

## Changing Organization Culture To Build Audiences

Just about every Durham participant arts and cultural organization has shaped an audience development plan. Many are very good. Some need more refinement. ALL point to a new commitment, within the board, volunteers and staff, to treating audience development as an on-going priority. This is a powerful change and may well be the most important outcome to date.

Now it's time to make it happen. Audience development, and the marketing that supports it, is about every person, every problem, every element of the organization that needs to change. Our research and consulting work has consistently shown us that deep organizational ability to solve problems and respond to the customer make for success.

### What does it take?

Remember Total Quality Management, or TQM? A major study of corporations that had taken their employees through TQM training, done by McKinsey & Company, found that the overwhelming majority of companies that had gone through a TQM process failed to sustain the changes they set out to make. They found that there are three conditions that stop change from continuing to happen:

- 1) The attitude that it's okay for the organization to change as long as it doesn't impact "me."
- 2) The culture that there are "undiscussable" topics—really fundamental to change—that are risky to talk about, so the tip of the iceberg is addressed while the iceberg still lurks below the surface.
- 3) The style that there are ingrained habits of attacking symptoms and ignoring deeper systemic causes of problems.

If you really want your audience development plans to succeed, addressing these three "change stoppers" is vitally important.

### Addressing the "Change Stoppers"

The first is the classic and typical organizational situation, where one person who simply won't change, won't take on something new, is burned out—one person can stop progress. That person can be a board executive or a volunteer, an artist or a maintenance person. Moral of the story: involve everyone. Make sure you take the time for everyone in your organization to see him or herself within your audience development plan.



What about those “undiscussed” issues? Sometimes they are simple but ongoing problems that no one wants to hear about because there don’t seem to be solutions. We discovered, in a couple of plans, that basics, like a phone system that actually works for customer service, are critical. No one discussed them throughout the entire diagnostic process because the frustrations over the years had made everyone avoid bringing up the topic once again. But now, in the context of problem solving for audience development, there is new urgency and reason to deal with the situation.

Attacking symptoms is something we all do. It is much easier and quicker than looking deep. It is so much easier to talk about the color of the new brochure than to discuss what the season programming says about the audience we want to attract. Getting to the deeper discussion requires a good process, a willingness to lay defense mechanisms at the door, be candid and constructive. Often it benefits from a facilitator.

These three tasks—involve everyone, get past the “undiscussed” issues and addressing the root cause of issues rather than symptoms—take time. But for every organization moving into the implementation of audience plans, they should become regular tasks, regular ways of checking progress.

### “After Action Review”

We in the arts don’t typically think of the military as a place to look for a case study model. When it comes to a solid “learning organization” process, we should. Over the past decade, the US Army has instituted After Action Review (AAR) which has widely been acknowledged as vastly improving its tactical expertise. AAR is described as a “professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables participants to discover for themselves

what happened, why it happened and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses.” After every mission, formal discussions take place—at the platoon, company and task force levels—with a facilitator. To make it work:

- Performance standards are well defined, so everyone knows how they will be judged.
- The AAR is a totally democratic process: everyone has an equal right to speak.
- Reviews also include the mission and concept of the actions, so it can be judged within context.
- The discussion focuses on the exact events, not hypotheses. What happened? Why did it happen? What should we do about it?
- There is a facilitating observer who is carefully trained to seek maximum participation, maintain focus and review key points.

The process works. Try it as an approach after you’ve tested the first implementation steps of your plan. Debrief. Assess. Problem solve. Use a neutral facilitator. Focus on the final question, “What should we do?” This gets at the truth that no matter how much planning we all do, and put on paper, constant adjustment is what makes a plan succeed.

(If you want to read more about this and other strategies, pick up a copy of *Hope Is Not a Method: What Business Leaders can Learn from America’s Army*, by Gordon R. Sullivan and Michael V. Harper. Random House, 1996.)

### Everyone Does Audience Development

What about investing everyone in your organization, so that your audience development plans don’t die from some small or unintended lack of involvement? Every person matters.



Every person is building audiences for your organization.

In Daniel Goleman's book, *Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam Books, 1997), he tells a great story about getting on a New York City bus one steamy, miserable August afternoon. The bus driver welcomed him with a hearty, "Hi! How'ya doing?" Like any good grumpy New Yorker, Goleman was startled and started off with a grumpy response. Then he watched. Each and every new passenger got this greeting. Most rejected it. Not deterred, the driver gave a guided tour as well. As he drove down the street and got stalled behind double parked cars and taxis, the driver offered his own little commentary. A great sale was going on over at that store. There was a new exhibit at that museum. The fruit at that stand was particularly fresh. Gradually, the climate of the bus altered from steamy August grump to happy and smiling. People started talking to each other. They got off the bus with smiles, thanking the driver. He'd changed the climate. Was his an ordinary job? He proved that *there is no ordinary job* when it comes to building a bond with an audience.

The architect Mies van der Rohe noted that in designing a great building, "God is in the details." The details are all those little things in every organization, from the way people are greeted when they come in the door, to how easy or hard it is to read the type font on the program, and everything in between. We can call the sum total of details the "brand identity." Some of the best audience development plans—

the ones that have the lasting impact of creating an enthusiastic, broad public following—are those that have considered every little detail and started addressing them with improvements and solutions, bit by bit. These plans don't rely on that major mailing or that great event that will suddenly transform everything. They acknowledge that change is something every person can impact. As the great management consultant W. Edwards Deming noted, "Nothing changes without personal transformation." And as the old adage goes, the only constant is change.

Be willing to reflect on your plans. Add the details. Consider the change points that will make them real and effective. Think of your investment in audience development as an evolving, learning opportunity. Bring your entire team together, periodically, to ensure you are acting upon your strategies and commitments.

- Listen
- Note
- Then wrestle with bottom line issues:
  - What results do you want to create?
  - What are the characteristics of your culture most likely to hinder the change?
  - What is most likely to help?
  - What attitudes will have to shift?

Then work as a group to find solutions, find small and doable change points. Keep at it. Repeat as necessary.

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