

A FESTIVAL OUT OF TIME

Anne Torreggiani describes the change management process undertaken at The London International Festival of Theatre, where the organisation reinvented itself as a 'festival out of time'.

Three years ago I came stumbling, bleary-eyed, out of LIFT '99 (my first Festival), marvelling at the richness of the experience we had just been through and yet feeling strangely vexed and perplexed. LIFT's vision is a hugely inspiring one and it felt good to end the festival in the knowledge that what I'd been promoting was not rhetoric but reality: LIFT really is a ticket to explore – forgive the marketing-speak – 'a window on the world'. So what was the problem? For the first time, thanks to data sharing between our host venues and some smart number-crunching at the Barbican Centre (our box office providers), we were able to establish some important factors.

- most (up to 80%) of our audience were only attending one LIFT event
- 90% of our audience lived and worked in inner London, a fraction were visitors to London; and up to 30% identified themselves as 'arts professionals'.

In other words, the way people were experiencing LIFT was at odds with the way it had originally been configured. Beyond this, I was well aware of external pressures likely to exacerbate these trends, such as the ever-tightening time-squeeze of metropolitan life and the proliferation of live performance, especially in what were once LIFT-staked territories such as international theatre, summer festivals and site-specific events.

So there were some big questions to ponder. Given the complexity of the LIFT proposition in a crowded market-place, was the LIFT brand actually making an impact? Could it compete? Did it still have integrity? How could LIFT maintain, let alone increase, its profile with the traditional formula – an intense biennial event with a long wait in between – in a speeded-up, impatient, spoilt-for-choice world? Critically, the rest of the LIFT team took these issues on board, and in pushing them to the centre of strategic thinking showed the openness to external signals essential to planning for change. But of course this was not the only impetus. Perhaps the sight of our 20th birthday sailing into view brought a heightened sensitivity to the winds of rapid change whistling about our ears. Whatever it was, it wasn't just the lure of the pot of gold at the end of the Arts Council of England's

Stabilisation Programme, though this was undeniably an incentive. The programme also offered four fundamentally important things: a planning structure; access to expert and objective advice; the resources with which to effect change; and a deadline.

In our different ways, all the members of the LIFT team were asking themselves the same question: had LIFT fulfilled its mission, and if not, what would the next 20 years look like? There was general acknowledgement of the implications: whatever the answers, they would inevitably mean personal and organisational upheaval. The team's first and brave response was to put this fundamental question to the people to whom we thought it mattered: sponsors, theatre critics and former employees; artists, producers, venues, and educationalists. We went back to the audience statistics, did more profiling and commissioned qualitative research with attender groups. We sought the advice of various consultants.

These integrated processes with their emphasis on the future succeeded in making us realistic about our core challenges and dilemmas, and served to frame threats and anxieties in terms of opportunity. We then gave ourselves time to reflect – a space to imagine, discuss and have some fun with the possibilities. The review gave us a rigorous structure and pointed questions to address, and a new coherence to our guiding vision. We were liberated to concentrate not on the why or what of LIFT – the desire for these had been vociferously confirmed – but on the how. What were the delivery mechanisms by which we could achieve ambitions and sustainability? Our thinking became radical: there were few, if any, models from elsewhere to suit our needs and we had renewed confidence to pioneer our own solutions.

The full plan took another six months to detail and is now enshrined in a 1,000 page document in Stabilisation Unit's filing cabinet. More encouragingly, it is also alive in numerous projects and active working plans. So I return to those questions that were niggling us some eighteen months before. Here's what we decided to do that addresses them.

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LIFT is now a ‘festival on the move’ – that is, producing year-round with a series of high-profile one-offs and connected seasons surrounded by focused participation and audience development activity. It means we are no longer competing with ourselves and we already have clear evidence that our core audience is attending more events. Our ability to maintain and augment visibility has already been demonstrated by an increased media profile for each event. Our opportunities to promote the LIFT brand and explain the proposition have increased.

This new structure is underpinned by a more diverse and coherent curatorial approach. The complexity of the proposition can be demonstrated through the work itself. We can concentrate resources to develop niche markets and communities of interest. The review proved that our reputation is built on taking risks and staging work that no one else can: our programming criteria are confidently geared towards this ‘only LIFT’ principle. Flexibility in the programming cycle enables us to choose more accessible performance times and locations. Investment in LIFT Online offers documented contextual material as an accessible resource.

Clarity and realism in understanding LIFT’s publics and its role in the cultural landscape mean we can focus on and plan to develop our core markets instead of applying the scatter-gun approach. We now have an acknowledged function as a business-to-business proposition to capitalise on. We have laid out a genuinely ground-breaking agenda in terms of cross-sector partnerships and funding models.

In short, we used the full range of market intelligence available to us as a mirror in which to take a long hard look at what we were doing and why. Convinced by the truth of this warts-and-all view, we gained the confidence to rethink each area of the organisation. By working closely as a team, we fashioned our plan as a set of interdependent processes and, as a consequence, everyone appreciates intimately how their area of activity supports another’s. An inventive new product proposition, clearer and tighter than before, was one result, as was the emergence of a strategic

picture of LIFT’s audience and its needs; they combine to provide the foundations of a new marketing strategy. Change has set LIFT on course to its 40th anniversary with a new spring in its step.

Peter Renshaw, formerly of The Guildhall School of Music and Drama, recently cited LIFT in his report *An Enabling Framework for Change*. In it, he suggests that the culture of an organisation determines its ability to achieve transformation. His suggested principles sum up the best of our experience:

- realign priorities to the changing cultural landscape;
- connect to different contexts and changing cultural values;
- define excellence in relation to context and fitness of purpose;
- establish parity between different forms of excellence;
- create a trusting environment in which knowledge and learning are shared;
- manage the apparent paradox between quality and quantity, and between explicit and tacit knowledge;
- strengthen commitment to reflective practice;
- develop new partnerships, networks and interconnections;
- and foster a process of organic development within the institution.

I note his last point – don’t stop there ... ■

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