. These roles include (1) helping professional leadership design a planning approach that is organic and appropriate to the entity; (2) serving as a conceptual and technical resource; (3) helping keep the process focused and in realistic relation to timeline; (4) helping select and direct appropriate resource consultants in areas requiring special expertise; and, (5) engaging key partners and players in the process at appropriate times. We believe the best planning consultants manage to support and facilitate a planning

process without themselves becoming part of the process.

The Planning Process must be strategic; the word “strategic” is a verb and not a noun.

In too many instances the term *strategic* is invoked as a description of a planning process or aspects of a plan with very little real strategic thinking involved. Strategic thinking extends from a strategic mindset about how we relate *cause* and *effect* to our advantage short, medium and long term; and, how we utilize all resources to shape or create a desired set of outcomes. A strategic mindset and thinking is complex, thoughtful and seeks to envision, leverage and achieve a greater end product than the sum of the parts. The artistic process is a great example of a complex set of strategic ideas, actions and results. Every artistic decision is imbued with strategy in casting the right players, combining and recombining concepts & elements, adding richness, value and meaning to ideas, and forming the right collaborations in order to achieve the very best artistic product. Some staff and board members simply don't understand or are not interested in being strategic; they are more interested in focusing narrowly on results, benchmarks and the parts more than the whole. These individuals must be kept a safe distance from the planning process.

In the “Planning Process”, PROCESS is the Active and Operative Word.

When the best-laid plans inevitably encounter real world exigencies an arts organization needs an effective process to return to factor new information and to make a new plan. Any plan that cannot change, adapt and evolve is useless as a tool and potentially disastrous in this fast changing, highly volatile environment.

The healthiest and most productive organizations are those with effective processes. Processes allow them to simultaneously absorb and expend energy, to read the volatility and changing conditions around them, to formulate and revise plans and actions ongoing, to appropriately organize and use resources, to make good timely decisions and to constantly learn and adapt and move forward. Those organizations with really effective processes are even able to anticipate and act to influence the environment and external events in positive ways.

Each arts organization's planning process must be informed by their own artistic process. As stated before, the process of making, producing, curating, exhibiting, presenting, or programming art is the most effective planning, problem solving, decision making, relationship building process that an arts organization has available. But each arts organization must understand this process and allow it to inform and extend into every aspect of the organization's work and life through its planning. Failing to use this valuable resource is not only a waste of that resource, but it opens the

door to other less productive, even conflicting processes that other arts professionals and non-arts “experts” are eager to inject.

This Folio on The Arts Planning Process, like all of our Folios, extends into a corresponding AAR Field Workbook on Arts Planning. The concepts contained herein are developed into applications around planning and organizational development. AAR’s approach and framework for planning strongly reflects our values and our experience working with hundreds of professional performing, exhibiting, presenting and literary arts organizations in the U.S. and Canada. Our planning framework adapts to and is tailored to the true and organic nature of each arts organization’s artistic process, however defined. For more information about ARTS Action Research’s work, services, publications and team of Associates please check our website at www.artsaction.com.