

Investment Review Discussion Paper

An important part of the Investment Review is to encourage debate and discussion on a range of arts issues.

We've asked 11 authors to prepare discussion papers on 5 different subjects. This is one of these papers. The brief didn't request specific proposals or recommendations, instead the authors were asked to offer their individual and personal views to stimulate and provoke discussions. Any views or opinions expressed in the discussion paper are the author's own and not those of Arts Council of Wales.

Title: **Artistic Leadership**

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What is the word "leadership" doing in a phrase with the word "artistic"?

In a time of rapid cultural and technological change, the question of whether an artist is someone or does something underlies much arts discourse. For some, artists are exceptional people who offer intrinsic value to society, while, for others, art is an act that is available to all and is practised to a greater or lesser degree of effectiveness.

As Robert Graves declared sixty years ago, "To be a poet is a condition rather than a profession." It has become increasingly untenable to hold to a belief in the artist as somebody whose work is revealed, as was said of the actor Edmund Kean, "by flashes of lightning." However, even now, to be an artist is not simply to have a job or a role. Artists feel they live from a sense of their vocation. For many, it is to declare that a connection with art prefigures their identity at a very deep level. Some contend that they could never do anything else or that, even if they weren't being paid for what they were doing, they would do it anyway.

While recognition and longevity are rewards, artists are motivated at a fundamental level by a desire to progress their artform. The artist does this by radically reconfiguring our sense of the world or by adding to the body of existing work. In that sense, the creative drive is inherently innovative. It tends to attract personalities that are idiosyncratic, socially engaged, searching and non-aligned. Indeed, many artists derive their energy from self-identifying with the marginal and the oppositional. There is even an evolving category of "outsider art" to delineate those who operate beyond conventional boundaries and, since the Romantic period, the outlaw artist has become its supreme archetype. So how can such a person relate to leadership?

Leadership, after all, is a problematic and loaded concept. For example, Clare Short, the politician and former Cabinet Minister, has expressed scepticism about current interest in leadership. She has argued that it is fashionable - indicative of an individualistic and greedy society. Certainly, arguments around leadership have cascaded out of the business sector in recent years and have sat somewhat uncomfortably in the world of culture.

Essentially, leadership is a capacity that resides in the world of the operational and organisational. Primarily focussed on the alignment of resources to goals through structures, plans and processes, it is an aspect of management that can seem anathema to creativity and art. By contrast, artistic activity characteristically emerges relatively unplanned and from unlikely sources through novel combinations of diverse ingredients. As such, it is a highly social and collaborative activity that stands at odds with the popular perception of the artist as a solitary and tortured genius.

However, over the last thirty years, the arts have been steered by government to accommodate business-like skills of entrepreneurialism and efficiency. The business world has been held up as an inspirational model to the arts as a means of maximising public investment and undercutting reliance on subsidy as the monopolising source of income.

In the last year or so, we have seen this model shattered. Financial markets have been in turmoil and global institutions have been brought to their knees through the unfettered pursuit of short-term goals, unmitigated by an appreciation of the risks. Greed has manufactured and been in the grip of its own form of imaginative fantasy. When major banks are, effectively, nationalised, traditional argument in the arts around such issues as sustainability, value and community suddenly seem far less esoteric than they once did.

However, the unprecedented conditions in the economy and the parallel collapse in the political sphere are merely symptomatic of the dizzying level of change that is taking place at a global level and is driven by digital technology. As Graham Leicester has argued, "This is not only an age of change but a change of age, a period of cultural transformation."

The post-war era has witnessed a revolution in the way our society has modelled itself and a transformation in the nature of its institutions and organisations. Even so, this has been outstripped by the pace of change on the ground. Hierarchies have been displaced by networks, hubs and clusters. The world has become much more inter-connected and interdependent. Centralised power and authority are challenged in a hitherto unparalleled way by individual access to information; for example, as this is being written, social networking sites are driving democratic protest in Iran.

As the age of command and control comes to an end, simultaneously, young people are inheriting a world which is hyper-connected and of disorientating sophistication. As Graham Leicester points out: "In order to thrive in this challenging environment, we need to develop a higher tolerance for complexity, uncertainty and not knowing."

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Mike Daisey is a performer, making theatre in the USA. Compared by some to the late Spalding Gray, he has been presenting a solo work over the last few years entitled "How Theater Failed America." The title is an interesting construction in itself: it points to how theatre has failed to live up to its potential to benefit America, rather than how America has betrayed its theatre. In the piece, however, Daisey sets out an argument that "America has lost sight of the values that led to the establishment of regional theaters, and in its place are institutions that value buildings over artists, isolation over engagement, and corporate growth over artistic development." His polemical performance has caused a deal of controversy, but Daisey welcomes this: "I've just seen far too many 'discussions' that should have been full-voiced arguments, too many passions squelched in the face of institutionalized hopelessness, and just too much damn silence, especially from the artists who live and work within the system. I'd rather see some feelings get hurt... than the palpable quiet and passive-aggressive silence that I feel is too often the stock and trade..." While America is not Wales and our nation has very different funding arrangements, there are recognisable parallels.

In the last few decades, organisations have developed under a bureaucratic model of the arts that has been synonymous with growth. In order to receive funding, it has become necessary for applicants to fulfil a series of benchmarks such as being formally constituted, having charitable status and with policies on equal opportunities and health and safety, for example. The logical consequence of this is that organisations become increasingly focussed on administration and operation. These functions grow and develop to the point where they become part of a semiconscious scenario of permanence. At this point, it becomes very hard to divest funding from that organisation as priorities change and doing so is fraught with trauma and difficulty. In a climate of growth, the accretion of historic costs is less problematic, but in a climate of government deficit and public sector cutbacks it requires serious reflection. As we contemplate the future, viability as much as sustainability will be the focus. The emerging context will also necessitate a review of the relationship between the level of fixed costs and artistic activity. But even more, it will be necessary to evaluate the appropriateness of traditional bureaucratic models and their leadership to the level and type of creativity generated.

In Wales, arts organisations have operated from a comparatively low base of funding in any case. For years, funding bodies have had to negotiate a difficult line between the limited resources available and organisations running fast simply to stand still. Additionally, there has been a significant amount of political turbulence as The Arts Council, in particular, has adjusted to a post-devolutionary settlement. Consequently, we have seen a period of tribalism and dysfunction. Until recently, government, funding agencies and artists have been consistently at odds with each other and the arts sector itself has turned inward in an atmosphere of introspection and distrust.

These circumstances have promoted leadership styles which, although by no means universal, have had damaging implications for the development of talent and creative renewal more

generally. Over time, the landscape has become populated by what can be caricatured as “Emperors” and “Savants.”

“Emperors” are the leaders who inspire either deference or fear, using their power aggressively to enrich their estate and looking outwards enviously at others. While judiciously rewarding those subject to them, they will often be in a state of thinly-disguised war with those who oppose them. “Savants,” on the other hand, are less openly confrontational. “Savants” gain power by knowing how things work, but prefer to seem invisible. Hampered by an inability to communicate or to inspire, they are happiest when doing things themselves or solving issues theoretically. They lack insight into how productive collaboration can be and thrive on secrecy, especially as a way of enhancing their own interests. Despite the caricature, the tendencies are recognisable, relating strongly to a culture of waning authority and retrenchment.

However, new conditions create and inspire new paradigms. With so much information available, with so much choice and with society increasingly tending towards complexity and multiplicity, the power to attract, influence, persuade and inspire become crucial human capacities. In leadership theory, this has been defined as a shift from transactional to transformational behaviour. Transactional leadership is focussed on outcomes and results; transformational leadership is focussed on change and developing people. While both aspects are important, the breakdown of traditional hierarchies puts greater emphasis on the latter. In the current setting, “relational” leadership qualities, underpinned by emotional intelligence and the ability to project an authentic alignment of one’s vision, values and behaviours, are becoming profoundly significant.

Moreover, as change has materialised, the concept of leadership has evolved away from its traditional top-down definition and its context within formal organisations. It is increasingly concerned with the invisible, open space between individuals and institutions. For example, the charity Common Purpose defines its vision as developing “leaders who can lead beyond their authority, beyond their direct circle of control; who can lead networks as well as organisations; who can produce change even when they can't instruct or elicit trust in familiar ways; who can sustain broader perspectives and who are confident in making connections between quite different groups of people and reconciling different worlds.”

Arising from this, the natural question is: where can these capacities be found and developed? Despite the plethora of “training initiatives” and “leadership programmes,” there is a growing body of opinion that the ability to deal with complexity and challenge is not borne of a greater range of learned competency and skill. It is more of an existential condition, borne of direct experience. Evidence is also emerging that one of the most promising settings to discover this kind of experience is within the arts and cultural sector. As Graham Leicester argues, “The levels of personal commitment, passion and mission in the sector coupled with the complexity of the stakeholder environment make this a good proving ground for modern management and leadership skills... with the added element that at its best this sector works in a medium that thrives on uncertainty and complexity, and is not afraid to acknowledge and engage with the void of not knowing.”

The creative industries are also offering innovative models of management that, in these uncertain times, are regarded as exemplary and progressive. Instead of rigid bureaucratic structures, we are seeing signs of a much more collaborative environment where flexible and responsive structures are temporarily created in order to progress specific projects. Of course, while there are risks involved through the loss of stability and confidence, there is also opportunity for pause, reflection, new challenge, expression and growth. These conditions feel natural to people working in the arts, who find they gravitate towards the collaborative and developmental.

In Wales, there are lessons to be learnt from this. I have already argued that bureaucratic organisational models have prevailed. Perhaps it has led to an over-emphasis on “flagships” as bastions of excellence and durability. In straightened times, the natural tendency would be to cutback in all areas other than these, as a way of preserving “quality.” Certainly, history would seem to show us that the bigger the organisation the more exceptionally it is treated. However, not only is this a reductionist approach that would have damaging consequences for the renewal of creative talent, it would be to fatally ignore the paradigmatic shifts that are taking place and that will set the course for our culture into the future. In which case, the current Investment Review offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to recast the context of arts provision in Wales by moving from an outdated bureaucratic mode to a mode that is more collaborative, agile, facilitative and activist. A key measure of change will be how incumbent organisations can become more networked and fleet-footed through collaboration on shared facilities and through the outsourcing of key functions to promote greater impact in relation to fixed costs and staffing.

In many ways, the reality of cultural life in Wales could be particularly receptive to this change. Is it too much to suggest that Wales with its languages, geographical diversity and rapidly transforming communities has a traditional affinity with fluidity and hybridity? Certainly, its artistic community is characterised by interconnection. Its people talk to each other and know each other. They try to see each other’s work. It is a sector built on strong, personal relationships. At the same time, the very geography of the country encourages a community that is both networked and de-centred. Therefore, it would seem well-placed to adapt and, indeed, thrive in the new ecology.

Indeed, the kind of personal skills and qualities required to thrive in such an environment are already significantly in evidence, although they are insufficiently recognised and empowered. Instead of “Emperors” and “Savants,” we need to recognise this potential and shift to empower very different leadership styles to accompany the creation of different organisational structures. “Water Carriers,” for example, are everywhere in Welsh arts. These are the people that carry and gather information. Their value is built on the relationships that they build and the emotional intelligence they display. Naturally collaborative and open-minded, they are relational in their approach and influential in practice. Unfortunately, they are qualities that are perceived as being “female” and deployed – all too often within organisations - as support to the strategic and decisive “male.” “Alchemists” on the other hand, are rarer in Welsh arts. “Alchemists” are visionaries who are capable of making something out of nothing. They are

entrepreneurial and synthesising figures that spot gaps, make connections and develop ideas into practical outcomes. In a sense, they are archetypes of creativity – combining artistic, imaginative sensibilities with a business savvy and a clued-up sense of the audiences for work, alive to why that work is important and with insight into how to realise and resource it.

While it is arguable that artistic leadership cannot be trained, it can be developed through experiential opportunity. Periods of secondment for research, inquiry, reflection, active learning and personal development are extremely valuable. The Clore Leadership Programme is one such opportunity, but the Fellowships are highly prized and concentrate resources on only a few individuals. The broader Cultural Leadership Programme offers comparable “crucible experiences,” but, surprisingly, the take-up from individuals within Wales is low. Indeed, the programme received very little interest in running programmes from within Wales, despite it being a strategic priority. In order to promote a new generation of artistic leaders, a range of inexpensive but crucial initiatives could be offered and pro-actively managed by The Arts Council or a partner.

Firstly, it should encourage more widespread knowledge-sharing through mentoring and shadowing. These relationships should be formalised and properly prepared, becoming an integral part of leadership responsibility across the sector. It is important that this should be seen not as “a gift” from one to the other, but a mutual sharing of perspective and a joint opportunity for empathetic reflection.

Secondly, cross-sectoral Action Learning Sets should be created. Action Learning Sets offer the chance to step outside the pressures of a professional role and to view it from a different perspective. The peer-to-peer process involved is key, as it involves active listening and open questioning without any directive involvement from other participants. The aim is for each individual to generate solutions and insight from within themselves.

Thirdly, the sector needs to engage more widely with innovative thinking and theory through the wider dissemination of information. For example, Mission Models Money is an important resource for research into how arts organisations need to change as they move into the twenty-first century. It is too much to hope for such an initiative in Wales, although our universities could be doing more in terms of research and preparation for cultural careers, but there ought to be a coordinated approach to the distribution of information as it emerges, making it fully accessible to individuals and organisations.

Fourthly, there needs to be a strategic framework for the development of artistic leadership that is based on securing a good flow of personnel. Successful organisations rely on a regular influx of new ideas and innovative approaches. Far too many organisations in Wales have people in leadership positions that have been in role for far too long. Without devaluing the work of good people, reduced opportunity is as damaging to these individuals as it is to the rest of the sector. Of course, the decentred regional dimension of arts provision in Wales is a factor in recruitment, but it should not preclude the ability of organisations to renew. Executives should be required to submit a new account of their artistic vision on a five yearly basis, as if they were

re-applying for their jobs, and account taken of this by funders and boards. Greater focus should also be placed on succession planning within organisations.

Fifth, the practice of trusteeship and governance in Wales needs to be overhauled and re-energised. It is a wider problem than can be considered here, but too many trustees have unclear ideas about their role. A priority should be better training for board members to address issues such as the difference between management and governance, improving understanding, ownership and engagement, and the importance of strategically balancing artistic risk against business planning. Unfortunately, too many trustees from a business background feel disqualified from artistic discussions while others seek to apply inappropriate commercial ideas. Boards need to be better able to focus on the core mission and to be integrated into the overall leadership of their organisations. There should also be a commitment to recruit younger people and develop them, alongside a universal adoption of the recent McMaster proposal that each board involves a minimum of two artistic practitioners as trustees.

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The arts in Wales are at a moment of profound change, if not crisis. It requires new thinking and some radical intervention. While many people may feel daunted by and suspicious of the change required, it cannot be right that the super-structure of the arts displaces artistic activity itself. While the artistic life is fraught with inherent risk and difficulty, it cannot be right that low level administrative employment is a better guarantee of a viable career. And, while the world casts around for ways in which to address its recent failures and the deficits of meaning, satisfaction and well-being that this has produced, it cannot be right to ignore the dynamic potential of creativity that our artistic life has to offer. Two hundred years ago, Goethe wrote that, "Art turns wounds into capacities." Energising a holistic approach to artistic leadership will chart a course out of these painful and recessionary times.

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Sources include:

Arts Organisations in the Twenty First Century: Ten Challenges by Charles Leadbeater (London: Arts Council England)

Inside The Edge: 21st Century People by Roanne Dodds
(London: Mission Models Money)

Rising to the Occasion: Cultural Leadership in Powerful Times by Graham Leicester (Bristol: Mission Models Money)

The Empty Spaces or How Theater Failed America by Mike Daisey
(Seattle: The Stranger.com)

Walking a Tightrope: Supporting Artists, Creating Art by Francois Matarasso
(London: Clore Leadership Programme)