

## Arts Survival Training: An AMA Podcast

### Show Description:

*Arts Survival Training* is a podcast from the Arts Marketing Association about creating stronger, more resilient arts organisations. In each episode, you'll hear UK arts professionals weigh in on the skills and mindsets our field needs in order to survive in the face of social, political, and environmental challenges. *Arts Survival Training* is hosted, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon.

### Episode 1: Mission, Vision, and Values

#### Episode Description:

*In this episode, we're talking about mission, vision, and values. You'll hear from four arts professionals on the challenges they face in staying focused on mission, keeping their vision relevant, and ensuring that everything they do aligns with their institution's values.*

*The voices in this episode are Alia Raffia Ullah, Phil Douglas, Sarah Reynolds, and Jo Taylor. These interviews were recorded at the 2019 AMA Conference: Rewire – Culture, Audiences and You.*

#### TRANSCRIPT

**Hannah Hethmon (Scripted):** *Let's talk about survivalists, preppers. You know, those people storing up massive amounts of food and water in bunkers so they'll be ready when the apocalypse comes? If the earth's poles shift, they'll be comfortable and safe while the rest of us scramble to adapt.*

*On one hand, it's a bit nutty...spending your whole life preparing for the end of the world. But when I look at what they've put away, it does make me consider that I'm definitely under-prepared for even the most mild of disaster scenarios.*

*As I was prepping for this year's Arts Marketing Association Conference in Newcastle—pun intended—got to talking with AMA staff about survival training and what that looks like for arts organizations here in the UK.*

*This year's conference theme was about rewiring our thinking on how we build connections, so we can ensure that organizations thrive, but before we can thrive we first need to survive, don't we.*

*I'm recording this in the wake of the hottest days ever recorded in the UK, in an era of seemingly non-stop budget cuts for the arts, at a time when the event-that-shall-not-be-named continues to loom in the future.*

*I don't think building bunkers under our institutions will help much with the challenges facing the future of the arts, but I do think there's more we can do to ensure the arts and our planet are around for generations to come.*

[Upbeat Theme Music Plays]

*You're listening to Arts Survival Training, a podcast from the Arts Marketing Association about creating stronger, more resilient arts organizations. I'm Hannah Hethmon.*

[Theme Music Ends]

*In the next three episodes, you're going to hear the voices of AMA members, collected at the 2019 AMA Conference: Rewire – Culture, Audiences and You.*

*In this episode, we're talking about mission, vision, and values. You'll hear from four arts professionals on the challenges they face in staying focused on mission, keeping their vision relevant, and ensuring that everything they do aligns with their institution's values.*

**Alia Raffia Ullah:** Mission and values give you a real sense of purpose. And without that purpose, you don't know who you're meant to serve, and you don't know what you're meant to do. So get your mission and values in check before you decide to do anything. Otherwise you're going to become irrelevant, and you don't want that.

My Name's Alia Raffia Ullah, and I work at Manchester Museum, and I am the marketing and media officer there.

I'm really, really lucky because I work in a place that has a really core sense of its mission and values. So we're currently undergoing a capital development project right now. So a transformation that's a 13.5 million pound transformation; it's called "Hello Future." And our big ambition in regards to that is to become the most inclusive, caring, and imaginative

museum in the world. Now that's a big ambition. But we also have a really clear mission. So we are working towards a sustainable world, but building a sustainable world, and an understanding between cultures.

I try to ensure that all the work that I do fits within either, you know, is it inclusive, is it caring, is it imaginative? Okay. So on the right tracks. And am I working towards building an understanding between cultures and a sustainable world? And if it fits within those remits, then yeah, I'm on the right tracks.

I think where it gets difficult is...we're doing a lot of work around...with our most local communities and a lot of co-produced produced work, which is really important to ensure that we're relevant to the people we serve. There be a conversation around values and there may be there may be some kind of conflict within that where we have to look at managing what we can do in terms of making sure our values align and that's sort of where the challenges do arise.

We're looking a lot right now, especially in our digital communications, of doing a lot of co-produced digital comms. So having people come and use our social media platforms to profile the work that they do. And that's going to take a lot of bravery because we're going to let go of our password and give people rein of our social media channels. But just ensuring that whilst that happens, we do still try to stay true to our values and our mission.

With the commission invasion it's got to be a degree of flexibility. Because we are there to serve our communities as public funded institutions. So we do have a responsibility to ensure that we are representing the needs that they have or the values that they have and ensuring that their voices are heard and giving them agency to do that.

**Hannah Hethmon:** Mission statements and vision statements aren't infallible. How can arts organizations evaluate their own mission?

**Alia Raffia Ullah:** I think that comes back to, again, our audiences and our communities. And I think you really need to listen. You really need to listen to what people are saying about their experiences or about what they want and about what they need.

A Manchester Museum, we've appointed a new director, Esme Ward, who's really leading our vision and she's done a lot of work thinking about what our audiences need in terms of what they have been saying, and we undertake visitor surveys all the time and offer people opportunities to comment and feedback. And all of that has really fed into our values of being inclusive, imaginative, and caring. I think because she's still in that work and taken a lot of time

to consider what our local communities need and what people who come to the museum have fed back....at the moment we feel that we are...that our mission is the right way forward. And it's really working for us because there's a lot of flexibility there as well within it.

What does it mean to care? So that means: it is to care for our collections, is to care for the people. It's to care for issues that are important to our communities, to be imaginative. A museum should be imaginative. I mean, we've got amazing objects and they tell fascinating stories. And we also work with people as well who've got amazing stories to tell. And to being truly inclusive because we are there to serve everyone and everybody has a right to Manchester Museum and its collections. It's not for a select few who happen to work there or for a particular kind of person. It's for everyone, and we need to make sure that we try to serve that so that everyone feels that they can come and enjoy it.

**Hannah Hethmon:** What kind of advice would you give to organizations, or to individuals working in arts organizations, who feel that it's hard to make that mission central?

**Alia Raffia Ullah:** I think that that's a real organizational issue across the piece. I mean that everybody who works there has a responsibility from the top to people who are working directly with the communities or people who are working outside of the institution...everybody across the board has a responsibility to ensuring that the mission and values are at the core of what they're doing. The reason why that is, is because it gives you a really strong sense of your purpose. And if you don't know your purpose, you don't really know what direction to go into, and when you get a really messy brand, you get a really messy identity and people don't really know what you're there to serve. You become irrelevant.

I think it's really important to listen. The first thing you need to do is listen to people who are outside of the place. I mean you need to put your self in the position of the visitor or your audiences so you get a sense of what they need and what they want. And that's how you establish some really great values. And then from there you need to make sure that everybody in the institution has a strong sense of what that is. So whether that means you know, doing a lot of work in terms of having building sessions between teams, making sure that there's that there's some kind of infrastructure in place where people consider the mission and values before they do anything. So before they organize it that an event, they think "Is this core to our mission and values?" Before they put something out on social media, "Is it core to our mission and values?"

I mean, language is so important and working in marketing communications. If I didn't have that really strong sense of purpose that we are there to build an understanding between cultures,

we are there to build a sustainable world, we are inclusive, imaginative, and caring...I wouldn't know what kind of language I need to use and it helps me all the time in my day to day.

So I think it's really important to ensure that everybody has a responsibility. It doesn't just sit with the marketing team, it doesn't just sit with the leadership. It sits with everybody in the institution.

[Transition Music Plays]

**Phil Douglas:** If you are a person who has a responsibility or a role or a budget or a resource, know and check your privilege and understand that your lived experience is different to others and own with honesty what you do and don't know and invite others into everything that you do.

My name is Phil Douglas, and I am the director, producer, founder of Curious Arts, which is an LGBTQ arts organization based in Newcastle and Gateshead.

**Hannah Hethmon:** As an arts organization we have lofty ideals and vision and a sense of what should be in the world and what our organization can do at its best. But 100% of the time that requires pushing back against a variety of factors that stop us from being where we want to be and doing what we want to do.

**Phil Douglas:** I think it's a challenge as a small organization when we work with larger organizations... obviously in any partnership you try and identify shared goals, shared outcomes, shared morals. But with large organizations, they sometimes have many, many different masters or the stakeholders and you can be such a micro part of their work program or their year. And so what we've found is a little mantra that we have is kind of trying to encourage them to help us "police the promise."

So one person in a large organization can promise you something and then they move on or the budget changes or the priorities change, which is understandable. It's just understanding the impact on that on the smaller organization or the small partner or the communities that you were working with to bring into this project or this activity. It's just trying to encourage the managers, the directors, the people in power and influence to remind them not to be passive in their privilege, but also to constantly encourage them to think about, you know, coming to the really, really small youth showcase or the small community showcase. Because when people end up in roles which I removed from the grassroots or from the coal face, so to speak, and they don't see the delivery and they end up in strategy land, that's great for the vision, but it

becomes disconnected. So they actually don't understand and see, and are refreshed in understanding the value of the impact of the work through true grassroots partnerships and output.

And there's something about being honest about what you can commit to. So ensuring that organizations are clear on if they are prioritizing something over something else, that is their prerogative and they need to do that because it's always revert resources versus vision and what's actually going on in the present time. But there's something about also honor, honor of honesty and honor of commitment. It may not be the full commitment that was originally planned, but ensuring that they constantly reflect on the impact on smaller partners, our communities in their big kind of boardroom decisions.

Challenges for us: One live example at the moment is we need, you know, funding or income generation. But we work in a kind of an LGBTQ arts realm where a lot of people are either new to engaging in the arts or don't have place of personal value on it. So there's something about the affordability of those communities and how much they can afford to pay to consume this, this culture. There's also something about perceived value. So they wouldn't spend money on it if they don't think it's for them or represents them or they just don't have any value in it because they value other things cause we haven't achieved that kind of cultural value awareness of experiences with them. So there's something that we need to do around affordability, accessibility, pay-it-forward ticketing schemes we do.

And you know, venues might need income as well, but there is always a solution that can be designed by, you know, people or resources or funds that could be jointly assessed so that we can remove that barrier of engagement for...LGBT asylum seekers is on in our case, or young people who cannot afford the transport costs to get to the event.

So I think it's a big thing for us to constantly a challenge as a small organization, the larger organizations and saying, oh you say you want to reach x thousands of young people or this many people. But if your show is finish at a certain time and there's no buses to more rural areas, then you are truly not a regional resource. You are not reaching those people. And it's by design.

And the thing is that we have the gift of changing the design of our offer. We can change the time, the price and the location of a lot of what we are doing. And within that we need to engineer the soft invitations and create ownership over this offer. And if it's not designed with these people all by these people or informed by them, then it's not theirs. And it's literally just

an output from an organization as opposed to something which people have a buy into and will have value of it because they've designed it or informed it or been part of its creation.

**Hannah Hehtmon:** So do you think that sometimes what we in the arts organizations feel is us clinging to integrity and to the integrity of the mission is actually just us confusing the mission with the infrastructure and institutions that we are used to seeing. And in fact like you're saying, the mission does not require us to have a show that starts at this time of day.

**Phil Douglas:** Yeah. I think what is culture and who owns it is a very live and dynamic conversation because it's a perception thing. So actually the word "culture" itself is a barrier. The word "arts" is a barrier. People are just deejaying in that bedrooms and they're making crafts at home, having a little cheeky crafternoon with a friend. This is about kind of deconstructing all these language and labels and the need to, I understand we need to monitor, but the way in which we monitor things.

I think it goes back to any business plan, a mission statement of any organization, large or small. If it is not people focused and refreshed regularly, it's also defunct because we don't know what the mission is if we don't speak to people because surely they should design the mission. They are the stake holders, they're the consumers and the owners and they pay their taxes or they make their donations. So we need to shift this power from the board room and the chief execs and we have to create this democracy in decision making. Otherwise we are timing out our cultural infrastructure by not designing soft invitations ownership.

[Transition Music]

**Sandra Reynolds:** Be authentic. What really will keep you aligned to your vision and mission is really about connecting with the people that you're working with. It's very easy to get stuck in the office to be on your computer and to be, you know, oh, I'm too busy, I can't go to a creative arts session, I can't go and see a recording. But actually that's absolutely key. You need to take that time out and actually be connected to the people that you say that you're working with, because that will really strengthen and reconfirm your mission and value as to why you are doing what you are doing.

**Sandra Reynolds:** Hi, my name is Sandra Reynolds and I work for an organization called Heart N Soul. And I'm also an AMA board member. Heart N Soul is a creative arts organization that believes in the power and talents of people with learning disabilities. And my role is really to kind of just really share and communicate all the great work that we're doing.

**Hannah Hethmon:** Can you talk about some of the challenges that arise that threatened to compromise or dull or just hinder or slow down the mission and the vision?

**Sandra Reynolds:** Yeah, I mean, I think one of the key things that can hinder, I guess the mission is people's perceptions of people with learning disabilities. I think in society people definitely still have quite a negative perception of people with disabilities as a whole. And I think for people with learning disabilities in particular, I kind of feel like they are ignored really in society.

So whenever I say that, you know, I worked for an organization that works with people with learning disabilities, the first thing they always say is, "Oh wow, that must be so rewarding." And it's really quite condescending because that is not what our mission is about at all. As I mentioned, our mission is about believing in the power and talents of people with learning disabilities. They have a lot of power, they have a lot of talent to share. So I think for us that is just read that it's probably one of the key hindrances that we face.

For a lot of people, they only have that kind of light bulb moment that actually, you know, people with learning disabilities have value, is if they actually come to one of our events or come to one of our projects. And what they realize is that, oh, these people that I thought were, you know, a bit odd and you know, people that I wouldn't want to associate with, they're just like everybody else.

**Hannah Hethmon:** How do you overcome challenges like that where public perception is a barrier to doing the work you want to do?

**Sandra Reynolds:** Yeah, I mean for us it's just really to show the work really. So it's really a case of really sharing the process. So we're very much into kinds of documentation. So we're always filming things on our on our cameras. Social media is hugely influential, and for us that's been a key way in which we can overcome some of those hindrances.

It's also about coming to events like the AMA conference really and other conferences that Heart N Soul are part of and really talking about and sharing what we're doing. Usually what we do is we ensure that it's the staff team member and one of our artists and participants that we're working with because it can be quite easy just to talk about, you know, people with learning disabilities and, you know, we're talking on their behalf, but at Heart N Soul everybody that we work with is integral to what we do and they actually are, the ones are making the decisions and then we make them happen. It's all about sharing.

**Hannah Hethmon:** So you've got that kind of behind-the-scenes documenting because I guess if someone was inside the organization working, they would see exactly what you're doing and they could get behind the vision and the mission without having to spend time wrapping their head around whatever it is they don't understand. And by using behind-the-scenes media as simple as, you know, I'm sure videos and pictures, you bring them into that space and allow them to get on board with the vision even though they're not in the space.

We have the public mission statement and we have the public version of what we do that we share to people and we don't often realize that the most effective tool we have to do our work is to let people see us doing our work because we are passionate and we care, and by watching us work in that kind of way, that behind-the-scenes they are involved in the process and they come on board and we don't have to convince them of the mission with rhetoric or slick media. They come to the same conclusion as we do that what we're doing is important.

**Sandra:** I think it's true. I mean, you know, most of the work is happening behind the scenes, but you do have to try and find ways to let people in.

[Transition Music]

**Jo Taylor:** People don't have to engage with us. Going to the theater, going to a museum, going to a festival is a discretionary activity. We need to give people reason to believe. We need to represent something that is truly powerful. And that can be truly powerful as in it's thoroughly entertaining or it can be almost spiritually transformative. But we have to be able to present ourselves in the world as something incredibly exciting, extraordinary, seductive, fun, intellectually stimulating, all of those things.

**Jo Taylor:** My name is Joe Taylor. I'm a director of a company called Morris Hargreaves McIntyre. We are an international strategic consultancy.

And the first thing I want to say is I don't want to belittle or dismiss any of those things that present themselves as challenges, as blockages, as reasons why individuals and groups of individuals within organizations adopt behaviors or do things or make decisions or drive strategies that are actually representing mission creep or that are directly undermining or even just not contributing anything towards the cause.

We're here because we want to change the world. And we identify the ways in which we're going to do that through our organizations. And if we're doing anything that isn't contributing, isn't adding value to that, then we have to ask ourselves some serious questions.

I think sometimes the reasons that people give as why they're undertaking an activity or behaving in a way that isn't contributing to mission...money is almost always involved. Even if that's not explicit. When you dig in, people are seduced do things because that because of resilience. And I think that's actually an irony and possibly a bit of an excuse. Cause I think the irony in that is that cause-led, mission-led organizations....the living your values being true to your purpose, living your brand, as Clair R spoke pfin a conference session I was in this morning about living that...is actually the most surefire way to success.

So actually organizations will be more successful, more financially resilient, will grow, audiences will deepen their relationships with their communities when they are true to themselves and true to their cause and true to their purpose.

[Theme Music Plays]

**Hannah Hethmon (Scripted):** *Thanks for listening to Arts Survival Training, a podcast from the Arts Marketing Association. For more resources and tools to help you make better connections with your audiences and achieve more impact in your work, visit the AMA website at [a-m-a.co.uk](http://a-m-a.co.uk) and follow the AMA on Twitter at [@AMAdigital](https://twitter.com/AMAdigital). Also check out the AMA's free resource website, Culture Hive, that's [culturehive.co.uk](http://culturehive.co.uk) AMA members get training, exclusive resources, and opportunities to network with other arts marketing professionals. Join today by visiting the AMA website. Again, thats [a-m-a.co.uk](http://a-m-a.co.uk)*

*This episode was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon.*

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