

ArtBridges Tips & Tools Series #9: The Stuff of Community Engagement

By Annalee Adair

Annalee Adair is Director of [A. Adair & Associates](http://www.aadair.com), where she is assisting public and not-for-profit sector in the areas of cultural planning, public art, community engagement and cultural leadership. Annalee often works with performing arts networks and assisted with the development and writing of ON Presents new website: <http://www.artsengage.ca>.



Annalee is currently managing [Talent2Lead](http://www.talent2lead.com), a program of the Cultural Human Resources Council and working on Edmonton Arts Council's new 10-year arts and heritage plan. As Manager of the Community Engagement & Education Division at the City of Kingston, she developed a community engagement strategy for the Grand Theatre, a city-wide youth strategy, an accessibility audit of cultural venues, and a First People's Recognition Protocol and Plan. Previously, Adair developed a Community Arts & Social Engagement Division while at the City of Ottawa and was the founding Executive Director of [ArtsSmarts](http://www.artsmarts.ca), a national arts and learning organization.

Community Engagement:

Building relationships of trust with both the individuals your organization serves as well as residents of the broader community is the ultimate aim of effective community engagement.

Community Engagement is a familiar buzz phrase in the arts sector in Canada. While Community Engagement is not a new concept, ‘why’ and ‘how’ CE is done is interpreted in many different ways across disciplines, organizations and sectors.

Arts presenters and artists have an opportunity for a new transformative role in their communities. In addition to our usual presenting activities, developing a community engagement approach can deeply immerse our organizations into many more aspects of community life.

Ultimately, the core work of effective community engagement is to engage diverse partners in a learning journey so they are able to transcend their individual good in favour of the common good. The Harwood Institute refers to this way of working as Turning Outward, which they define as, “building a deep knowledge of your community through engaging not only official leaders but everyday people; using that knowledge in a deliberate way (along with data and best practices) to shape strategies and community solutions; and working in a way that not only solves problems but improves the way the community itself works.” (Leavy, 2017, p. 2)

Authentic community engagement requires some essential skills but that is not all. To do engagement well also requires a long-term commitment to relationship-building and an investment of adequate resources so that engagement becomes more than a “one-off” event that is budgeted for – and occurs – only at the start of an initiative. To fully harness the “extraordinary power of ordinary people,” community engagement should be a pillar within your organization’s strategic planning.

Community engagement is a practice that does take work and, for organizations and individuals who embrace it as part of how they operate, it also requires a recognition that engagement work is often “messy and unpredictable.” This reality is one of the reasons why many organizations are much more familiar with “informing stakeholders” than actively engaging them in developing solutions. This reality is summarized by Eric Bonabeau, CEO of Icosystems, who wisely noted that, “managers would rather live with a problem they can’t solve than with a solution they can’t fully understand or control.”

RELATIONSHIPS

When engaging with residents it is important for arts organizations to appreciate an important distinction between *broad* authentic community engagement and representation that reflects a diversity of ethnicities, ages, academic achievement and experiences or includes program participants or people of the community.

In the world of community engagement, the differences between the community and the arts world cause familiar difficulties, as the 'community' is unruly, unpredictable and an unknown to most organizations. Connecting with external communities requires working past real and perceived, historical and current barriers. In addition, varying levels of power exist among relations and partnerships and consideration needs to be given to how principles and practices might unfold differently across relations.

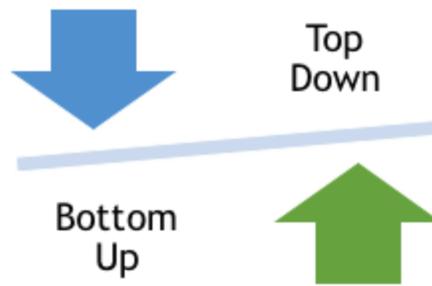
The tendency is to try to cope, to put it off, or attempt to pull parts of it to help it achieve the organization's own aims, objectives, programs and service delivery by reaching out/down ('*outreach*'). This sets up a dynamic that will achieve certain outcomes but is not a sustainable approach to building community relationships that will ultimately fulfill the organization's role as a community builder and resource.

Organizations who seek to practice effective community engagement must be willing to view it as something that is far more than simply seeking the input of those that they are already serving and ensuring that they are included on the organization's advisory committees or on the Board.

Many organizations traditionally functioned in a strictly transactional business model, driven by the financial bottom-line. Today, many are facing the same challenges of volunteerism and an aging leadership and audiences, resulting in a decreasing number of performances, exhibitions or activities over the course of the year. Clearly, this old transactional model is breaking down and no longer meets community cultural developmental needs.

Whether dealing with mental health, immigration, bullying, issues of tolerance, homophobia, youth or diversity; the arts can be a tool in addressing these community priorities through alignment with artistic works that explore these issues.

For organizations the mindset shift is one from seeing themselves primarily as "the doers" and providers of programs and services, to embracing a role as the catalysts and co-facilitators of conversations and multi-sector collaborations that share a commitment to strengthening the well-being of the community.



TIP #1

MOVE FROM A TRANSACTIONAL RELATIONSHIP (OUTREACH) WITH COMMUNITY TO A MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP (as COMMUNITY BUILDERS):

WORDS & TERMS

The term, “community engagement” is often used by arts organizations to describe a relationship with the audience. For the purposes of this tips and tools series, community engagement is not giving community what (we think) they want, and it is not the responsibility of others to come to us. That is audience development.

The table below adapted from [Doug Borwick's](#) blog illustrates the key differences between the two ways of interacting with community. Both approaches are legitimate, but each have their own focus and purpose.

TIP #2

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IS NOT AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT VS. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Audience Development	Community Engagement
Art is the key commodity	Relationships are the key commodity
Short Term Marketing	Long Term Organizational Development
Focus on increasing patron & audience #'s	Focus on building community relationships
Look at who and who not is coming to venue	Look at what matters to the community
Internal focus (outreach)	External focus (in-reach)
Involves marketing, education and development staff	Involves all stakeholders including staff, board and volunteers
Organizational identity, goals and priorities remain the same	Organizational identity, goals and priorities could be transformed
Conservative approach, internal impact	Risky approach, internal/external impact

THE QUESTION OF EXCELLENCE

If you have worked in community arts, co-creation, arts collaborations, community engagement, public art, arts education – or in a capacity where arts meet public or community members – one of the first barriers to gaining legitimacy, recognition, or support for this work is the question of **excellence**.

It is assumed that if community is involved in the creation, planning or decision-making of the “art” excellence will be compromised. Excellence is slowly being redefined in the arts sector – artistic merit is more often used now due to evolving work in culturally diverse and indigenous arts communities.

1. The activity is by, with, and for the communities
2. The artists are highly skilled
3. Activities reflect the energy and qualities of the community

TIP #3

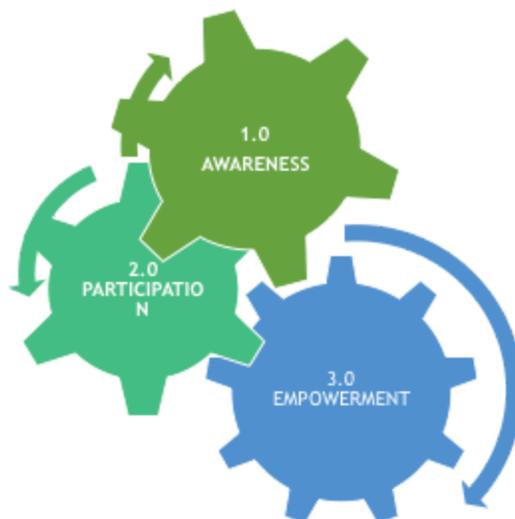
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DOES NOT USE technical and expressive excellence (in one very specific cultural tradition) as a means of stopping conversation about connecting with communities

The 3 CATEGORIES REQUIRED FOR EXCELLENCE IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INCLUDE:



THE CONTINUUM

There is the recognition that arts organizations, and in particular, performing arts centres that are supported by local residents must begin to play a larger role in their communities. However, current business models do not support this evolving role. Community engagement is a continuum of relationships with community. Working at all 3 levels of community engagement is critical to a successful community engagement strategy.



We have developed a rubric to assist arts organizations and performing arts centres in tracking and assessing how they are working with their communities. Please click on the [community engagement scale](#) to see the complete version of this and print off or save as a reference.

TIP #4: WORK AT ALL 3 LEVELS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SIMULTANEOUSLY

(excerpt from community engagement scale)

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT LEVEL	1.0 AWARENESS	2.0 PARTICIPATION	3.0 ENGAGEMENT/ EMPOWERMENT
ROLE OF THE VENUE	Focus is on the provision of venue for building community awareness, exposure and consumption of culture	Focus is on the application and provision of venue for community participation in culture	Focus is on the application and provision of venue for “community” exploration, application of knowledge, issues, needs, information and resources.
ROLE OF THE SITE	Single, grand, one site-serves- all-functions space or institution Restoring and enhancing the quality of building or spaces original purpose	Better, easier spatial access Renovating to evolve image of existing building or original spaces Multi-use spaces for specific community organizations	Solid, applicable, & relevant multi-spatial access/presentation Redefine the purpose and role of original site and spaces A member of a network of community learning centres distributed around the community
BUSINESS MODEL	Revenue model/subsidized with support, sponsorships Transactional Short Term profit	Revenue/subsidized with support, sponsorships and grant funding Transactional / Short Term ROI Investment in Community Outreach	Cost recovery (not essential) Subsidized through community partnerships and funding agency support Long Term/Social Return on Investment
VENUE PROGRAMMING	Top down Presenter driven programming	Top Down Presenter/Staff driven programming	Bottom Up Community and/or issue driven with community stakeholders and presenter
PROGRAMMING GOAL	Goals are pre-established Ticket sales Revenue Attendance	Goals are pre-established Ticket sales Revenue Attendance in activity/performance	Goals are established jointly with stakeholders and are evolving Shared Revenue/Shared Cost Participation/Partnership Support Community Outcomes

RESOURCES

We suggest that you visit [The Resource Centre](#) at [artsengage](#). This resource centre provides a list of books, useful websites, research papers and reports, that give the most recent information and examples of community engagement in the arts and other areas.

ArtBridges Tips and Tools #9: The Stuff of Community Engagement was written by Annalee Adair. Photos by Annalee Adair.

Please visit: [A. Adair & Associates](#), [Arts Engage](#) and [Talent2Lead](#)

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For more **FREE** resources and tools like this one, please visit www.artbridges.ca