Sustaining the Arts by Means of Business Model Innovation

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Introduction

Across North America today, arts organizations are typically undercapitalized, too often generate operating deficits, and are fighting to stay solvent. In Canada, fiscal instability was exacerbated when public funding was significantly reduced. Covid-19 has devastated arts organizations even further.

All too often, attempts at renewal are focused on reinventing the art, re-capitalizing, or laying off staff, rather than on reimagining the underlying business model. The conventional operating models are continued and, with each new annual deficit, operating capital erodes further. When levels of deficit and negative working capital become intolerable, arts organizations typically devise temporary solutions such as private "save the arts" recapitalization campaigns, government bailouts, staff layoffs, temporary wage rollbacks or, in extreme cases, bankruptcy and restart.

This article will explain how business model innovation (BMI) was implemented to renew two leading Canadian arts organizations: the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra (CPO) and Alberta Ballet (AB). In both organizations, failure had resulted because their traditional business models had not adapted to deal with market, economic, and competitive pressures, changing audience needs and cultural/societal shifts. Opportunities that would have led to new sources of revenue from new market segments had been viewed very sceptically and remained unrealized.

The central elements of BMI that drove the renewal of these two arts organizations were as follows: higher stakeholder engagement, lower fixed versus variable costs, disciplined fiscal management, understanding audience needs to discover new markets, and having the courage to question and revise the business model itself.

In both cases, Donna, the first author, was the external change agent recruited by the board of the arts organization and tasked with designing and facilitating the change process. With the help of key players in each organization, she was the one who led a team to conceive and implement the new business models.

One key player at CPO was Larry Fichtner, Chair of the Calgary Philharmonic Society, which oversaw CPO through bankruptcy protection. Larry was a key leader in replacing critical working capital from donors and funders while working alongside Donna to build a sustainable business model.

Another key player at CPO was Alana Gralen, the first violinist. As Chair of the Players Association, Alana was instrumental in getting engagement and buy-in for the new business model from the musicians. Her passion for community outreach and education inspired new roles and participation by the musicians.

At AB, the key player was the Chair of the board, Dawn McDonald, who was passionate about ensuring survival and realized early that the organization required external expertise to pivot to a new, sustainable business model. Dawn recognized the successful turnaround completed at CPO under Donna's leadership and sought to hire the same team to develop and implement a new business model for AB.

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Another key player was Chris George, Interim Executive Director of AB and previously Managing Director of the AB School of Ballet. With institutional memory and rapport throughout the organization, Chris helped Donna navigate the organization.

Two Case Studies

On 14 October 2002, CPO made an announcement that delivered a devastating blow to its musicians, staff and board. After close to 50 years of performing, Canada's fifth-largest orchestra (in terms of number of musicians and operating budget) had buckled under due to insolvency, lack of leadership, declining ticket sales, breakdown in customer service and environmental turbulence. The predominant view among both funders and the public was that CPO should not be saved.

The organization had had its share of upheavals in the two decades leading up to the bankruptcy protection announcement. For example, one year before the announcement, CPO went through a four-week musician lockout during contract negotiations. Other orchestras were experiencing similar challenges, ranging from bitter labour disputes to cost-cutting and wage rollbacks. In 2001 alone, Statistics Canada reported a collective $4.3-million loss for orchestras across the country. As Donna had explained when she was recruited to lead the turnaround, "The level of fixed costs is unsustainable – very few of the costs are variable, giving [the organization] little flexibility to pivot or try new things."

The Ballet had enjoyed a place of prominence and success on the Canadian arts scene for 50 years and was regarded as one of the premier ballet companies in the country. It featured a thriving and growing School of Ballet that focused on training, developing and nurturing dancers as young as three through to professional ballet performers. It had staged many original ballets choreographed by the internationally renowned artistic director Jean Grand-Maître. Yet the company found itself struggling to survive. By 2015, depleted finances, a dwindling subscriber base and organizational inefficiencies, compounded by a province facing the most serious economic downturn in 35 years, had taken a heavy toll.

As AB prepared to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its founding, in the 2016–17 season, the board of directors initiated a process to ensure that the organization would be sustainable for the long term. Given the economic climate at the time, and the impending anniversary, the board decided it was an appropriate time to re-evaluate the organization's underlying business model and facilitate improvements towards sustainability wherever possible, to prepare for the next 50 years. Donna was hired in late October 2015 to undertake diagnostics, establish the scope of the change required, strategize the new business model, coordinate the initiative, and develop a phased Sustainability Plan.

The Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra and Alberta Ballet shared many common challenges that contributed to their near-death experience. In both organizations, diagnosis revealed that the "art wasn't broken" but that it was not being effectively leveraged against high-growth and revenue-potential audience segments. Each organization had talented performers and a stellar performance record, but innovative uses of the talent to tap new growth opportunities had not been explored. Each had a long and distinguished history of 50+ years, had a national reputation for excellence, was recognized as contributing to the vibrancy of the community, and had a core of loyal supporters.

In spite of this legacy, or more likely because of it, these two arts organizations had not experimented with BMI. Their performers were passionate about their art and dedicated to their organization, despite having endured years of difficulties; however, they were not included in meaningful communication or problem-solving within the organization. The core problem that plagued CPO and AB was an antiquated business model that had created a "boom and bust" culture rather than a sustainable future.

ABSTRACT

Two prominent Canadian arts organizations, facing imminent collapse, underwent organizational renewal via business model innovation (BMI). The authors examine the forces that led to failure, the process for revisioning work, the key elements of the new business model that created an informed, adaptive and fiscally responsible organization, and the leadership required to conceive and implement BMI.

KEYWORDS

Business model innovation, sustaining the arts, leadership, governance, role of the board, dynamic capabilities

Four Common Elements of BMI

A business model (BM) is the way in which an organization generates revenue and manages cost in order to produce a surplus that can be invested in further developing the organization and its capabilities as well as adding to a reserve fund to buffer the organization against unexpected future financial shocks. Fundamentally, BMI strives to increase revenue and/or reduce cost in order to increase the surplus.

At both CPO and AB, the BMI was focused on (a) preserving the core market while growing new markets; (b) increasing variable costs over fixed costs while building the reserve fund; (c) using the surplus to motivate and reward entrepreneurial success; and (d) streamlining the board, including instituting a single reporting structure.

Preserving the Core Market and Growing New Markets

Both CPO and AB had already captured the bulk of their "core markets," meaning that any further growth in these markets would be relatively insignificant. Growth needed to come from attracting new audience segments.

At CPO, audience research led to the identification of two new audience segments: those attracted by the flexibility of single-ticket sales, and those seeking to enjoy classical music in non-traditional environments in a variety of venues within and outside of the city. The marketing focus was redefined and implemented through re-branding, using a different approach to packaging and selling tickets and targeting new audiences, communities, and venues.

At AB, research revealed numerous new audience segments that could be targeted for near- and longer-term growth (see Figure 1). All audience segments, and most notably those that presented the greatest opportunity for growth, indicated a strong desire for before- and after-performance receptions, dining opportunities, special events for youth to meet dancers and purchase products and memorabilia, and alternative, more personal and customized venue experiences.

New and unusual settings facilitated both the renewal of traditional repertoire and the introduction of new works. In the first year of CPO's rebuild, traditional programming was decreased, while nine non-traditional events were planned, with the number for future years directed by market demand and financial considerations. New business focused on joint community programming initiatives, whereby revenues and expenses could be split between CPO and a community group such as the Rotary Club or the South Asian Association, which had never heard the orchestra play Asian music. This approach enabled CPO to target non-traditional sponsors, such as Chinese businesses, thereby expanding its revenue and fund-development base.

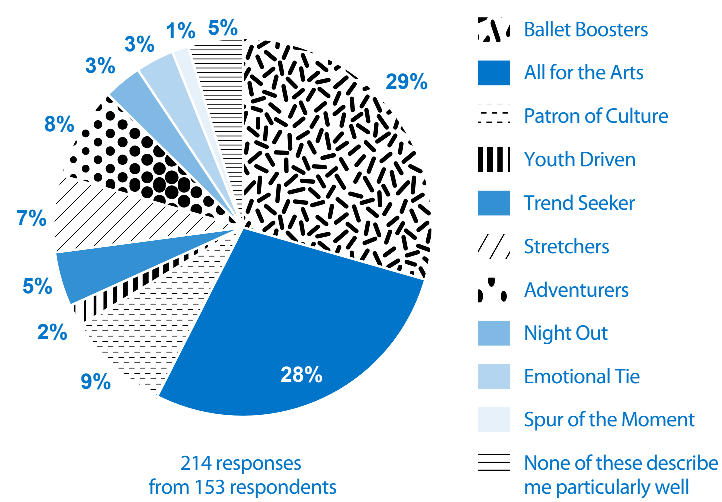
The Orchestra found an immediate new revenue opportunity within services it had historically undervalued. The chorus, composed of volunteer choristers who periodically joined CPO in a variety of performances, enjoyed free-of-charge high-level professional development with the Assistant Conductor and visibility in the community as a member of the chorus; sheet music; access to rehearsal time with the musicians; rehearsal space; and performance attire. The Orchestra repositioned the chorus as a "strategic instrument of the orchestra" and began charging choristers an annual fee for their participation in order to offset expenses and generate a surplus from the services these singers received, equating initially to about $30,000 annually. Contrary to popular opinion, the chorus increased in terms of quality and prestige as a result, as well as growing in size.

At the Ballet, analysis and comparative investigation revealed a social enterprise opportunity focused on serving the physical and mental health of dancers. Supporting the broader dance community through assessment and support of dancers from the earliest years in ballet school through to post-career wellness was identified as an important advancement within the dance sector overall, and represented a new realm of spin-off programs and products that could be widely marketed.

FIGURE 1

NEW AUDIENCE SEGMENTS UNCOVERED

***Up Close* 2015 Audience Members by Segment**



Source: Survey responses from audience members of *Up Close,* a performance held in November 2015

A High Performance Centre that would leverage research from the University of Calgary and best practices already underway within the dance company was envisioned. The Centre would focus on dancer health and wellness, injury prevention, artistic excellence, and endurance through evidence-based multidisciplinary applied research. Early market research suggested that the Centre would be highly lucrative and would position the company as a global leader. This BMI would enable the Ballet to target non-traditional clients, sponsors and funders, thereby expanding its revenue base. These findings are consistent with those of Poisson-de Haro and Normandin (2020), who found that, when transitioning from maturity to revival, cultural organizations redefined their value proposition, their customer relationships and key activities, while refining their customer segments.

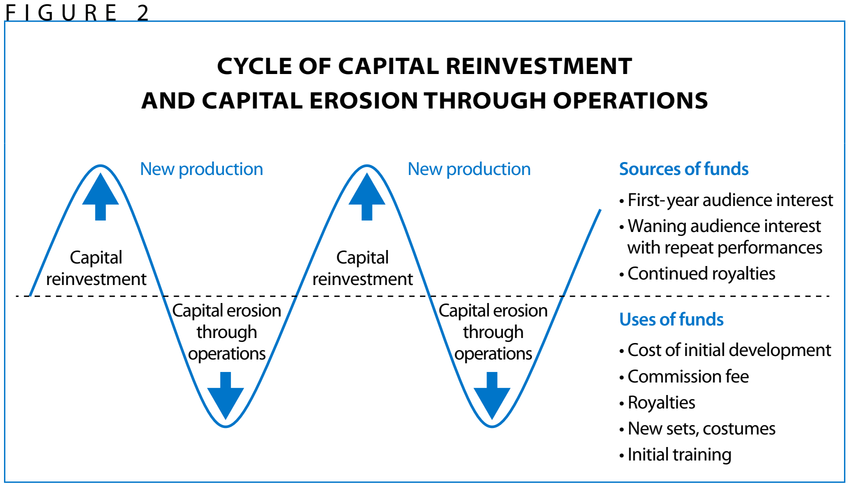
Increasing Variable Costs Over Fixed Costs While Building the Reserve Fund

Over a span of 50 years, both organizations repeatedly initiated re-capitalization campaigns in the face of declining public and private funding to address financial shortfalls. The cycle of capital injection, capital erosion through operations, re-capitalization, and re-erosion through operations was deeply entrenched (Figure 2).

At CPO, as at AB, the level of fixed costs was precariously high, and both organizations routinely relied on the sale of next year's subscription revenue (as well as school tuition in the case of the Ballet) to fund current operations. This shortfall in working capital could not be bridged by their respective Foundations, because endowment funds had dwindled as they were accessed each year to fund operating loans that had not been paid back. Banking partners became increasingly reluctant to extend bridge financing to cover the gap. Looming crises came to a head as the organizations attempted to launch their performance seasons with insufficient working capital. Both organizations perceived their situation from a mindset of scarcity (i.e., tighten cost controls, reduce costs, fundraise more to cover gaps) rather than from a mindset of growth (i.e., invest money in high-potential growth opportunities).

As a first step, in order to generate the magnitude of surpluses required, fixed costs needed to be significantly reduced. Obvious cost reductions were made in both organizations, including the following: outsourcing key management functions to third-party providers at significantly reduced cost and with a higher level of expertise; reducing musician weeks from 46 to 40 per year and dancer weeks from 42 to 36 per year; and, at CPO, reducing staff salaries by 20% while simultaneously introducing an incentive pay component with upside potential based on the entrepreneurial success in tapping new markets.

FIGURE 2



At CPO, the first ever three-year collective agreement retained the orchestra size at 65 musicians despite considerable pressure by funders to reduce it in order to reach financial sustainability. In exchange, the musicians agreed to recalibrate their base pay and share in any surpluses generated from entering new markets after costs were covered and an annual contribution was made towards re-establishing a reserve fund equal to 10% of annual revenue.

Using the Surplus to Motivate and Reward Entrepreneurial Success

The Ballet had depleted its reserve, severely impacting its ability to invest in new solutions for long-term growth. The transformation team proposed a new performance bonus structure that rewarded entrepreneurial success while replenishing the all-important reserve for long-term security as a way to achieve both goals.

For CPO, the success of pursuing new, non-traditional market-growth performances allowed the musicians and staff to derive no-cap variable remuneration, which more than made up for the 20% decrease in their base salary as part of the cost-cutting measures. New market opportunities, such as "Mozart on the Mountain" and "Beethoven in the Badlands," were made possible, and their chances for success improved further as musicians agreed to introduce "split orchestra" combinations in order to increase both performance flexibility and financial returns. This type of partnering with the organization and taking on some of the risk was made possible through the surplus-sharing scheme.

Streamlining the Board and Introducing a Single Reporting Structure

Both CPO and AB suffered from flawed governance in terms of structure, size and practice. In both cases, the board received separate reports from two sides of the organization: creative performance through the Artistic Director and operations through the Executive Director. Each senior leader maintained their own vision and goals in accordance with their area of responsibility. The artistic side, comprising the Artistic Director and their respective teams of artists, made its plans and decisions in isolation – disconnected from all or most aspects of the business operations. Finance, production, marketing and communications all existed separately from the artistic side, coming together only when artistic decisions were already set and production schedules were moving ahead. This is consistent with the findings of McDonald et al. (2021, 758): "We found that goal synchronization is often lacking between the executive director and the artistic director of an arts organization."

This configuration had been a contributor to the cycle of reinvestment and capital erosion. Rather than determining the annual program based upon the operation's budgets and forecasts, operations was called upon to find some way to cover expenses of the production initiated by the artistic side (frequently involving inflated budgets due to initial development costs, commission fees, royalties, new sets, costumes and intense initial training). The board continually juggled two sides that were not linked, did not prepare a common, unified strategy, and presented their plans to and asked for direction from two distinct entities within the organization. One of the signals of this dysfunction was the fact that the Executive Director of AB had been replaced 10 times between 2000 and 2015. The transformation team recommended that a single senior leader, the President & CEO, report to the board.

The size of the board was another factor. In the case of the AB board, which was initially conceived as a fundraising board with a provincial mandate, bylaws allowed for a board as large as 21 directors. However, few of the directors actually engaged in fundraising, and, with 17 directors, the board's ability to make timely, informed strategic decisions was stretched. The board had become too bulky and bogged down to be efficient or effective.

The Ballet's organizational structure was reworked to foster better communications and create a path forward for collaborative strategy and planning efforts (see Figure 3). This freed up the board to focus its time and attention on broader, overarching strategic priorities and to address the immediate financial challenges of the organization. Consistent with best practice in governance, the board moved to reduce its numbers to 10–12 committed members. Similarly, CPO reduced its board from 33 to 12.

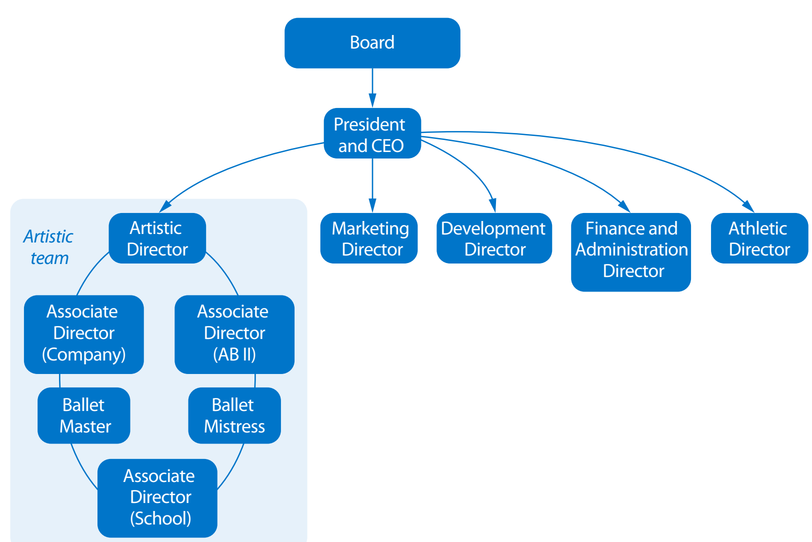
Leadership for BMI

Surprisingly, the literature on BMI has precious little to say about the leadership needed for BMI. As Saiyed (2019, 70) notes, of the 150 papers on BMI reviewed by Foss and Saebi (2017), only two discuss leadership, and one of these is about how BMI builds firm leadership rather than how leadership drives BMI. Foss and Saebi (2017, 217) agree: "Our review revealed that there are few studies of the drivers or antecedents of BMI. . . . Furthermore, in spite of the attention to the managerial side of BMI, there are still significant gaps in understanding the internal drivers of BMI."

What do the few available studies of leadership for BMI tell us? Chesbrough (2007, 16) notes a "business model leadership gap": top leaders who had been nurtured within the existing business model know "in their bones" what its strengths are and will not deviate from it easily. Foss and Stieglitz (2015) argue that the difficulty of conceiving and implementing BMI is much greater when the new business model requires systemwide changes rather than modular changes confined to one or a few parts of the organization. Difficulties are also greater when the new business

FIGURE 3

SINGLE STRUCTURE FOR REPORTING TO BOARD



model requires the creation of radically different products and/or the pursuit of entirely new market segments. The CPO and AB cases called for systemwide, radical change, which Foss and Stieglitz (2015) label "revolutionary BMI," requiring the active involvement of top management in everyday decision-making, attention to detail and a highly aligned top-management team.

Also surprising is the fact that the few studies of leadership for BMI that do exist do not consider the role of the board of the organization. As Ruth Rentschler notes in her book *The Entrepreneurial Arts Leader* (see Fillis 2003), arts organizations have changed their focus from the creative product to creative management of the organization, which involves leadership as well as educating and entertaining. In a more recent book, Rentschler points to the crucial role of boards of arts organizations in providing leadership for the organization (Farrell 2016). And leadership includes having the courage to take bold risks when necessary, as the board of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company did by building a $9-million state-of-the-art facility for their ensemble because "we understood that if we didn't build them a new space, a better space, we would never see them again" (Ravanas 2006, 65).

Our study throws additional light on the critical role that the leadership of an arts organization plays in driving BMI. At CPO, the Chair, Larry Fichtner, recruited Donna Finley as the change agent and together they were the main drivers of BMI. At AB, the Chair, Dawn McDonald, recognized the contribution that Donna had made to help save CPO with a successful BMI and hired the same team to develop and implement a new business model for the Ballet. And Dawn continued to provide encouragement and support in various ways; an example is this e-mail she sent to Donna after she had joined: "We are working through a difficult time and very difficult decisions. Last evening a feeling of cohesiveness was very evident. With thanks for your commitment and hard work, Dawn."

Chris George, AB's Interim Executive Director, was also supportive, as indicated by a message he sent to Donna: "There is a long way to go still. But I am confident that we are making huge strides in our new direction throughout every area of the organization. Last night's guests – from Canada Council, CADA, the Mayor's Office, the Jubilee, Mitacs, the University of Calgary, Momentum Health, and so many more – left extremely excited and supportive of the direction we're moving in and the risks we are taking to do and to be something different."

At CPO and AB, the three critical players – the board chair, a key insider and the external change agent – were fully aligned with the concept of the new business model and agreed on what had to be done to successfully implement it. Without this strong alignment and drive to create a successful new business model, BMI would have died on the vine.

The BMI literature emphasizes the importance of developing new learning capabilities (Weerawardena et al. 2021), but the *investment* needed to create dynamic capabilities has not received the attention it deserves. The coalition of the powerful players driving BMI at CPO and AB recognized the need for one-time transitional funding to develop the new skills, new processes, new systems, new technology and the subject-matter expertise that had to be brought in from the outside to jump start the change process in order to achieve a new business model. As Donna publicly acknowledged, "A lot of our work with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra was to invest in the skill and capability of the organization. That's what we do: we transfer some of our knowledge and skill base into organizations that urgently need them" (Finley 2003).

The BMI literature highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement and collaboration with networks, ecosystems and partners, but it is relatively silent on the importance of mobilizing the organization for the *high engagement* needed to change the culture of the organization to align with the new business model (Foss and Saebi 2017; Weerawardena et al. 2021).

At CPO, musicians were drawn into the new business model through strategic planning and implementation committees and task teams: organizing new performances; letter-writing campaigns and communications with important CPO audience members and stakeholders; media appearances and interviews; and fundraising calls. As Jancovich (2015) observes, arts managers who involve the public in decision-making are better able to make the case for continued public investment, in the face of austerity, while also enhancing the creativity of their organizations.

At AB, the story was much the same. When the dancers were exposed to an analysis of the data collected from the strategic assessment work, they immediately expressed a willingness to be part of the solution. One dancer's comment sums up their reaction: "What can WE do to help?" Dancers contributed through appearances during and after a performance; were featured in thank-you letters to sponsors and thank-you videos for subscribers; participated in calling subscribers to renew their subscriptions, in fundraising and donor-information sessions, and in mystery-shopping market research; and appeared in the media to promote the Ballet.

An example of the positive feedback this generated is the following e-mail from AB patrons: "So good to see that the Company is smart enough to get good advice and also to follow that advice. The wonderful things on stage only happen with sound direction from head office. We look forward to continuing to support Alberta Ballet as they move through this process."

Conclusion

As Chait et al. (2005) observe, non-profit boards spend most of their time in their fiduciary role (legal responsibilities of oversight and leadership) and their strategic role (major decisions about resources, programs and services) and little or no time in their generative role (deeper inquiry, exploring root causes, core values, new ideas and game-changing options).

The Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra and Alberta Ballet engaged in BMI because they were in financial distress. If their boards had been aware of their generative role and had spent sufficient time on it as a natural part of their duties, they may have undertaken BMI proactively rather than reactively as they did, and avoided the financial distress that finally drove them to BMI.

So, our first recommendation is that boards become aware of their generative role and devote sufficient time to it periodically. In light of our findings, we would ask the board chair of any arts organization the following question: Who in your organization is responsible for keeping the board informed about the viability of the existing business model and the need for BMI and the opportunities it can open up for the organization?

Before making a decision to pursue BMI, the board and the senior leadership should acknowledge the difficulties inherent in conceiving and implementing BMI and then commit to providing the attention and funding that its success demands. If they decide to pursue BMI, the board, the senior leadership and the external or internal change agents – call them the guiding coalition – must be fully aligned on what they are trying to accomplish, how they will implement their plans, and their openness to continuous course corrections as new discoveries are made.

It takes courage to conceive, sell and implement BMI. The guiding coalition must ensure that the organization begins a process of objectively examining the embedded traditional assumptions of the old business model and understanding the assumptions of the new business model. The old assumptions must be challenged and the power and potential of the new assumptions demonstrated.

As we have seen in the CPO and AB cases, one-time transitional funding will be needed to develop the new skills, new processes, new systems and new technology, and the outside subject-matter expertise necessary to jump start the change process towards the new business model. The tendency is to think this can be done with the resources the organization already has, but these are usually insufficient.

Skills in finance, marketing and innovation are critical. It is difficult and time-consuming to train existing personnel, especially if the organization is in crisis. The right attitude and openness are everything! The guiding coalition must find new people to bring into the organization based on the skills and experience needed to meet the challenges of moving to the new business model. Further, they must look beyond their specific arts community for people from other fields with new ideas and approaches.

Arts organizations usually do not know their growth segments well enough. If it has not been done recently, or at all, a market segmentation study should be undertaken to pinpoint the served market as well as potential new market segments. For example, CPO had already captured the classical music market and had to grow segments where people enjoyed the music but in a different setting. They had to bend their minds to the notion that the new consumer is attending our concert *not* because it is classical music but because it is an *interesting experience* and they like classical music.

Arts organizations tend to say, "Don't corporatize us!" They need, instead, to be open to learning from the corporate world and to think about new sources of revenue. For example, what about fee for service rather than just giving stuff away? Instead of being just a charity, why not ask, Who might pay for such a service, event or experience? At CPO, they discovered that the choir happily paid a "choir fee" for the experience and the privilege of being able to participate!

Multiple perspectives are needed to create a new, viable business model. Hence, stakeholder engagement that embraces a variety of perspectives is a critical source of energy for BMI. All task teams should include a board member, a staff member, an artist, and an internal or external facilitator/consultant – and, as appropriate, other stakeholder representatives or subject-matter experts. Here are some observations that have resulted from our studies of BMI:

- Strategic ideas come from surprising places; for example, they do not necessarily come from the person who speaks the most – it could be the person who speaks the least.
- The deep listener can hear a new idea that might otherwise be missed.
- Change agents do not have to be experts in the arts sector; they typically bring objective, out-of-the-box thinking.
- Benchmarking peer organizations, *and similar organizations in other sectors,* are critical if new approaches are to be found.

Based on the findings of our study, we recommend that organizations not wait for the perfect solution before acting, because the perfect solution may never materialize. They should focus on a limited number of priorities and act on them before adding others. We recommend that "mini experiments" and trials be run on a small scale, with a focus on implementing those that get traction. The motto should be: Fail fast and try again.

Business model innovation requires diverse inputs by the organization and its stakeholders. The goals are to capture the hearts and minds of stakeholders; sharpen the focus on the paying audience's motivation and needs; invest in order to build internal skills and capability; and create a unified, collaborative organization that can make the constant course corrections necessary to address new obstacles and seize new opportunities. To achieve meaningful engagement, communication must be comprehensive and continuous.

Above all, BMI requires the combined commitment of leadership, staff and artists to a new vision, a breaking away from the traditional mindset that says, "This is how things have always been done in the arts." It requires the courage to move forward *through* the fog instead of waiting for it to lift; to grow in new directions; and to embrace an entrepreneurial mindset of calculated risk and reward. Stakeholder engagement that brings a variety of perspectives (not just the business perspective) into the conversation is critical for generating the energy needed to drive the process.

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