

Innovation Stories

Cultural Organizations Doing Things Differently



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The New Pathways Program Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities



Robert Mangold
Retrospective,
1955 - present
I-Beam Series

Photo by
René Atchison
2012

About the Organization

Founded in 1976, the municipally-owned Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities (Center) offers year-round theater and more than 800 classes in visual arts, dance, music and humanities. Established by the City of Arvada, Colorado, to serve its citizens, the Center now attracts more than half its 350,000 annual visitors from outside the city and surrounding county. The Center's facilities include main stage and black box theaters, an outdoor amphitheater, classrooms, galleries, banquet facilities, and a historical museum. Its annual budget is approximately \$11 million, making it one of the largest cultural organizations in the region.



Starting Conditions: An Awkward Governance Structure

While the Center boasted significant achievements, some uncomfortable suspicions were emerging among those who knew the organization best. Despite public perception that the Center was “on the move” programmatically, insiders believed the Center’s structure was beginning to work against it. On the surface, the Center looked like a typical not-for-profit institution, but in fact, it was a department of city government. Instead of a Board of Directors, the Center was guided by the Arvada Arts and Humanities Council whose 11 members were approved by City Council.

Given the Center’s growing reputation and institutional ambitions, its governance structure was not only unwieldy and inadequate, it was becoming potentially harmful. There were no clear lines of communication, and organizational leaders complained it was difficult to know where authority resided. Was the Center—which managed all programming but functioned as a city enterprise—really in charge? Or was it the Arts Council whose members were appointed to support the Center but who were accountable to the City Council? Was it the City Council that approved the Center’s appropriations? Or, was it the City of Arvada itself, led by the City Manager, to whom the Executive Director of the Center reported?

No one could deny the value of the City’s historic commitment to the Center. In 2009, for example, the City contributed nearly 40 percent of the Center’s annual budget; when combined with state funding, government support for the Center reached nearly 50 percent. So what could be wrong? On one level, the Center’s position was enviable: solid and consistent support from the City, growing national recognition, well-received programming, and a strong value proposition with the local community. Yet on the other hand, the Center was generating less than four percent of its revenue from outside fundraising, and government funding was diminishing. Things were beginning to feel uncomfortably precarious inside the organization, and the Arts Council had neither the clout nor the experience to take up the fundraising slack on behalf of the Center. The public was confused, too, with prospective donors wondering why they should support the Center when “the City would take care of it.”

New Pathways Program: Bringing Constituents Together

The Center joined New Pathways in June 2010 as one of 15 organizations in the Denver region that participated in a series of three hands-on workshops for the local arts community designed by EmcArts to build a learning community around innovation. The Center chose to apply for and was accepted into deeper facilitated process with EmcArts. During a rigorous eight-month process, the Center examined its complex structure and acknowledged the need for a new systemic relationship between the City of Arvada, the Arvada City Council, the Arvada Council for the Arts and Humanities, and the Center.

Milestones & Learning: Making Sense of a Dual Purpose Key Challenges

Soon after entering New Pathways, the Center’s Team conducted interviews with key stakeholders. Most were positive about the Center and its programs, but they also expressed confusion about

governance and public funding. There were other problems, too: lack of shared vision, constant confusion about roles, inadequate strategic planning, undercapitalization, negative net assets, an increasing income gap, and limited understanding about what the City and the Center each brought to the table. One person said, for example, “I knew the City greatly supported the Arvada Center, but I had no idea just how much.” Another added, “It seems like the City doesn’t recognize the Center as an asset—and the Center doesn’t recognize the City’s support and connection as an asset.”

What kept the Center and the City—with all their good intentions—from developing a compelling sense of shared purpose? The biggest issue was likely the difference in organizational cultures. The Center was now a large organization—outstripping many City departments—and it required different oversight and leadership. “We’re playing in the big leagues,” said one staff member. “We need a high level of sophistication, and

while the City has been extremely supportive, the Center is really different from the City’s other products.”

Driven by an increasingly aspirational long-term programmatic vision, the Center felt constrained by political complacency. Subject to a City Council that had to be re-elected every two years, the Center simply did not have the leverage it needed to plan for its long-term needs. Because the City’s structure and systems were not designed to support the Center—now as an \$11 million arts organization with demanding requirements for governance, financial management, long-term planning, and community-building—the New Pathways Team knew things needed to change dramatically.



The missing piece, many believed, was the Arts Council. Neither a real Board of Directors nor a traditional regional arts council, the group wandered between its role as a civic body and its responsibility to support the Center. Center staff noted, "While the Arts Council has been a good advocate and advisor through the years, it has never wanted to accept its role in fundraising." EmcArts facilitator Melissa Dibble agrees, saying, "The Arts Council is a group of good citizens who care about the arts and want to do good things for the Center, but it doesn't reflect the level of experience and accomplishment the Center has attained." Worse yet, staff said, recruiting new members was difficult, since "no one who's influential in the arts wants to sit on the current board because it has no real power."

Changes in Assumptions

Holding back change was a fundamental long-held assumption: that the Center was helpless to change the existing structure. Fifteen years earlier, leaders had tried and failed. As the New Pathways Team struggled anew with this challenge, frustration was pervasive, and one member of the Team showed outright resistance. Dibble probed his objections further, hoping to unlock the group's thinking, and he finally exploded with what was bothering him: "We can't do anything because it's just too hard to change," he said. Rather than agreeing, the rest of the group asked, "But isn't it too hard if we stay the same?" This was a transformative moment in the conversation, Dibble says, and a critical shift in the Team's assumptions about its work.

But where should they go from here? Experience had already proven that the issue could not be resolved without the engagement of all constituencies. Perhaps more importantly, no one assumed that everything about the existing structure was bad; after all, it had produced an outstanding

and widely respected institution. Cautiously, the group moved forward, no longer assuming that nothing could be done, but stopping short of assuming that a complete break from the City was the only option. Although the Team didn't yet know the answer, it had a new working assumption: that an answer could be found that would benefit the Center, the City, and the residents of Arvada.

New Pathways to Mission

Realizing the Arts Council was central to any restructuring effort, the Team began by looking at the organization's bylaws. What they discovered, the Team says, "was a duality of purpose that posed an inherent challenge." The Arts Council was charged with promoting arts activities at the Center and in the City of Arvada—potentially competing responsibilities that made it hard for the Arts Council to prioritize its duties. At the same time, the New Pathways Team recognized that the Center needed a committed Board of Directors dedicated to fulfilling the organization's mission and securing its operations.

With a better understanding of the Arts Council's mandate, the New Pathways Team saw an opportunity, and they proposed two simultaneous lines of inquiry. The first would identify the values, goals, roles and expectations for an organization focused on the Arvada Center; the second would determine the requirements of an organization dedicated to the broader community. The Team recommended a Discovery Phase of six to nine months for each inquiry, followed by a Definition Phase of up to five months that would allow the Arts Council to define success. Finally, during a Destination Phase, the teams would identify an operating and governance structure for separate organizations or offer an improved plan for operations and governance within the existing structure.

With the endorsement of the full Arts Council, the New Pathways

Team and the Arts Council took its recommendation to the City Council. "It was a shaky moment," says Dibble, "as individual members of the Council expressed concern about the potential outcomes." With no clear consensus, the Council asked for more time to review the proposal. Thanks to the openness and careful advocacy of the New Pathways Team, the City Council ultimately approved going forward with the Discovery Phase of the project, likely appointing members of the Arts Council and/or City Council to serve as facilitators. A steering committee comprised of Arts Council and City Council members was proposed to coordinate the work, and members of City Council serve on each Discovery Team. A full report on the Discovery Phase was planned to be made to City Council in Summer 2012.



Obstacles and Enablers

Outside facilitation was critical to overcoming the politics, history, frustration, faulty communication, and competing expectations that threatened the Center throughout the process. Initially, Dibble says, the Team wanted her to own the vision. "You're the expert; tell us what to do," they told her. "It was a real tension point—like a hot potato," Dibble adds, "not because people didn't care but because the structure was so ineffective. There were lots of politics, anxiety and passing the buck." The neutral New Pathways process, however, shifted responsibility to the Team, and experienced outsiders pushed their thinking. One member—who served as chair of the Board of another major arts organization—was the first to identify the need for leaders who would "keep the

Obstacles and Enablers (cont.)

flame,” saying “I know it’s my job, along with my Executive Director, to be vigilant about the mission and to communicate and champion the vision of my organization.” Dibble credits outsiders with helping the Team embrace the importance of having an oversight body with discipline, institutional memory, consistency and cultural integrity.

The Impact

Still in the midst of its investigation, the Center cannot yet report on a new design for its structural relationship with the City. Both the Executive Director of the Center and the City Manager have departed, and it is unclear whether their departures will affect the process. Meanwhile, however, the New Pathways Team says that just participating in the program was deeply important. Being part of a process that was funded by a foundation from which the organization had never received support helped establish the Center as a more traditional arts organization in the eyes of many stakeholders.

Thanks to New Pathways, all primary constituents participated for the first time in a structured, facilitated conversation about the fundamental challenges and opportunities embedded in the Center’s governance structure, a discussion that produced new clarity around the Arts Council’s dual role and identified a new

pathway for evaluating options. Arts Council members learned what it took to support a large arts organization, they also realized there were civic issues the Arts Council should address that have nothing to do with the Center. “This had always been confusing,” Dibble says, “and now they are energized by the possibilities. The process got a conversation going that has had an impact and created some momentum. Hopefully it will continue!”



1940’s Radio Hour. Photo by P. Switzer, 2011.

The Innovation Team

Gene Sobczak Executive Director	Natasha Tiff Development Staff	Bob Dyer City Council Representative	Melissa Dibble EmcArts Facilitator
Debra Havins Arts Council Chair	Mark Arnold Volunteer Council	Kimberly Wagner Arts Council Member	
Tim Geisler Arts Council Member	Katie Blackett CEO, CO Mountain Club	Andrea Koppenhofer Board Chair, Ft. Collins Museum of Art	
Jennifer Lusk Arts Council Vice Chair	Terry Stevinson Past Art Council Member/Chair Secretary		
Deb Condo Arts Council Secretary			
Stephanie Stastny Arts Council Member	Bill Ray Deputy City Manager		

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