



Inside the Edge

**21st Century people - why we need them and
where we can find them**

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MMM: Designing for Transition

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Last year, I was involved in commissioning two publications, which separately and together start to tell a deep story of the people working in the arts - I'd call them 21st Century people.

These people are already demonstrating ways of being that chronicle some of the special qualities I'd argue are unique to the arts world such as a toleration for ambiguity and difference, a capacity to constantly question and play with rules and offer a 'source of reconciliation, exhilaration, and hope which never fails'¹. They are also examples of the kind of people who will thrive in the unpredictability and complexity that will be the hallmark of this century. They start to offer an understanding of the kind of people that we need more of in order to help the rest of us feel our way in these uncertain times - people who can realise new responses and routes through the complex changes in our globalised world²

The first paper is a provocation: *Rising to the Occasion: Cultural Leadership in Powerful Times* by Graham Leicester³, commissioned by Mission, Models, Money (MMM) during its last phase. It argues that within this complex and fast paced world it is the arts that attracts and develops a particular kind of person and particular way of working that is key to operating successfully in this environment. The second, commissioned by David Micklem, then at Arts Council England, and Jerwood, is a book: *The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible* by Kate Tyndall that describes, through a series of personal journeys, a subset of exactly the sorts of people, qualities and ways of being that we need in the arts and are needed more broadly elsewhere, told through stories of real people's motivations and achievements.

¹ Anthony Storr (1992), *Music and the Mind* (Collins)

² Kate Tyndall (2007) *The Producers, Alchemists of the Impossible*, (Arts Council England and the Jerwood Charitable Foundation)

³ Graham Leicester (2007) *Rising to the Occasion: Cultural Leadership in Powerful Times* (Mission, Models, Money)



These two uplifting pieces of writing offer a language and a framework that help catalyse deeper thought about the individuals that we need to grow more of to lead, guide and connect us, and the insights help us see that these people are found in abundance in the act of producing and creating the kind of meaning and value that is generated by artists.

Both publications have shaped a key strand of MMM's fourth phase of work MMM: Designing for Transition (or Deft for short) which will focus on the development of 21st century people.

What have we learned so far?

During the first three phases of MMM, we became very conscious of the extreme pressure put on many working in the arts and the enormous levels of passionate belief, personal commitment and sacrifice which enables the sector to flourish.

We are also more than aware that we are living in 'powerful times', boundless complexity, shifting sands - choose your own metaphor. Not only an age of change but a change of age. This is placing ever-increasing demands on managers in all sectors including the arts and especially on those we identify as 'leaders'.

As Graham's provocation states - there is mounting evidence of people cracking under the strain of unrealistic workloads, responsibilities and expectations. This is showing up in the data for mental illness, mental distress, psychological dysfunction, time off work, churn, addiction and other forms of coping.

The point is echoed in Richard Florida's most recent research showing a high correlation between the kind of hard-working, fluid, mobile, multi-cultural, cosmopolitan rootless society that supports a creative economy and the incidence of mental distress and disorder. His conclusion is that we cannot have a creative economy without a creative society to support it. All this may sound daunting but as I hope to illustrate, those who



work in the arts are well placed to support the development of these higher order capacities. At this time of fundamental transformation, they have an extraordinary opportunity and I would argue responsibility to ‘be hospice workers for the dying culture and midwives for the new.’⁴

What do we plan to do next?

As part of the Deft programme, we are planning to look more deeply at a range of issues. We’ve designed an action research project, called ‘The People Theme’ which will:

- build on the work already completed to date in phase three of MMM and identify the 21st century competencies relevant to the sector;
- investigate how people choose to respond to change, complexity, uncertainty and unpredictability in terms of representational systems and preferences; personality types; emotional intelligence; critical, creative and conceptual thinking; communication skills and reflective practice;
- develop a theory about these factors and other identified 21st century competencies, and start to identify the organizational systems and models that will best support people able to navigate and create that 21st century creative society;
- and design and test interventions to nurture and develop these competencies within the partnership and in the longer term elsewhere.

Why do we need 21st century people?

From every perspective, the knowledge, skills and qualities needed to make things happen in the world, a world which changes at rates few of us can keep up with, is being questioned, analysed and turned into training manuals.

⁴ Ibid



With continuing challenges to our understanding of the values and the anchors that traditionally might have kept us sane, the world gets ever more complicated. The methods, habits of heart, skills and attitudes to keep the show on the road are difficult, unknown, and unclear. The concept of leadership as a knowing, known process is no longer reliable and the idea of the hero leader is less and less relevant. And yet, it seems hard for the mainstream rhetoric, research and analysis, to move away from understanding it as an extension of management or skills training: something codifiable which can be drilled into large cohorts of people undertaking expensive courses, with the singular ambition of producing individuals who can run traditionally arranged organisations, operating 19th century governance structures and creaking business models. This is true for the commercial world, and for the third sector, but it is especially true in the arts.

Because the world is changing at such a rate, we need different ways of being, and of adapting to the pace and depth of the change, new ways of managing, leading and ultimately creating value. We all know that the kinds of interventions that make the difference are clarity and strength of purpose, integrity and the right people for the right task at the right time to make things work. The arts are a people business yet our whole approach to caring for our people and understanding the subtleties of the kinds of people who make our precious world work barely scratches the surface. The development of our people is an absolute priority for enabling healthy evolution of the sector and we need to learn how to do this better, quickly.

At the beginning of this paper I outlined the arguments in Graham and Kate's writing because I believe they offer a rallying call. We urgently need to articulate, judge and value leadership from a new perspective one which recognises the qualities and attitudes required to navigate the complexities of the 21st Century. Producers in the arts are a



special and particular group of those kind of people, artists are another. We need to find, nurture and support more of them, both as individuals, and within different kinds of organisational frameworks.

Complexity, speed and the people of tomorrow

It remains difficult, grappling with each shifting tectonic plate, to articulate the value of the arts within the traditional policy frameworks designed by as our various public and private funding bodies.

We know that the arts are much more about heart and soul, about difference and challenge, about passion and individuality, drive and contrariness, about people and unknown quantities, and about a distinctive kind of intelligence and all other difficult intangibles that do not fit easily into traditional policy and funding frameworks or even a classic commercial approach - so much policy is often about conformity, about equity, about finding order about delivering outputs that are about everything else except great art. In this midst, the difficult tension between art and commerce is being glossed over, and by conflating different values and different motivations under one banner of creative industries, we could end up missing what the art bit really has to offer.

We also know that there is a rapid evolution in the ground between for and not-for profits within and outside the arts world. The whole social enterprise, social entrepreneur, social investment space is opening up new ways of doing business which is having and increasingly significant impact on the nature of the creative input from the kinds of people we work with and speak to, to the organisational forms we are inventing to support creative practice to the way we finance themselves.

Our sector is characterised by high levels of self-employment and micro-enterprises - (usually businesses with less than 10 full-time employees). Most of the creative development happens within this realm, with the art-bit being created in a world of



informal networks, sole traders, informal or semi-professional small enterprises.

Ideas, projects, artworks are conceived not with a finite development time to be presented to audiences and visitors in a reactive relationship. Instead people come together from these groups to work together to create initiatives which cross boundaries and which require very different relationships, focus, skills and ways of being that are not bolstered by the frameworks of large institutions.

This is against a backdrop of massive challenges on social, political, economic, cultural and technological terms of global concerns. As I touched on at the beginning of this paper, at an individual level this wider context is creating its own sense of overwhelm, with increases in mental health issues as never before. Maureen O'Hara's⁵ insight is that there are three typical responses to this overwhelm: neurotic, psychotic and transformative. The first two lead to unhealthy stress, those who can manage to engage with the acute stress find a new way forward.

If leadership is about risk - about stepping off the pier into the unknown waters, then pacing the pier is not what is going to help make the leap. It is about being prepared to break the rules, but that in itself is not something that can or should be proscribed. That is where integrity matters, along with vision and these are qualities, which cannot in themselves be taught.

How can we identify people with 21st century competencies?

In order to find our way through this period of transformation we need to identify the people that have these leadership qualities. Maureen describes these people as

having a transmodern psyche which is neither western-modernist nor non-western-tribal, nor sociocentric but is inventing new hybrid ways of being that balance the kind of psychological strategies appropriate to a technologically mediated world of 'individual

⁵ Maureen O'Hara (2001), *Alternative psychological scenarios for the coming global age*,



rights and responsibilities' with the more basic needs for relational continuity, community, spirituality and connection to the natural world characteristic of non-modern consciousness.

She sets out the characteristics of 'tomorrow's people', the people that can navigate this existential' position that we are in as follows:

- Innovative and conservative
- Multiple truths held lightly
- Lives, thinks and acts locally and globally
- Embraces spirituality
- Thinks holistically & systemically
- Tolerates ambiguity & difference
- Reflexive learner
- contextual 'self-in-process'
- ethics - right action over fixed principles
- assumes personal responsibility and accountability
- particularist and generalist
- reasons abstractly and narratively
- trusts physical intelligence

She proposes that we urgently need to develop an understanding of the dialogue between the macro-level of large-scale social changes, the middle level of organisational and group psychology, and at the level of the individual

Thomas Homer Dixon offers further ideas of the qualities of 21st century people. He talks of the need in this world for a prospective mind. This is "one that aggressively engages with uncertainty and risk, one which recognises how little we understand and how we control even less. The prospective mind ... looks for ways to prevent or forestall horrible outcomes, not just through managing things - an approach that is often ineffective and



sometimes counterproductive - but also by imagining and implementing more radical and far-reaching solutions. Most fundamentally, the prospective mind seeks to make our societies - and each one of us - more resilient to external shock and more supple in response to rapid change.”⁶ Even Martin Sorrell, CEO of WPP says that “In an increasingly networked world the 21st Century is not for tidy minds...trying to simplify complexity ends up destroying value” where even business is talking about keeping true to what is mission critical - and that mission is not simply what the bottom line looks like. The place of meaningful creation is in the arts.

One group of 21st Century People...(not the only ones...)

One group of people who know how to make things happen out of a vision, out of ideas, out of a group of passionate individuals are producers. What they do is not simply about them in themselves. With a combination of personal vision and a sense of responsibility; artistic judgement; they are highly instinctive decision makers, combining flexibility with clarity of purpose, opportunism with a strong sense of direction, they are the kinds of 21st Century people that we need to guide us into the unknown. They have the judgement, nerve and inner reserves to take significant artistic and financial risks. They match the courage, risk-taking vision and resourcefulness of the artists with whom they work.

Producers make an extraordinary contribution to the arts - to the artists whose ideas and creativity can be harnessed and realised by them, and to the public whose engagement is the inspiration for the producer's drive and process. The producer helps to realise new responses and routes through the complex changes in our globalised world, makes the connections with the audiences, and works with artists to create the experiences beyond what most could imagine and create experiences that connect us to what art means in our lives.

⁶ Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down*, Souvenir Press (2006)



In *'The Producers: Alchemists of the Impossible'* we chose to create a set of stories about individual producers and what they're capable of, the visions, qualities and energies that drive them - qualities which are often undervalued and unexplored by our existing infrastructure and institutions with their siloed mindsets and systems for understanding what it takes to make things happen. With huge care, understanding and rigour Kate Tyndall was able to bring out all themes that drive these people and thus help us to identify and understand them with more subtlety.

The job these people do involves an all-encompassing, interwoven set of responsibilities necessary to make great ideas and projects happen. The producer might be the chief executive of a well-developed organisation with specialist teams focusing on particular aspects of the producing task, or they might function solo or lead a small or medium-sized team. As producer, however, they hold the full picture, and are responsible for the successful collaboration and combination of skills, ideas and money at work in order to realise the idea in the most imaginative way possible.

Farooq Choudhary, producer for Akram Khan Dance Company said: "An idea is born, you free it and serve it, and let it find its own path. This is the most fragile and crucial period in the creative process. It's easy to find an idea but it's infinitely harder to serve and be loyal to it. A threat can be that the idea starts to serve you. What you want to say is often not truly clear until it is said. If you stay too much in control, you're containing it. The artist is the inventor, and the producer is the innovator who innovates the product into the marketplace. How do we keep the internal world of our work sustainable for ourselves? Each time we conceive a project, it requires a new world that we must create, and we have to find a new set of rules for it. It takes a lot of emotional and physical energy to find this new underpinning for the thing you're about to build. So



we plan to take time to step out, to press the pause button just for a while in two or three years.”⁷

At different points and in different places, the producer sometimes conceives a project, becoming a leader in the creation and conception of the initiative; equally their role is to realise an artist's vision. The producer imagines, manages and delivers a project financially, and takes the responsibility for the ultimate financial outcome. He or she is responsible for finding the finance, spending the money to best effect, and achieving the best outcome for all the risk-takers. They are also responsible for how to deliver the project - its structures, partnerships, and team, its development through to full realisation, and then its exploitation and dissemination. To get the most out of it for all concerned, they must follow the story through to the end.

In order to do this, the producer brings a range of qualities and skills, honed into an integrated intelligence which carries the weight of the responsibilities involved. The producer asks and answers the really big questions, resolves problems and helps those involved reach out for vision that they strive for.

David Jubb, Artistic Director at Battersea Arts Centre, said of producing: “Beware of rationalists. Including yourself. Logical, sensible, well-considered trains of thought are fantastically seductive, especially because they are often right: do the sensible thing, take the path of righteousness, you know it makes sense. At key moments this is exactly the opposite of what you should do. The most important bit is looking after people and being generous with your time. I am at my best when I am helping someone else work something out. I am at my worst when I’m in danger of taking someone for granted. Great artists are like great scientists: inventors of the human spirit.”

⁷ The Producers, Alchemists of the Impossible”



Some of the questions we will be trying to answer

Working with the wide range of organisations that are already engaged in Deft, we have created an action research project, which will result in an increase in understanding and awareness of the competencies required to work in the 21st Century environment and the conditions that support those competencies. These are competencies that the sector itself needs, but which are also in demand across the board.

Some of the questions we'll be trying to answer are: How do we create environments that accept that the balancing of all those qualities described above requires environments that themselves understand and nourish the drive and rigour, at the same time understanding the human toll that that can take? How can we grow the people with these capacities so that they can live well in this 21st century confusion? How can we develop the capacity thrive in even greater complexity and uncertainty - and identify the higher order competencies which will help people work effectively with established orders that are, in reality under threat? How can we recognise and support individuals equally at home in an old culture, and the developing new one?

We hope to identify strengths that could demonstrate that the arts are fertile ground in which to grow 21st century people. Graham's paper underlined this potential. First, the substance of the arts is intimately connected to meaning making, making sense of the buzzing confusion of our world. Second, the sector is generally loosely organised and configured with plenty of room for personal passion and innovation. Third, our observation of leaders in the sector suggests that some at least are already growing with and through our powerful times in ways that are less available to colleagues in the private and public sectors.



Each of the producers in the book talks about the dark side of the risk taking, of the not sleeping, of the impact on family and health. But more importantly they talk about the network of relationships, of the community of like-minded people of encouraging people around them to go that bit further in their questions, ideas, before setting the direction. Those skills need masters, in the ways of ancient traditions of sensei. We need to find an easy language or easy ability to justify the kind of judgements required to understand, value and invest (in every sense) in these kind of people, be they producers, artists, chief executives, rising stars, or some other role that we haven't found, that help us navigate this time. Arts and culture are the crucible in which the consciousness of tomorrow will be formed, and always have been. In understanding these people and how they operate we go a long way to understanding how to harness the restorative and regenerative power of the arts and their capacity to making the world a better place.

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