



CREATE

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Embarking on Community Engagement

I. Initial Steps: Simple and Slow

Community engagement is important to the long-term viability of arts organizations and to the well-being of the communities they serve. If you don't believe that, you may stop reading here. All of what follows discusses "how," not "whether" or "why?"

Effective community engagement begins with an organizational commitment to it. Half measures or "funder-made-me-do-it" projects will quickly wither on the vine. Communities easily detect insincerity. Only after a commitment is made is it time to think about "doing" community engagement.

Simple

Upon committing to engagement, the compulsion to do something immediately is misguided. (It is also entirely understandable. We are an event-driven industry.) The production of arts experiences that will be the expression of community engagement must come out of a relationship building process. That process must happen *first*, so nothing should be put in the hall, on the boards, or on the walls immediately.

In addition, initial efforts will not/should not be time-consuming or expensive. Things will develop organically as habits of mind change from artcentric to community-aware. When arts organization staff members (all departments) see a portion of their work as serving the interests of external communities, they will begin to rethink the things they are already doing with budgets that already exist.

Unfortunately, too many people simply cannot believe this. Examples of commissioned operas, multi-city story-capturing and -telling efforts, and cities transformed by multi-year dance company projects make people think good community engagement is impossibly expensive and/or labor-intensive. Such bells and whistles stories are almost all the culmination of years of community relationship building and herculean funding efforts.

Instead, simple is not only possible but vital at the outset. First steps can begin with the realization that *West Side Story* is about (among other things) immigration and gang violence; that Vivaldi's *Spring* can be an expression of environmental awareness; that Renaissance music inspired by the Plague is about a deadly public health crisis; and that virtually every work of art we would be programming anyway in some way or another reflects issues of importance to people today. In addition, the work of each department of an arts organization outside of programming (those big enough and lucky enough to *have* departments) can be refocused in simple ways to support community engagement efforts. (One example: marketing focus groups can add a few questions to aid development of two-way relationships between the participants and the organization rather than the traditional one-way information gathering.)

Blockbuster community engagement projects are thrilling to examine and can serve as prods to greater efforts. However, especially at the beginning, they can also inspire despair that change is impossible.

Slow

Some in the arts industry express concern that pursuing community engagement will drive current stakeholders with imagined precipitous changes to the organization and/or its offerings. There are a couple of responses to this that should be comforting. First, community engagement should *begin* with the community that is your core constituents. Getting their feedback on plans and involving them in the process of making your organization indispensable to the larger community can make of them allies and cheerleaders in all engagement processes.

Second, **in successful engagement work no change should happen quickly**. It is important to reassure stakeholders that it is possible (preferable) to begin engagement work incrementally. The next show/season will not suddenly consist of work foreign to the current staff and support base. Indeed, relationship building is time-consuming work so the results of engagement with new communities should not be immediate or pervasive. This is one place where the lengthy process of engagement is a benefit.

We in the arts have an understandable desire to rush to action. Ours is an event production business. We exist to *do*. In community engagement work, though, this instinct is almost inevitably counter-productive. We cannot present—or even suggest—meaningful work until we have a reasonable understanding of the interests of the community with which we want to engage. Careening into production prematurely is usually at best off-putting and at worst offensive. Give the relationship time to reveal how best to partner with a new community.

Initial steps in engagement should be, must be, small. Too much too soon will drive people away. This applies to programming, marketing and sales, fundraising, governance, evaluation—all aspects of organizational function. The common denominator of this approach is as simple, inexpensive, and excruciatingly difficult as changing habits of mind. **The essential transition is to stop seeing the work as delivering a product that *should be* consumed by a nameless, faceless public and to view it instead as a valuable resource for specific individuals and communities *whom we know*** (or are getting to know). When the board and staff of arts organizations makes this switch and apply it to how they go about their existing tasks, the results will begin to support the work of deep engagement with communities.