

# Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts  
**COCA - Center of Creative Arts**

## The Innovators

A group of forward-thinking Saint Louis philanthropists founded **The Center of Creative Arts (COCA)** in 1986 as an “incubator for the arts.” Widely touted as a cultural innovator, COCA is the largest multidisciplinary arts organization in Saint Louis and one of the premier community arts centers in the country, serving 50,000 people annually through more than 500 program activities that include dance, drama, visual arts and music. COCA’s education programs serve students of all ages at 40 sites across the Saint Louis metropolitan area. COCA’s 2009 annual budget is \$5 million.

This story begins with...



COCA

possibilities

## The Innovation

COCA developed *COCAbiz... the Art of Performance*, a series of workshops for the business community that uses multi-disciplinary artistic tools to illuminate and improve the creative capacity of businesses. The program focuses on developing communication, management, and team performance.

## Starting Conditions

With a broad range of programs and a diverse participant base, COCA believed it was missing an opportunity to connect with “the passionate business community” in Saint Louis. For two years, it had offered a successful *Creativity in Business* speaker series as part of its corporate membership program, featuring well-known authors such as Daniel Pink and Chip Conley. The positive reception among the business community encouraged COCA to add classes and workshops for individuals, but enrollment was lower than expected, and feedback from the business community indicated that the same classes were available elsewhere. At the same time, COCA realized that by using an outside expert, it had not integrated the workshops with its other programming, and it had not used its artists effectively. Somehow, the new experiment just did not connect to COCA’s “mojo.”

## The Art of Performance

Engaging arts-based training  
for common business challenges.

Nonetheless, the staff at COCA still thought they were onto something. A two-day visioning retreat further convinced them that a more fully developed business curriculum could enhance the organization's presence in the corporate community and could keep COCA on the cutting edge of new ideas in learning. At the same time, COCA staff also realized they needed to better understand a variety of issues related to program content, marketing and branding, and resources. Contemplating the opportunities and challenges, COCA asked itself whether its initial unsuccessful experiment in workshops for individuals

might, in fact, be the seeds of a more powerful program. Could a new strategy, COCA wondered, deepen its relationship with the corporate community? Moreover, could it challenge and enhance people's definition of creativity and art, serve as a pipeline for new donors, and provide a revenue stream to offset the costs of COCA's school-age outreach programming? Motivated to explore these questions in a strategic way, the organization applied to the Innovation Lab. COCA was accepted in June 2009, and the Innovation Team went to work.

## The Lab

### Transformative Moments

COCA joined the Lab thinking it would expand *Creativity in Business* to give people the tools and connections they needed to create and innovate. It envisioned a program that would establish a community of thought leaders and innovators whose friendships and networks would strengthen program participants personally and increase their businesses' creative capacity. COCA staff and business leaders on the Innovation Team agreed enthusiastically that this was a good thing to do. Throughout Phase 1, and leading up to the Lab Intensive, however, there was a serious disconnect between the perspectives expressed by both groups. Lab facilitator Melissa Dibble observed that almost from the outset, business leaders on the Innovation Team distrusted COCA's capacity to create and run the kind of rigorous program that would

appeal to business – despite their belief that "the arts were a good way to attract business interest." They were highly comfortable with the original model because it relied on outside experts, and they were uncertain whether COCA had the internal capacity to rise to that level. COCA staff and artists, on the other hand, knew they would have to expand their knowledge of adult facilitation techniques, business concepts and forces that affect organizations; they also knew they would have to learn how to translate artistic concepts to business concepts. Yet they insisted, "We have ways of building programs that are high quality and intrinsically art-based; these program development values and systems should work for this audience as well."

For several days at the Intensive, Dibble says the two groups "talked past each other." Two of the business members of the Team nearly left. The turning point came when Phil McArthur – a

specialist brought by the Lab – presented a session on balancing advocacy with inquiry. Using a video simulation of the Challenger disaster, McArthur led the group through a discussion of how a pre-launch decision-making process that relied on asking questions rather than on advocating for specific positions might have averted the explosion that destroyed Challenger. The presentation was a breakthrough for business leaders who came to see their insistence that COCA lacked the capacities to create and run the program as blocking real conversation about its actual institutional capacity, particularly the organization's ability to develop and train teaching artists to implement an expanded program for businesses. According to Dibble, business team members returned from the Intensive saying, "There is something in the arts that is authentic, intelligent and more collaborative than any way we've ever worked before."

Another important moment came when the Team returned to Saint Louis after the retreat. How could those who had been at the Intensive translate their growing enthusiasm to those passionate corporate leaders who had been instrumental in starting *Creativity in Business*? How could they enroll others in the new idea without rehashing old assumptions, losing momentum or unraveling the progress made during the Intensive? They settled on a unique approach: a mini-theater piece with a rotating cast of COCA characters. The piece depicted the project's history, the Lab process, the COCAbiz learning model, marketing and communications plans, and the prototyping timeline. By using storytelling to describe the

journey they had made, COCA shared the joys and tensions the team experienced, helped others make sense of the work, and enlisted their commitment to the new direction.

#### Shifts in Assumptions

Once business leaders dropped their assumption that real expertise could come only from outside the organization, they stopped asking, "Why should COCA do this program?" They came to believe that COCA could, in fact, deliver meaningful and valuable education to the corporate community. Acknowledging COCA's significant creative capacity, the implementation then moved quickly into workshop design, artist training and piloting.

#### New Pathways to Mission

COCAbiz is not just an add-on program for COCA: it grew organically from the organization's core competencies and mission, and relies on skill sets that are deeply embedded in the organization. Offering information programs for businesses is not a new scheme for arts organizations. What is new about COCAbiz, however, is its illumination of how an organization can use its inherent knowledge and skills to connect with and provide learning for people outside the arts – not by offering arts skill-building, but rather by using the arts as a vehicle for teaching and to stimulate leadership, creativity and innovation. COCABiz offers learning about business concepts and skills through the arts.

#### The Prototype

With funds from the Lab, COCA hired an organizational development specialist to assist in linking arts content to business-skill development for the workshops, engaged a project manager and an assessment consultant, trained the artist faculty, and conducted two pilot workshops. Each workshop was designed for 12 participants, taught by three artists and an organizational development specialist, and consisted of three modules, each addressing core business competencies and employing dance, theater and visual arts techniques. Before offering the full prototypes, COCA held pre-pilot workshops for each topic. The pre-pilot workshops caused COCA to expand the timeframe for the full workshop, to develop a take-home tool kit for participants, and in some cases to change the order of the discipline-based modules to enhance clarity. Once the pre-pilot workshops were completed and evaluated, COCA ran two pilot workshops with selected local companies.

*Playing the Relational Field: Artistic Strategies for People Managers* was designed for "new people managers." The dance module taught enhanced communication and empathy through non-verbal exercises; the theater module contained exercises designed to help participants think on their feet and communicate quickly with their team; and the visual arts module emphasized expanded empathy, the need for creative solutions, and how to manage conflicting priorities. The second workshop – *Re-imagining How Teams Innovate: Creative Solutions for Teams* – was for organizations needing a culture change. It used a visual arts module to demonstrate the steps in the creative process and taught effective brainstorming; a theater module that engaged participants in narrative exercises that helped them overcome obstacles to effective team performance; and a dance module that used choreography to help participants build their ability to develop creative strategies.

Working with Mary Piontek from EmcArts, the COCA Team developed surveys to evaluate the impact of the pilot workshops. Designed to help the team compile both qualitative and quantitative data quickly, the surveys were a critical tool in helping COCA shape the program. Overwhelmingly positive, respondents to the survey reported significant insights related to listening and non-verbal communication, teamwork and collaboration, and the creative process. One participant noted that the workshop "used a completely different language and format than what I am used to, and I found it most relatable to my job."

## Obstacles and Enablers

Resources from the Lab – especially at the Intensive and during the prototyping period – were crucial to the success of COCAbiz. At the same time, COCA clearly brought its history of innovation and its capacity for creative program development to the Lab. Good thinkers whose daily work is rooted in artistic process, the COCA Team members were persistent, analytical, careful to admit where they would need training to be successful with COCAbiz, and disciplined in testing their ideas. The fact that COCA approaches solving problems or designing programs through well-established processes helped it enormously as it considered a range of opportunities. Perhaps most important, COCA was rigorous in planning and preparing for the launch of its pilots, and it understood the critical importance of design, testing, evaluation, re-design, and re-testing. It invested resources to give the pilot workshops the greatest possible chance of success, and it learned from its experience. Going forward, COCA will hire an organizational development consultant to help move the project from prototype to full implementation. COCA's board also recently authorized hiring for a full-time position to manage and carry out COCABiz. Perhaps it is not surprising that COCA used the metaphor of the journey to gather support within the organization when it returned from the Lab Intensive – there is evidence of journey throughout the process, and that, too, is characteristic of COCA's mojo.

## The Impact

COCAbiz holds many lessons for the field about the intrinsic value of the arts and the capacity of arts organizations and artists to transfer their skills to other sectors. It suggests new opportunities for artists, as well as lessons for arts organizations about how to embed their work deeply in the communities they serve.

More than that, COCAbiz has already produced significant energy and momentum within COCA itself, prompting Dibble to say that this may be the "fastest-to-scale innovation she has seen in the Lab."

Artists have new teaching skills thanks to the training they received in preparation for the workshops. They are enjoying increased stature in the business community as those outside COCA realize what they have to offer in the arena of creativity and innovation. COCA team member Stan Sams developed a Culture Book that is serving as a guide for the organization as it develops language to describe the program's mission, vision and key marketing strategies, and a COCAbiz website is being designed. Business team members – skeptical at the outset that COCA could deliver on its ambition – are now the principal cheerleaders for COCAbiz, already helping to raise \$200,000 toward a goal of \$500,000 that will support COCAbiz through its first full year of programming.

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### The Innovation Team

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