

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 organizations. 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 3: Wellness is Not Optional

Episode Description:

In this episode we're talking about how arts organizations need to be turning inward to assess and improve wellness in this sector, what practical steps organizations can take to care for their staff, and how individuals can get arts leaders to make wellness a priority.

The voices in this episode are Sebastian Cater, Phil Douglas, and Jo Taylor. These interviews were recorded at the 2019 AMA Conference: Rewire – Culture, Audiences and You.

TRANSCRIPT

Hannah (Scripted): *It's no secret that our field asks a lot and often doesn't give much back in return. We love what we do, but sometimes it doesn't feel like the work loves us back.*

We spend our careers taking care of others, working overtime to improve lives with the arts and make the world a better place.

*We're making change in our organizations to better respond to the needs of our audiences. But who is taking care of us? Is the work making *our* lives better or has our commitment to the arts become a source of stress and unhappiness?*

[Theme Music Plays]

Your'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 this three episode mini-series, you'll hear the voices of AMA members, collected at the 2019 AMA Conference: Rewire – Culture, Audiences and You.

In this episode we're talking about how arts organizations need to be turning inward to assess and improve wellness in this sector, what practical steps organizations can take to care for their staff, and how individuals can get arts leaders to make wellness a priority.

Sebastian Cater: I think my hope is that people ultimately see mental health in the same way as they see physical health. What tends to happen is you say mental health can people just hear mental and I think stress and I think all the bad stuff that goes with it, but really if someone's talking about the physical health and they're talking about gym and yoga and all the good things were really supportive. What I'd love to see is when someone says they're working on their mental health, that people applaud that and want to find out more and want to find out what they can learn from it as well.

I'm Sebastian Cater. I'm a freelance consultant working in the arts, marketing and business development worlds. And I used to be marketing director at Sadlers Wells.

Hannah: This field can be really challenging, partly because we care so much.

Sebastian Cater: It's a really good point. And I think that the caring is what attracts a lot of people. You know, we go into the arts because we want to support it. But I think often what can happen is then that sort of caring can override caring for ourselves. And I think generally in the arts there's not a great culture of wellbeing and self care. I think just historically has never really been talked about. I think maybe it's almost been seen as an indulgence because we've got to support the art no matter what the show has got to go on.

Things are starting to change. And I think it's a combination of personal responsibility that's needed. Each of us need to think about what we need to create balance in our life so that we're, you know, we can see what we're doing really objectively and come to it from a place of strength.

But I think also there needs to be leadership. So, you know, me as a, as an arts leader, if you like you know, the roles I've had before, sort of running a team, running a department, I think we have a responsibility to talk about it as well. You know, anyone who is managing teams of people has a responsibility to make sure that their teams are, you know, in a good place that they're cared for.

It's a sort of, it's not just a human resources issue, it's a human issue. We can't just rely on HR to sort of sort stuff out when it goes wrong. You know, we can't afford for people to have time off sick if they're not feeling well. We need to be supporting people on their journey throughout.

And I think there's, there's lots of ways we can do that. As leaders, we can make sure that we're bringing up self care, literally every time we're having interactions with people. We can talk about our approach as well. And I think ultimately, you know, organizations need to have policies on this. They need to have a wellness policy so that they can say, this is the kind of culture that we are. It's not just about creating great art. It's about creating a really supportive culture where we can ensure that everyone is able to achieve the best that they can be.

Hannah: Would you elaborate more on what a wellness policy would look like at an institution? What's in a wellness policy?

Sebastian: I mean it doesn't have to be big stuff. It could be having mental health first aiders. It's a relatively easy thing. Same principle as a sort of physical first aiders. Someone can go on training and these mental health first aiders course. It's a two day course and actually you could have anyone at any level of the organization doing that. And it just means that they are equipped with the skills to talk to people. They have the comfort with the language of talking about wellness. And it doesn't mean they're a psychologist and it doesn't mean that they are a therapist. It just means that they can talk to people and people know they can go to them if they're feeling challenged or they're feeling stressed. So that's a really easy way.

It might be having a quiet room, a designated quiet room so people can just go and just be quiet or meditate. Which is a sort of resource thing, but it doesn't necessarily have to cost, you know, if you've got a dressing room that isn't being used in the day, you could just designate that.

It might also be, you know, email policy. Actually, you know, if you don't have a policy on email, if you don't say upfront, this is what we expect people to do....so we expect people to answer them in the day, but we don't expect to answer them at night or on weekends. If you don't say

that, then the policy by default is we expect emails to be answered 24/7. So, you know, some of it is a practical thing and some of it is more of a personal thing.

Hannah: Do you think there is more stress put on entry level employees who don't know that they can not answer emails or don't know that they cannot do things like that?

Sebastian: Totally. If you don't have an upfront policy on wellness in your organization, then there is no wellness policy. The default is everyone just has to muddle through. New people to the organization are watching what the people above them are doing. And if people haven't been taught how to work healthily and smartly, you know, if people aren't being encouraged to take breaks, if people aren't being encouraged to take a lunch break and actually get up from your desk and walk around. If you're not actively talking about that, then you know, the organization and the leaders that are encouraging unhealthy working practices and, and that is a problem. I think as well, new people, generally younger people are coming from a very different place to, you know, the generation above and they're coming from a place where you know that they're looking at the employment sector and they're asking themselves, you know, what kind of environment do I want to work in.

You know, working in an arts environment is important, but actually they also want to be working places where they are treated with a bit more respect. And where people are talking about things that maybe we don't always as leaders don't always feel comfortable about. If organizations are not having those conversations upfront, even at an interview stage, we have to really think about our recruitment policies, because if you've got young people, new people coming into the industry and they have a choice of range of organizations, a range of types of work they can do. If you've got organizations that are sort of saying, I don't really know what my wellness policy is, you know, to be honest, money's never been that great, it's effectively quite a stressful environment. Yes, we're supporting the art, but actually young young people nowadays can create their own art so they don't need to work for organizations. So my fear is there's going to be a bit of a recruitment crisis and actually that huge pool of people we used to have to draw on to, to recruit from is, is ever shrinking. And that's an issue.

Hannah: Do you think salaries, salaries below the living wage, that kind of stuff has an impact on wellness for employees?

Sebastian Cater: I think we've I think we've traditionally relied on working in a creative environment to sort of make up for the lack of money effectively. And that's not just the artists, that's not for profit across the board, you know? People coming into the industry are looking at what we are offering. So being close to the art is one factor, but the environment in which

they're working is a really major one. Yeah. Money isn't everything, but you know when you've got this generalizing now, but you know, I'm going to say the m word millennials, but if you've got, you know, young people, millennials who are creating their own brands, monetizing their life through youtube or Instagram or whatever, you know, they know how to generate income off their own back and actually they're looking at these environments and going, well hang on a minute, there are positives there. But actually there's a lot of, you know, if I feel like that I'm going to be going into place, which isn't offering flexible working or working from home and or things that they can do if they're their own sort of self employed person. I think it's, it's a big factor and it is going to make people think twice about whether they want to go into the arts.

You know, it's not enough anymore just to say come and work for the arts. Particularly when you've got a generation who've come through and...the creative work, whether it's plays or music is effectively cut, massive cuts. So you've got a whole generation who aren't exposed to it. So really we're putting those adverts out there saying come and work for the arts. And they're going, well, what is the arts? You know, I might not have experienced it in my lifetime. So you have to work....Organizations have to work even harder to try and draw people in.

Hannah: What would you say to people who are working in organizations that don't have wellness policies, that don't make that a priority, and who feel the stress and the pressure of this environment but don't have the power to make top down change? How would you suggest they advocate for themselves and for their colleagues and simply take care of themselves?

Sebastian: That's a really good question. The first thing I always say is breathe. Cause everything's better when you breathe. We have a tendency to just, if we're stressed, you know, everything just gets tight. You know, our mind gets tight, our body gets tight. So the first thing is breathe, go for a walk, think about it. But practically as well, you know, talk to other people, talk to your peers, see if there's other people in the organization who are feeling the same way. Talk to your manager is the next thing. And then, then you know, if you're feeling you're not getting anywhere there, then maybe talk to HR. Keep an eye on what other organizations are doing. Cause it's really interesting. There's some great work that's out there that organizations who are sort of taking the lead. I've heard about Scottish Ballet doing interesting work.

There's sort of other organizations who are, who are taking the lead and you know, the, the, the people at the top are going, there's an issue here and we need to sort it out. You know, maybe bring in those case studies and go, you know what other people are doing it and here are the positive effects. They've got a more happy workforce, their attrition rates are going down so they're not having to spend as much money on recruitment. And you know, happy workers are productive workers. So that's a pretty strong business case because you know, if

you use it as a business, your model is just churn. Let's just get through people, you know, they'll last a couple of years and then they'll get stressed and burnt out and go somewhere else. It's not really sustainable and it, and it sort of is immoral.

So actually, as someone who is maybe experiencing stress or seeing that there's an environment which is quite stressful, there are definitely things you can do but maybe rather than it coming from a sort of a place of, Oh God, I don't know what to do, actually be proactive and see what else is out there and go to HR or your manager with some ideas and some suggestions about different...potential different approaches.

Hannah: I guess you kind of touched on this by saying it's a moral, and I appreciate you saying it, so boldly, but do you feel that there is a disconnect between the care that we have for our communities ...externally right.... our visitors and our audience...and the care we have for the community that is our workforce, that is also people in our community.

Sebastian: That's a really interesting one. Arts organizations are definitely going on a journey in terms of engaging with the communities better. You know, if you look at the new Arts Council 10 year strategy, that's a really big part of it. We can't just make art for a select group of people. It has to be for everyone, which I know has always been a thing. But it just increasing that key the way it's going. And I mean, what I've seen of that strategy so far, there's not a lot of information in there or forward thinking about the workforce. So in some ways I appreciate that that's not really what the Arts Council is for, but unless our sort of major organizations, whether it's funders or trade bodies, unless they are saying to us this is a problem, you know, stress is endemic, and unless we have solutions are part of the problem.

So people need to step up. And I get it, you know, you've got a whole generation of people, particularly leaders...I include myself, you know, I've been in the sector for nearly 20 years, and no one's really had a conversation about stress reduction, stress management, wellbeing. So, you know, the people at the top, unless they've gone on a journey themselves, are pretty much in the dark. So I think what people have to do is feel the fear and just embrace new, embrace exploration, be prepared to try stuff out. If you think mindfulness of wellness is some hippie thing, well maybe it is, you know, but what do we want? Do we want to be a happy hippie or we don't want to want it to be depressed and you know, quivering in a corner. You know, it's like we surely, if we want to create great art, we want people to enjoy it and appreciate it. We want to create happy communities and we want to create happy workforces. So, it's going to be a journey for everyone, but we just have to try something, share what we're doing. And gradually we're going to get better at it

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

Yeah, so I identify as a kind of yeah, a millennial, somebody who's an aspy, so that's a term meaning kind of aspergers syndrome. I have a mild version of aspergers. I also identify as a queer man. I also am very clearly quite a softly spoken northerner. So I think that within the arts world of the UK, where I've come up against is having quite a young looking face. People always assumed for years that I was the intern or the apprentice. So that's kind of institutionalized ageism to start with. Cause no one thought I had a valued contribution. So I actually got skipped in lots of meetings. They just went past me thinking I was a note-taker. And then on top of that, there is something about, you know, queer spaces in arts organizations.

Coming from a working class background, I don't feel as though a lot of big buildings, new builds and redeveloped buildings, huge contemporary art galleries or music centers. They're not for me. I don't know how to behave in them. So there's something about just breaking down these social norms. Like I want to tweet about an opera that I'm in. We have to roll with the times and accept that people want to engage in culture in different ways. And also culturally we have different behaviors.

I take groups of LGBT asylum seekers to see shows as part of our project and they, you know, behave differently. They cheer, they whoop they put their feet on the chairs, they don't understand or place any value on our very British behavior of politeness and conformitism. But their response is not less valuable than ours. It's just we are very kind of structured.

So when it comes to kind of wellbeing, my thing is about understanding that people behave and respond differently. We need honesty in that and permission like let's just give people permission to be in these big buildings and see these big fancy shows and things that are grassroots and high quality on their doorstep.

For me, I think self care for artists and independent freelancers is absolutely crucial because we don't have the resource or the infrastructure or the line management, which they do in organizations. And I think organizations should be more supportive to that. If something needs to be canceled or postponed because of an artist's self care. We have to remind ourselves in this sector that it doesn't work without the artist and the artists are the least paid and the most overworked. So the system is actually imbalanced. We just need to own that and acknowledge it and start designing our way out of it. It's okay to acknowledge your power and balance.

So yeah, going back to self care and wellbeing, I think owning what you need in a space. And I did a presentation today and I just said, just so you know, after this, this and this, I'm very tired today. But yeah, creating comfortable and safe spaces. If people want to go out of the room and take a call, that's fine. Everyone's busy. But yeah, being true to yourself and just giving people permission to be more human and being more kind. We can be bound and overwhelmed by our to do list, but we're all still humans and we all still care and we have to revisit the passion as to why we're working in this sector.

Hannah: I think that equally applies to the artists, to the visitors and to the workers, to themselves, the people that are working in this industry. Making space for everyone to, I mean, people will figure out how to be comfortable in space....it's not that we don't need to make them comfortable but allowing people to make themselves comfortable, to put their feet up on the chair if that's how they like to watch. And applying that metaphor then to our workers as well to our staffers. Because I think a lot of times we don't afford the same attention....We want to make our visitors comfortable. And of course that's important, but we don't apply the same values to our staffers, to the people working at our institutions.

Phil Douglas: That's absolutely correct. And we're kind of, for some reason, our bound by tradition, we are policing these rigid behaviors and kind of cultural attitudes to something. And you say it right. We're trying to be more open with audiences and customers, but then we're still creating a such strict kind of restrictive ways of operating for stuff. And it's ok to fail. Like everyone's failed. It's no big secret, you know, like, just letting someone fail and allowing them time to own it and recover it. And I think that's...we don't talk about that enough at all. We don't talk about failure. We don't talk about the barriers and considerations that individually, you know, a queer, disabled single parent who is an artist trying to make work is navigating just to be in the room. We don't place enough time or conversation around understanding people's people's approaches and people's experiences.

[Transition Music Plays]

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

We work in organizations that, I'm just going to say typically we're not coming to work because of the astronomical salaries. So we all come to places of work where we care an awful lot.

I don't want to confess what percentage of my life is spent thinking about work. I'm just revealing how unhealthy I am there and in front of you now. But therefore we care a lot and so to the other people we work with and that makes for emotional relationships.

The only thing I want to share here, particularly as I think that we're waking up far too late, but at least we're waking up to thinking about how we encourage a culture which allows wellness within our organizations.

I'm really proud to work for an organization where we don't just have health and safety officers. We have mental health and safety officers. I just think, and that's a relatively recent thing for us, and we have wellness Wednesdays. We have lots of other things we're implementing, but I feel that is great to know that there's people in my team around me whose job it is to look out for and guide people. They're not going to give us medical advice, but they're going to signpost us, and we all look out for each other. We now know if I think somebody might be struggling, I know exactly what to do, who to talk to. There's something just in their existence that makes me feel more well.

Sebastian Cater: Breathe. Everything gets better with breathing. And try something. Try something that will make yourself feel better. And if you're a leader, try something that will make your team feel better. You know, you have to make a change, make a difference, whatever that is. But you know, it's only by each person taking responsibility that we can gradually go on a journey to areally happy, you know, healthy workforce.

[Outro Music Plays]

Hannah (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 audience and achieve more impact in your work, visit the AMA website at [dash m dash a.co.uk](http://dashmdasha.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 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 dash m dash a.co.uk.*

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

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