

# **The Human Side of Implementing Action Strategies to Build Cultural Participation**

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We've learned a lot recently about how to build cultural participation. Some of the learning is at the practical level, as in the innovative programs described in Bill Moskin and Jill Jackson's study of values-based arts organizations, and in reports like *From NASCAR to Cirque du Soleil*. Some is at the level of deeper understanding about the motivations and behaviors of people who participate in the arts and people who don't, as in a recent study of arts usage by the Arts Marketing Center, the *Learning Audiences* study by Arts Presenters and the Kennedy Center, the ongoing RAND research program, and applications of Jerry Zaltman's ZMET.

These "new fundamentals," as Jerry Yoshitomi calls them, hold great promise for future efforts to build participation in the arts. As we begin to draw them together, through conferences like this and other knowledge synthesis activities, specific action strategies will emerge, based both in behavioral science and practical experience.

But then we face another challenge - getting this knowledge used by artists, arts organizations and communities to effect real change in the way Americans participate in the arts. Making change happen will require financial and human resources, and effective dissemination of information about new cultural participation action strategies. It also will require attention to the human side of implementing these strategies, and that's the topic I'll focus on today.

More than 80 years of behavioral science research about how people, organizations and communities handle change make it clear that the "human side of change" is often the Achilles heel of efforts to implement new programs. If we went around this room, no doubt each person could describe a wonderful new program that failed not because it wasn't good, perhaps even based in sound research, but because people passively resisted it, lost enthusiasm for it, or even actively sabotaged it. Cultural participation action strategies also are vulnerable to these complicated human dynamics.

In the Spring 2000 issue of the *National Arts Stabilization Journal*, leading arts CEOs talk about how they deal with the difficult challenges of change. The issue reprints a famous 1995 *Harvard Business Review* article called "Why Transformation Efforts Fail." In it, Harvard Business School professor John Kotter reports the results of his decade-long study of more than 100 companies and how they've fared in their efforts to implement major new programs inside their organizations. His results are discouraging: "A few of these corporate change efforts have been very successful. A few have been utter failures. Most fall somewhere in between, with a distinct tilt toward the lower end of the scale."

MIT's Michael Hammer, the leading "guru" of re-engineering, perhaps the most popular transformational intervention of the 1990's, has said that 2/3 of all re-engineering interventions have failed - mostly due to staff resistance. Human beings' innate resistance to change is "the most

perplexing, annoying, distressing, and confusing part" of re-engineering, says Hammer. Moreover, he goes on to say, resistance to change "is natural and inevitable. To think that resistance won't occur or to view those who exhibit its symptoms as difficult or retrograde is a fatal mistake ... The real cause of re-engineering failures is not the resistance itself but management's failure to deal with it."

I recently read a *Business Week* essay by James Collins, the management scientist who wrote the best-selling book *Built to Last*. He's just finished a 10-year study of 1,500 companies that made the *Fortune* 500 list since 1965, finding that only 11 of them made the transition to "great" companies, defined as having consistently outstanding shareholder returns.

These few companies had in common what Collins calls "immutable laws of management physics," like being fanatically consistent in applying the strategies they knew worked for them. When implementing cultural participation programs, what does behavioral science tell us are the principles we need to follow with "fanatic consistency" to deal with the human side of change? I'm going to suggest three of them.

***1 - Resistance and fear are normal human reactions to the inevitable stresses of change, and these reactions must be dealt with when implementing a new program.***

Whenever people do something new, they're taking risks. That produces stress, fear that change will lead to bad consequences, and resistance to letting go of old, comfortable ways. But behavioral science research has taught us that the best way to deal with these normal, natural fears and resistances is to encourage people to express them honestly, so that they can be dealt with.

For instance, the John S. & James L. Knight Foundation for seven years has been funding an Arts Marketing Collaborative program, which now is in various stages of development in eight communities across the country. Each of these programs involves creating a partnership among local arts agencies to work together on marketing the arts, pooling their resources, eliminating overlapping efforts and capitalizing on collective buying power. This of course means major changes in the way things have been done.

As these collaboratives unfold, Knight Foundation has provided support for convening a conference bringing together the major community players in nonprofit arts. An outside facilitator, psychologically trained, helps this group debate whether they really should start up the collaborative.

Participants are urged to voice their fears, discuss openly the reasons they think this strategy might not work, and what difficulties they anticipate in developing an arts marketing collaborative for their community.

For instance, many arts agencies are fearful that their image will be "homogenized" or their special audiences even alienated by a group marketing approach. As the fears and resistances are discussed, ways to respond to them can also be developed, such as starting with a "pilot" version of the marketing collaboration to see how it works, before trying it on a larger scale.

For a cultural participation action strategy, this means providing such an opportunity for all who will be affected by the new program - local artists, audience members, community leaders, and staff of

arts organizations. Some of the fears or resistances that surface may help to shape the program itself, as well as the manner of its implementation.

***2 - All people who'll be affected by a new program must participate actively in its implementation, encouraging them to feel a sense of ownership in it.***

The more people feel they have participated in shaping the way a program operates and how it is implemented, the more they will support it because they feel it belongs to them. Also, they'll have had the chance to fine-tune a program in ways that are likely to make it more successful. So, after surfacing fears and resistances (and dealing with them), behavioral science says the next step is to develop a broadly-based partnership to help implement the new cultural participation program.

Some of the most innovative cultural participation programs in the country already are following this principle. For instance, in Los Angeles, the Cornerstone Theatre, which works in inner city multicultural areas of the city, produces dramas that involve community residents in acting, writing, production. In Houston, the Museum of Fine Arts has a "A Place for All People" program, which involves exhibitions selected by local artists and community members - this is an especially clever strategy because it also empowers artists, who often resist cultural participation programming because they fear it will rob them of control over their work in an effort to curry favor with audiences.

***3 - The new program must be implemented with careful attention to the larger context of other changes that are happening to people, organizations and communities.***

In any community, artists, arts organizations and the public at large are contending with many other kinds of changes (including other programs they're being asked to implement) at the same time as the new cultural participation program comes along. Especially in urban areas, there may even be other, perhaps somewhat competing, arts participation efforts. Big changes may also be happening in education, business, social services or other aspects of the community.

Unless there's careful attention to this larger context, a new cultural participation program may be introduced when people are simply exhausted from other changes they're trying to make, and it may fail because of that. Or the program will lack credibility because it doesn't take account of other priorities the community is dealing with at a given point in time.

For example, in the effort to build an arts marketing collaborative in Grand Forks, North Dakota, considerable weight had to be given to the long-term impact of a devastating 1997 flood in this community. People are still getting their home and work lives back together four years later. This doesn't mean not to work for the new marketing program, but it does mean being sensitive to these larger issues when doing so.

At the same time, a new program may have greater impact if it's designed to take advantage of natural synergy with other changes that are happening. In San Jose, the newly-developed arts marketing collaborative effort is being coordinated with another program, a foundation-funded annual conference series called "ArtsBuild Communities." This innovative annual conference

concludes with an opportunity for participants to sit in their seats and write small grant applications that can be funded virtually overnight. The conference this year will be devoted to arts marketing, so there'll be chances for local arts agencies to learn about new developments in this area, and maybe get a small grant to help them with their own marketing challenges.

In the largest frame, any new program must be introduced with some sensitivity about the ever-increasing pace of change we all live with in today's world. From the Internet economy to changing social values, just about everybody can identify with novelist Dean Koontz's poetic statement: "It was as if God had turned up the control handle on the flow of time."

A "template for change" to use in strategic planning for implementation of a cultural participation program might involve answering thoughtfully these three questions:

1 - How can those implementing the new program surface fears and resistances people may have about the cultural participation program, so they can be acknowledged and dealt with?

2 - How the program implementers promote meaningful participation and ownership in the new program at all levels - artists, arts organization staff, and community members?

3 - How can the new cultural participation strategy be implemented with the most creative attention to other changes that are happening in the community at the same time?

Artists, arts managers and community leaders can help by insisting that effort be devoted to answering these questions before moving ahead. Funders can help not only by requiring that such questions be answered by their grantees being funded to implement a cultural participation program, but also by providing a space for convening the community to wrestle with these important issues. Funders might also provide capacity-building services for local arts agencies to increase their ability to address these questions, which can be very challenging when also dealing with all the technical aspects of a new program.

There are other ways behavioral sciences can help us create more effective cultural participation strategies. For instance, according to research conducted recently in California by AMS Research, many consumers don't like making decisions about what arts experiences they go to - they want somebody else to make the decision for them. We need to know more about who these decision-makers are, and how a cultural participation program can be designed to reach them. We already know that every community has "opinion leaders" who influence the thoughts and behaviors of many other people, and as Malcolm Gladwell reminds us in his recent book *The Tipping Point*, these people can have a disproportionate impact on major social outcomes in a community.

Behavioral science concepts may also be helpful in understanding better some of the longstanding attitudinal barriers in the arts to more effective marketing. For example, Cora Mirikitani of James Irvine Foundation says that the number one impediment to efforts her foundation funds on arts marketing is the perception among artists and arts organizations that the money will be used to sully the creative spirit. How can these fears and resistances be surfaced and dealt with?

I want to close by suggesting another level of input we need to seek when implementing cultural participation programs. I mentioned this talk to a painter friend last month, as we attended a Los Angeles benefit performance of *Sunday in the Park with George*.

When I asked for input, his immediate response was a creative one - reverse the angle, he said! That is, what can the arts contribute to our understanding of behavioral sciences and its impact on cultural participation? How can images from Shakespeare's plays, or Picasso's paintings, or the great Sondheim song "Putting It Together" help to illuminate the challenges of complex human dynamics we face in building more effective cultural participation strategies for American communities? Perhaps that can be a topic of conversation in this conference, and a reminder to all of us to keep the artists in our communities, and the artist in each of us, close at hand when we are engaged in any effort to make change happen.

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