

Ivan Wadeson

## Re-framing risk

### Doing more with less

“Do more with less” has become a new mantra for management teams around the country since the financial crash of 2008 and the ensuing age of austerity. Faced with a triple-whammy of cuts (revenue funding, sponsorship and giving and from consumer spending or confidence) many organisations have sought or been forced to simply do less, cut back, make redundancies or even close. But in the same period Battersea Arts Centre has doubled its turnover, Sadler’s Wells and the Whitworth Art Gallery have doubled their audiences and at Arc in Stockton audiences are up 87%. And in each case the programme of work has not only expanded but increased the proportion of newly commissioned or unfamiliar work, presenting imaginative even challenging pieces.

I spent the late part of the summer talking with leaders at these four English organisations – Maria Balshaw at Whitworth Art Gallery, David Jubb at Battersea Arts Centre, Alistair Spalding at Sadlers Wells and Annabel Turpin at Arc, Stockton - and some of their teams to hear what they attributed these successes to. And to see if there were any common themes. I deliberately sought out leaders – some I knew, some I did not – with five years plus experience in their role. As Jim Collins in his book ‘From Good To Great’ makes the case, achieving such successful shifts is not a quick win, there is not a moment when the egg hatches and a newly formed organisation emerges. There is long-term preparation and planning so I wanted to look beyond the new-broom-quick-win scenario. This was exploratory investigation rather than a rigorous study but here are some of the conclusions I have drawn as to factors behind the success of these four.

#### **A Vision That Sets Direction and Standards**

It won’t be a surprise that each leader had a compelling and easily communicable vision. However there was often a lengthy and twin-track process to achieve this. David Jubb talked of two years and many staff workshops to work on a new vision; Annabel Turpin put in place a “standard arts centre programme with a bit of everything” whilst spending two years talking and listening to the people and artists of the Tees Valley. Alistair Spalding had spent four years at Sadler’s Wells “learning what makes the organisation tick” before taking sole control in 2004. At Whitworth Art Gallery, Maria Balshaw had no prior relationship so put in place some immediate improvements to signal change (literally buying new brooms to ensure the gallery was cleaned properly) which she refers to as “shorter sprints” whilst preparing the staff team for a longer journey up the mountain. As she said “change has to be enacted very, very fast but committed to for a very, very long time”.

These pithy and often patiently developed visions – for Battersea Arts Centre to invent the future of theatre, for Arc to be meaningful and relevant to its local communities, for Sadler’s Wells to be London’s dance house, for Whitworth Art Gallery to be world-class – are not merely clever or succinct sound-bites. They are genuine, living concepts, that permeate all the organisation does. More importantly they create the long-term roadmap for change and a set of quality standards for organisation. Once a ten year vision was agreed and set for the

Whitworth, it then became the arbiter for all activity: “is what you’re doing contributing and taking us on this journey?”. And as austerity has bitten “the discipline of saying ‘is this helping with our journey, does it deliver against purpose’ has got stronger”

None of these organisations have changed their vision since introduced – they have been other often considerable changes about how it has been delivered – but no deviation from the high standards and ambitions they set for themselves.

### **Increasing activity, embracing ‘risk’**

It may seem counter-intuitive but all these organisations have increased their volume of activity. And not simply upped the quantity but by degrees changed and evolved its nature. Moving away from reliance on wall-hangings and 19th century watercolours at the Whitworth to show more of their hidden collections and to embrace current and international visual artists, developing a co-commissioning with associate artists at Sadler’s Wells and at Battersea Arts Centre developing the scratch programme of theatre development into a model of organisational working (even applying it to capital redevelopment). At Arc Stockton reaction to the range of performance being programmed is often (patronisingly) one of surprise: “you’re programming that company in Stockton”.

Each person talked about steps to mitigate risk but mainly they had a healthy, almost welcoming attitude to it. Annabel Turpin “when I look at the population and the demographic of Stockton, what’s going to be riskier to sell: a production of Shakespeare for instance that’s written in a language they are not familiar with, that they are going to feel daunted by? Or to sell a show that’s about people making mistakes or about people experiencing dementia or about getting better at talking about love?”

Work was not boxed into narrow genres but talked about honestly and plainly (even “this is not for everyone” where appropriate). Internally a level of excitement was generated about the new, the unfamiliar and the unexpected that was infectious and became shared by audiences.

At Battersea Arts Centre, to allow these changes, the Time Out Critics Season, a long-standing strand of successful and critically well-received plays, was dropped. Not only meeting the organisation’s mission but demonstrating an important principle for David Jubb: “people deal with risk by pushing it away from themselves... but by keeping the risk closer and managing it more closely, it can be a more creative space to be in...”

### **“The Twin Gods of Artists and Audiences”**

This was a phrase Alistair Spalding uses but it has a strong resonance for how the other three work too, albeit with some differences in emphasis. David Jubb attributed success to “putting artists at the heart of everything we do” but for him and the others it was also with a profound understanding of the interaction and co-dependency between the two. Not all were necessarily versed in marketing language, possibly even the opposite in some cases – but there was a strong awareness of their importance of audiences (“our biggest stakeholder”), of their differing needs and a desire, almost a social mission, to invite them in

and allow them to interact with artists and to grow. All interviewees demonstrated a huge commitment to their local population, of bridging the divides “we’re an international dance house in Islington so it’s important to maintain strong relations with our diverse local communities and schools”. This often happened through outreach and creative learning was also about the rights of communities to feel they owned the building. In all four organisations, local groups created work through participatory activity was regularly presented within the venue. Allowing a local dance group to perform at Arc was “not to attempt to convert them to see contemporary dance but to put a value on the experience they are having here, make them feel their show is valued and has a place. Then they start to feel the building is here for Stockton and not just for ‘art’”.

There was also a strong emphasis on talent development, or talent liberation, despite or especially because resources were stretched or diminishing. Recruiting or growing the right people to do the right job and giving them the room to grow personally, lead projects and experiment, enabled the leaders to focus on long-term direction and viability. Leadership interaction with staff was frequently and repeated characterized as “about conversation not transmission...”

None of these organisations’ periods of change were without difficulties – redundancies, periods of retrenchment, dealing with the unexpected – but each were approached with a steely-eyed focus on the future and a brave discipline whilst dealing with the immediacy of the issue. And more often than not these challenges were seen as catalysts for further change. Maria Balshaw: “times of adversity focus the mind more... to focus on the things that really matter, to boil it down to the essentials”. But she goes beyond this: “the scale of change we are seeing creates a mandate to be bolder”.

Despite the four very different personalities and leadership styles, this boldness and unwavering focus on the future, together with other personal qualities such as humour or honesty or energetic resilience has enabled change and ambition not only to be delivered but sustained.

‘More with less but also better’ may appear a paradox but these organisations have demonstrated it is achievable in different parts of England and at different scales.

When this article originally appeared, one response pointed out that although austerity is a reality, the arts have experienced many cycles of ‘difficult economic times’ over the last three decades or so. And whether during stability or change, during contraction or expansion of funding, the leadership challenge remains to manage these dilemmas, fluctuations and risks.

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