

Two's company

Responses on Twitter to the recent announcement of Gregor Muir's appointment as Director of the ICA ranged from relief that he was a curator to concern as to whether consequently he could 'add up'. As these reactions highlight, we prefer our organisations to be led by Artistic Directors and yet it is increasingly unrealistic to expect one person to provide all the relevant expertise. In the theatre sector some Boards have shifted power away from Artistic Directors, reducing them to second-tier posts in favour of 'safer', and blander, models. In visual arts we have retained our curator-Directors, and struggle to attract audiences and earned income as a consequence. Joint leadership - where an Executive Director and Artistic Director work in tandem - offers a model that satisfies both business and artistic needs. Common in theatre, it is now attracting interest in the visual arts, as seen at Tate St Ives, Tate Liverpool and Liverpool Biennial.

Galleries which have recently introduced Executive Directors report major increases in attendance and trading income as well as benefits from the additional time an Artistic Director can spend on programme research and developing co-production and touring partners when not over-burdened with other responsibilities. Improved stakeholder relationships and a higher profile artistic programme contribute to a virtuous circle where increased management and commercial capacity enables a more ambitious programme. As one ED explained: 'admissions has gone from 10% of our income stream to 50% because of the nature of exhibitions we now do'. But the real value of joint leadership goes beyond additional capacity, it comes from the creativity inherent in bringing together two different perspectives or skillsets. When managed well, difference can produce innovative results, as one interviewee explained: 'my best thinking happens in dialogue, when I talk it through with someone it takes me further.'

But others point to joint leadership relationships that are 'unhappy marriages' and argue the model is a 'sticking plaster' we should only employ when the preferred option of a single Director is not available. Baltic, for example, advertised for its current Director as two separate roles, a CEO and Artistic Director, but left the door open for an 'exceptional candidate' who

was able to fulfil both aspects. So are two heads better than one or are joint leadership models double trouble and only to be considered as a last resort? Interviews I undertook with over thirty executive leaders and trustees in theatre and visual arts shed light on this question, and the issues that underpin successful joint leadership models.

The major problems that occur within joint leadership structures include a mis-match of the styles, values or level of experience of the two directors and a failure to embed appropriate joint decision-making systems, for example by splitting accountability. Therefore any recruitment process needs to include careful consideration of the type of leader who can work successfully in this model, and specifically with their counter-part. The polarization of the roles can fuel the ‘creatives and the suits’ mentality from which we can suffer from in the arts. One highly experienced ED explained:

‘at its most simplest the Artistic Director looks after the art, and the ED looks after the business but it only works if you are both fiendishly interested in the other side of the organisation’.

Seeing these two positions as a *shared* leadership role, or as one interviewee suggested ‘a jobshare’, underlines the shared responsibility required to make joint leadership a success. This means EDs have to be involved in programming discussions (which is far from universal, particularly in visual arts), and ADs have to be engaged with the wider organisation and external stakeholders. In theatre, although far less in visual arts, EDs are highly experienced in their artform having usually worked as stage managers (e.g. Vikki Heywood), casting (e.g. Baroness McIntosh) or producing (e.g. Nick Starr) prior to moving into senior management. Similarly many ADs have experience of producing (e.g. Erica Whyman or David Micklem). Understanding, and respecting, one another’s roles and contributions is critical.

Ensuring that all staff feel valued is a key task for joint leaders:

‘It’s about believing, really believing properly, that everyone’s contribution is a) creative and b) central. The minute anybody starts thinking that someone isn’t central or creative then I think you end up with a rift. If instead, you think it requires just

as much creativity to sell a story to the press or to raise funds from a private donor or to sort out the technical demands to create an ambitious programme, if you really think those things are mission-critical – and I think they are – and communicate that well to the staff then I think it works.’

Collaborative leaders recognise that without great management great art won't happen and ensure responsibility – and recognition – is shared evenly across the whole organisation. They also demonstrate a genuine respect for artists *and* audiences equally; have a vision that sees the arts as part of the wider community and take pride in developing ‘talent’ rather than believing that they alone can achieve success. Joint leadership models can be useful in embedding strong management skills at the head of arts and cultural organisations, and encouraging a collaborative culture within and beyond its walls. But structures are only one part of the solution: collaborative systems and competencies, but above all *values*, are all critical.

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