



Creative Management Project



GOOD PRACTICES STORIES

A Culture of Collaboration: Working in Teams and Across Disciplines

Building effective teams, using staff teams for decision-making, and cultivating connections between different disciplines or areas of operation are all powerful strategies for strengthening an organization. These approaches have paid off in the arts, culture and heritage sector, allowing organizations that employ these practices to use their human and financial resources to greater advantage, while creating more satisfying workplaces.

For Alexa White-Hawley, who very recently moved into the position of General Manager at the **Nathaniel Dett Chorale** in Toronto after sitting on the Board and engaging in other roles with the Chorale, communication across the whole organization is very important. The Chorale now conducts an annual retreat with Board, staff and artists, building time for vocal work and for reflection on “how we want to identify ourselves, what we want to do, and who will do it.” Alexa White-Hawley notes that including singers in decisions “makes taking action on the decisions more likely to happen.” And she encourages organizations to “be clear what you want and why you are asking for it.”

In Winnipeg, the **Prairie Theatre Exchange** (PTE) puts a strong emphasis on communication, and takes advantage of its physical space to create openness. The layout of its offices is conducive to openness: all offices are on exterior walls, with a large open area in the centre filled with tables. The central area is used for lunches and meetings. “We work with openness and transparency; there are not a lot of closed doors. We hold our Board meetings in the centre, so anyone can hear and see what we discuss. We have very few secrets,” says Cherry Karpyschin, General Manager. As well, PTE arranges monthly staff meetings, and frequently circulates information to staff about what’s happening within the company. For Cherry Karpyschin, “as a management strategy, it’s about communication: to make sure the staff know what’s happening.” She advises: “Good communication limits problems down the road.”

Many organizations which have built effective teams remarked that regular staff meetings are essential to keep staff feeling informed and involved. For Chris Moynihan, Executive Director of **Dance Umbrella of Ontario** (DUO), “Weekly staff meetings are a must.” To make time for longer term thinking and team building, DUO convenes an annual retreat for the Board and staff, with two half-day retreats in advance for staff to consider issues and prepare for the full retreat.

The staff at the **Langley Centennial Museum** in British Columbia make time at the start of each day for a brief “stand up meeting” to check in about scheduling and any tasks that might need support from other members of the staff team. In addition, all staff commit to bi-weekly meetings, and an annual planning retreat. One task undertaken at the bi-weekly meetings was to go through each job description in detail, allowing, in the words of Sue Morhun, Manager,

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“everyone to see the detail of each other’s work. We looked for areas of overlap and potential for conflict, which helped everyone be more understanding of each other’s realities.”

Oakville Galleries in Ontario also examines job descriptions in discussions with staff and at staff meetings as a method of strengthening learning and teamwork. In the words of Francine Périnet, Director, “Jobs are discussed at staff meetings and reviewed in the context of operations. We reposition every gesture in the larger context. There is a shared understanding of the nature of our work, with every person collaborating on output and everyone responsible for their own work from their job description. This collaboration depends entirely on trust in our working relationships.” Francine Périnet brings a strong philosophy of collaboration to her work: “I believe in team work and non-hierarchical structure.” The Galleries practices this participative approach in programme planning, developing themes that are “anchored, linked and cross-pollinated through discussion and debate. Several themes at one time are integrated across the whole programme. These themes are used to give a sense of direction to staff, but not to constrain.” She encourages staff to maintain good communications and build internal relationships, which keeps “clear channels back-and-forth in the hierarchy of staff, Board and volunteers. As well, we create ‘moments of diversity’ for staff to share things beyond work,” such as lunches, pot lucks, and physical activities.

Faye Thomson, Co-Director of the Winnipeg-based **School of Contemporary Dance (SCD)**, agrees that a team approach to working together is effective: “We work very much on a collaborative model in which everyone is valued and sees that they are contributing. We put people where their strengths are, and help them see how they are part of a whole. Because we are not huge [fewer than 10 full-time staff], we can fine tune job descriptions so that people can use their own strengths, can see and feel that they have their own input into how the vision is realized.” SCD utilizes the collaborative model at performance events, involving staff from other areas in front-of-house roles. This approach serves two purposes: it strengthens the theatre complement, and makes it possible for all staff to participate in public performances. SCD’s management model is also reflected in the leadership: Faye Thomson and Co-Director Odette Heyn-Penner share a financial philosophy but bring different personalities and perspectives to build a partnership that, according to Faye Thomson, “is more than double our individual strengths.”

Lori Baxter, Executive Director of the **Alliance for Arts and Culture** in Vancouver, works from a strong team base that includes a “diversity of styles and a diversity of knowledge areas. We don’t work in silos, and everybody pitches in and helps out for specific tasks and in times of crisis.” They also adopt a pragmatic, non-judgemental approach to mistakes, saying: “It’s not brain surgery we are doing. If something goes wrong, we just say ‘oops,’ and then look at how we make sure it doesn’t happen again, and learn from it.” Lori Baxter feels strongly that it is important to create an enjoyable place to work, since staff spend “way too much of our time here not to have fun.”

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