



ArtsLabSM

Strengthening the impact of arts organizations in urban and rural communities through leadership and strategy development

New Perspectives – Growing Impact

ArtsLab has been designed to strengthen the impact of arts organizations in urban and rural communities through support to leadership and strategy development. It has developed as a uniquely robust program, offering intensive training, mentorship and technical assistance to cultural leaders to ensure that they have the skills, ideas, and mindsets needed to adapt and thrive in a world of continuous change.

ArtsLab is the product of a pilot project that served eight Minneapolis/Saint Paul arts organizations from 1999-2003. Building on the success of and knowledge gained during that initial pilot project, five of the founding funders collaborated to support a new cycle in 2008-2011. During this time, efforts focused on strengthening organizational infrastructure among sixteen participating organizations through a combination of an in-depth organizational assessment process, quarterly peer learning gatherings, consultative support, opportunity for distance learning and modest grants to implement named goals. Throughout the phases of ArtsLab the program has sought to

- Increase the pool of mature and engaged leadership ready to meet the demands of the 21st century arts and culture sector;
- Build the resilience and strengthen the presence and leadership of visionary arts organizations within their community and region; and
- Demonstrate the power of the arts to enhance community vitality and engagement.

While the above long term vision of program success has been the program's focus, outcome indicators and measures were established for the individual organizations to track their progress within the program. These measures were tied to the initial assessment process, and probed the organizations' development in leadership capacity, adaptive capacity, management capacity, and technical capacity in a complex world.

To determine success and measure progress against these outcome goals, ArtsLab established a robust, multi-level evaluation plan—based on a logic model—that included a series of quantifiable tracking measures; grantee-, consultant-, and staff-generated reports; strategy team documentation; graining and peer-retreat evaluations; site visits; evaluator interviews; annual financial and audience statistical reports; and interviews with key community stakeholders. Serving a dual purpose—measuring the progress of individual grantees as well as evaluating the success of the ArtsLab program as a whole—these tools offer a foundation for ongoing program development.

This report is a summary document, based on the findings of our external evaluator, Dr. Patricia Shifferd, as well as the team of knowledge experts who have shaped the program over the past three years, meeting quarterly as a curriculum design and strategy team advising the emerging work within the learning community. It is focused on perspectives gained, lessons learned and program successes both in terms of program curriculum content as well as in the process and style of program delivery. It has become clear through the experience of working with ArtsLab participants that the strength of the program rests in the process, which maximizes participant cycles of assessment, reflection and application of learning, as well as the content of the work, which challenges participants to look deeply at the environmental content of their work, shape



strategy based on that “outside-in” thinking, and find new, perhaps transformative, ways to adapt and imbed themselves in the work of their communities. This brief distillation of what we learned has informed our own shaping of our next phase of service delivery.

Perspectives Gained

Building *resiliency* for a world that is complex and changing rapidly must be core content in a program focused on strengthening leadership and strategy development. Major trends and their impact on nonprofits have been well-researched and documented, and accentuate the need to master the art of perpetual adaptation. The rate and multiple dimensions of change give urgency to the need for challenging old practices and continually evolving new approaches to organizational life as well as to professional development and capacity-building work. ArtsLab has embraced these concepts. To carry our work forward in this new era we believe that artists and arts organizations need to re-examine their

- Relevancy to community life
- Relationships across sectors and through virtual and local networks
- Flexibility of thought and strategic response
- Adaptability through continual rethinking and continual programmatic response to change
- Leadership, which must be bold, risk-taking and strategic

While the concept of perpetual adaptation may seem simple, the shifts are not easily accomplished. We are taught to approach our work based on best practices, well-honed through historically proven management science that focuses on growth, competition, and a vision of always moving to that “bigger box.” For community-based organizations that do not aspire to become “bigger box” institutions, that challenge is to understand how to be much more fluid, flexible and permeable—to achieve goals through networks, akin to community organizers or social movements, rather than through building institutions.

Shifting away from “bigger box” thinking requires employing new tools and engaging new approaches to our work, and intentionality while we selectively abandon old “best practices.” The ArtsLab training and strategy team have concluded that we must re-examine accepted organizational assessment, strategic planning, evaluation, marketing and organizational development tools and practices. Tools are required that do not rely on old concepts of “bigger is better” but rather encourage real-time, flexible, nimble and adaptable approaches to resiliency in a world of perpetual adaptation.

Lessons Learned

Some key features and elements of ArtsLab emerge as particularly significant to achieving the depth of impact that the program has sought. We have learned the value of a multi-year program built on a model of regularly

creating...

1. spaces for “creative disruption” – regularity of time away in a rich peer learning community
2. conversations to hone ideas in a highly participatory process
3. context – new lenses – through “outside-in thinking” to embed in broader community frames
4. consciousness – through use of self-assessment tools



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5. opportunity to implement new ideas through technical assistance and implementation grants

establishing pathways toward...

1. culture of empowered teams and “emotionally intelligent” leadership capacity;
2. clarity of higher order, critical thinking and strategic focus;
3. choices and change stressing flexible, adaptable models;
4. community and engagement across organizations;
5. convergence with major societal trends of 21st century.

emphasizing...

1. cycles and multiple levels of learning – individual, team, board, organization, peer community;
2. holistic learning through emphasis on a breadth of leadership and management topics;
3. multi-faceted learning opportunities (retreats, individual work, mentorship, assessments, etc.);
4. adult learning principles;
5. individualized learning, continually evolving in response to emerging organizational needs;
6. questions and dialogue, conversation, not expert “mind dump.”

guided by...

1. mature trainers, consultants and tools that embrace both the facilitative approach (questions, dialogue and conversation) as well as concepts of mastering perpetual adaptation;
2. local resources: trainers and program leadership that know the local marketplace well.
3. a process-orientation that includes a curriculum arc, a pedagogy;
4. values-driven foundation based on a mission and vision that drive content decisions;
5. responsiveness to community context, living systems and relationships across sectors.

Successes and Growing Impact

Over the past three years, ArtsLab has met evaluation benchmarks in the four areas of capacity assessed during the application process in 2008.

- (a) leadership capacity—the ability to create and sustain a vision, to inspire, to model, to prioritize, to make decisions, to provide direction, and to innovate¹
- (b) adaptive capacity—the ability to monitor, assess, respond to, and create internal and external changes
- (c) management capacity—the ability to use resources effectively and efficiently
- (d) technical capacity—the availability of the resources, tools, facilities, technology needed to implement organizational strategies

In the area of **leadership capacity**, there were significant gains. Leadership skills were enhanced in a number of ways. The evaluator named especially that two individuals were named Bush Leadership Fellows this year; five participating individuals have received national recognition for their work; and four have moved on to new challenges utilizing their skills in their communities. There were numerous references to increased leadership capacity throughout evaluation documents. The Center for Hmong Arts and Talent commented: "*CHAT's leadership has developed*

¹ York, Peter. The Sustainability Formula: How Nonprofit Organizations Can Thrive in the Emerging Economy. TCC Group, 2011. ArtsLab utilized an assessment tool based on the work of the Annie Casey Foundation, prior to the development of the TCC tool.



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tremendously since participation with ArtsLab—both in the way we lead as well as how we think about leadership.” There was also significant comment about increased understanding of the relationship between emotional intelligence and teamwork, with reported maturation of team. 80% of participating organizations reported strengthened boards, revised committee structures, and significantly increased strategic focus. The evaluator commented that *“boards have been transformed in the way they work and think.”*

In the area of **adaptive capacity**, there were significant changes within the participating organizations capacity to assess their marketplace. Most ArtsLab organizations did work to assess their position in their communities. In addition to fairly routine audience surveys, some groups carried out focus groups, constituent interviews, or surveys to get a better sense of their community, its interests, and their organization’s position. Several organizations as a result made identity positioning one of their ArtsLab goals, using their consultants to help clarify the way they present themselves to the public. The Bemidji Community Art Center, for instance, completed an extensive set of community surveys and focus groups, reshaped their strategic direction and is currently developing a new facility plan as well as a new brand identity. They report that *“ArtsLab has helped us clarify our direction as an organization . . . provided the guidance and tools needed to accomplish our goals . . . given us the confidence to prioritize our values, pursue our vision and to incorporate public opinion into our strategic direction.”*

Across sixteen organizations, all reported concrete examples of increased engagement with their civic communities. Our evaluator summarized *“nearly all report that this work represents an expanded/re-conceptualized orientation to what it means to be in community.”*

As a result of the assessment work, all organizations reported a more focused ability to focus their strategic direction based on their market strengths as well as market needs and interests. Two illustrative comments from participant reports are offered here. The first is from Forecast Public Arts, which comments that *“Through ArtsLab our board and staff have begun to alter the way they work and the way they plan for the future. While decision-making and subsequent actions used to be more impulsive and opportunistic, we now take pause to ensure that decisions are made to match our strategic direction and will assist in accomplishing greater goals.”* The second is from Springboard for the Arts, which commented that as a result of ArtsLab learning *“we have been working on our definition of growth . . . moving away from the idea of ‘institutionalizing’ the organization. Now we believe that the correct strategy is in customer service delivery . . . to pilot programs in our immediate neighborhood, evaluate them and replicate them in the communities we serve and might serve. We call this the Lowertown Lab.”* Springboard for the Arts

There was also reported significant growth in **management capacity**. Despite the economic downturn, ArtsLab participants gained resources to support their mission and developed stronger systems to manage their resources effectively and efficiently. Five organizations developed significant new revenue sources, eleven added staff, and six have completed or are exploring facility expansions. Across fifteen organizations, the average budget size grew by 215% during the three years in the program [the sixteenth’s organization grew nearly 300% so was removed from the average as an outlier.] These indicators are particularly significant given the economic conditions that have faced the sector. Organizations consistently reported that this success was due to growth



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in their ability to be more strategic and adaptive, as well as the ability to tell their story in a much more compelling and focused way.

Several organizations built their operations and **technical capacity**. Nearly all of the participating organizations built new databases, developed “virtual offices,” upgraded hardware and software, and established systems for more effectively and efficiently manage their operations in one or more areas. Generally the focus was on financial and audience/donor tracking systems.

Conclusion

The evaluator, Dr. Patricia Shifferd, ends her October 25, 2011 final evaluator’s report with the following conclusion: *“In this report the impact of ArtsLab on the sixteen participating organizations has been documented and the strength of the ArtsLab model has been confirmed I am proud to have been able to document the features of this outstanding program.”*

The model for building adaptability in leadership as well as resiliency, relevancy and relationships across sectors has proven to be a robust approach to capacity building. As a result, we are pleased to announce that Arts Midwest has shifted from managing ArtsLab as an incubated project to embracing it as a permanent program. We are also pleased to share that each of five foundations that collaboratively supported the work over the past three years have all generously supported the continuation of the work over the coming three years.

We look forward to advancing this important work on behalf of the arts and culture sector as well as the broader societal frame in which the arts have meaning.ⁱ

ⁱ This report is based on

- (a) the extensive evaluation work of Dr. Patricia Shifferd
- (b) The advisory support of an excellent team of foundation representatives that guided the program, including
 - Vickie Benson, Arts Program Director, The McKnight Foundation
 - Sharon DeMark, Program Officer, The Saint Paul Foundation
 - Gayle Ober, Board of Directors, Mardag Foundation
 - Catherine Jordan, Director of Advancing Solutions, Bush Foundation
 - and in the design, Nancy Fushan, independent arts consultant
- (c) The Strategy Team of advisors that guided curriculum development and program’s emergent approaches to capacity building, including
 - Kate Barr, Executive Director, Nonprofit Assistance Fund
 - Cathy Hartle, Sr. Program Manager for Organizational Effectiveness, Initiative Foundation
 - Anne Hunter, President, Hunter Sage Marketing
 - Mai Moua, PhD, President, Leadership Paradigms, Inc.
 - Sharon Rodning Bash, ArtsLab Program Director, Arts Midwest
 - David Fraher, Executive Director, Arts Midwest