

Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts

Case Studies in Innovation
and Adaptive Capacity

PREPARED BY:

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ABOUT EMCARTS

EmcArts is a social enterprise for learning and innovation in the arts. We envision a time when participating in art is recognized as lying at the core of human potential. EmcArts is dedicated to advancing a resilient not-for-profit sector that can make this vision a daily reality. Our programs support individuals, organizations, and communities on their journey to becoming highly adaptive.

www.emcart.org

ABOUT JAMIE GAMBLE

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Lessons in Innovation

Foreword

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One cannot discover
new lands without first
consenting to lose
sight of the shore – for
a very long time.

- Andre Gide

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Andre Gide's image is of innovation as a journey on an open sea, familiar landmarks disappearing with the wake, little to navigate by, and growing concern at the failure of a clear destination to appear from the misty horizon.

Gide sees more: The uncertain journey begins with "consent" – it is freely chosen, not enforced by a funder or launched as a panicky reaction to impending disaster. And it goes on for a long time – beware the seductive early landfall, he implies, and its welcome relief from too much sea-room, too many possibilities, insufficient grounding in data. It's probably just a different part of the same coast. Discovering new lands demands of us, as we work together, that we enlarge our capacity to live in ambiguity, to reject the quick and bright ideas in favor of a deeper trawl, and to sustain excruciatingly our questioning, our examination of possibility, so that we can truly make space for "a wild surmise" not just a fundable project. We must go about the work, in fact, as artists.

EmcArts launched the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* in 2008 to support organizations in incubating innovation projects – conceiving, designing, and testing new strategies to achieve public value. Now, after six years and 33 participating organizations, we are stepping back to reflect on the longer-term impacts of the *Innovation Lab*, in order to better understand how and where it has had identifiable impact, and to appreciate more fully the productive messiness of what adaptive change is actually like in practice.

The first of these two case studies investigates the journey of Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company's *Connectivity* initiative from its beginnings as a submerged big idea at the heart of the organization to its current state as a fully integrated strategy across the entire enterprise. The second follows the journey of *Off-Center*, a disruptive project at the Denver Center Theatre Company (DCTC), which started on the periphery of this large organization and is now finding its way toward the core.

Each journey recorded represents an exciting and often scary ride. Neither the "inside" nor the "outside" strategy – originating the innovation at the core of the business or on its periphery – insulates

the protagonists from conflict, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Would *Off-Center* go anywhere after the early prototypes? The board's response from on high to that question was crucial for the Denver Center Theatre Company. Would *Connectivity* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company survive the pressure to become a marketing strategy? It became apparent that staff changes, and structural rethinking, were needed to navigate those tricky shoals.

For all the dicey critical junctures, these are indubitably stories of success – measured, initially at least, in very different ways from our traditional metrics. Each project is maturing into a sustainable initiative that is thrillingly becoming integrated into the core business of the company. Each shows how a voyage of exploration can be authentically navigated, and the tremendous benefits that can accrue if the vision of the leaders is robust, compelling, and long-term – with space deliberately and continuously made to embrace discovery and surprise.

We are grateful to Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and Denver Center Theatre Company for participating in these studies. Through their openness and candor, they illuminate the courageous journeys of exploration that take place in organizations as they undertake the serious work of learning to adapt. We also thank our independent evaluator Jamie Gamble of Imprint Consulting, Inc., for his forensic eye for detail and careful approach to objective evaluation.

There are many profiles already written on short-term projects by arts organizations in which they do something different. We hope these two case studies, and more that are to follow, will be recognized as richer because they focus on innovation as a process, one that achieves its effect as leaders negotiate unexpected twists and turns to reinforce their sustained commitment to "next practices."

Richard Evans

President, EmcArts

Introduction

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These cases reveal that moving *Connectivity* and *Off-Center* forward required a substantial effort from Woolly Mammoth and the Denver Center. In each case the innovators needed to expand their repertoire of change-supporting skills, and the organization had to invest in building the conditions necessary for the innovation's success.

- **Jamie Gamble**
Imprint Consulting Inc.

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Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and the Denver Center Theatre Company (DCTC) have earned national recognition for new works, artistic quality, and high-caliber performances. They, and their theatre contemporaries, also operate within a dynamic and increasingly challenging landscape for the performing arts. Shifting audience behavior, changing funding patterns, and an entirely new world of communications are some of the current realities that demand adaptation.

Woolly Mammoth and the Denver Center each had an idea that would help them to respond to this changing world. Woolly Mammoth was interested in a more deliberate approach to their audience's engagement and curating their audience as a way to bring energy to a performance, something they call *Connectivity*. The Denver Center was interested to develop *Off-Center*, a space that would allow them to experiment with new techniques that enhance the theatre experience, diversify programming, and explore how non-traditional theatre-goers might respond to different practices.

To help take *Connectivity* and *Off-Center* from emerging ideas to established practices, these organizations participated in EmcArts's *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*. The purpose of this report is to look in depth at the journeys of Woolly Mammoth and the Denver Center through their sustained efforts in innovation so we can better understand what was entailed, how the organizations have benefited, and what lessons can apply to future efforts in supporting innovation and adaptive change in the performing arts.

THE INNOVATION LAB FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

The *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* supports producing and presenting organizations in theatre, modern or contemporary dance, and jazz to move ideas for innovative practices to a place of strategic clarity and organizational readiness. Supporting innovations to be designed, implemented, tested, and refined is a response to the rapidly changing and increasingly challenging operating environment

for American cultural institutions. The *Innovation Labs* are designed and implemented by EmcArts, and made possible by the generous support of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

Organizations participating in an *Innovation Lab* are provided with financial and knowledge resources, coaching expertise, and extended facilitation support. Selection into the program is based on a competitive national application process. The program is geared toward organizations that have identified a significant challenge that requires an adaptive response; have innovative ideas under consideration; and can demonstrate the necessary organizational readiness and commitment to engage in this effort. Capacity for innovative change includes flexible and inclusive leadership, organizational self-awareness, and evidence that independent thinking, idea generation, and challenging 'business-as-usual' are valued by the organization. Applicants also must demonstrate a commitment to the creation, production, or presentation of new work in their art form(s). Selected innovations are those most likely to generate new and effective practices for the organization, its community, and the performing arts field.

Three or four organizations are accepted into each round of *Innovation Labs* and, over a period of one year, the following supports are provided:

- An initial four-month engagement with an EmcArts process facilitator to explore and clarify the new strategy, start to build the organization's team who will work on the innovation, and generate momentum for the overall effort;
- A five-day intensive, residential retreat for ten people (the Innovation Team) from each participating organization, where each Team works with its EmcArts facilitator and a guest content expert of its choice to provide time and space for breakthrough approaches to emerge, and a prototyping plan to be constructed;
- Approximately six months of organized and repeated prototyping of the new approach, including follow-up coaching with the EmcArts facilitator, to

EmcArts's definition of organizational innovation

n. Instances of organizational change that:

1. Result from a shift in underlying assumptions
2. Are discontinuous from previous practice
3. Provide new pathways to creating public value and impact.

help with the design, testing, and learning relating to early implementation of the innovation;

- A grant of \$30,000 toward project prototyping, plus \$9,000 in unrestricted operating support, to maintain organizational momentum toward implementation and to assist with critical follow-up activities; and
- Access to an online resource center on innovation and hub for interaction among *Innovation Lab* participants (www.ArtsFwd.org).

Since 2008, thirty performing arts organizations¹ have participated in an EmcArts *Innovation Lab*. The innovations include efforts in patron engagement and participation, education, youth programming, partnerships, community engagement, and organizational structure. Some of the innovations selected for the *Innovation Labs* have evolved radically over time; others have become a core part of the organization's business; and others have been replaced with different ideas.

INNOVATION AND ADAPTIVE CHANGE

Innovation is a concept with a lot of currency, appropriately so. It has cachet because of its relevance to the pressures and rapid pace of change of our time. These pressures also mean we pile a lot of expectations onto innovation. The enthusiasm of a new idea generates a lot of big aspirations and grand visions. These are compounded by misunderstandings about how innovation occurs, such as the classic myths of the 'eureka moment', that radical change 'just happens', or that our usual practices will help us to adapt. We have come to understand that doing innovation is hard work, and that there are things organizations can do to enhance the chance of success.

Complex adaptive challenges do not have established best practices, known expertise, or evident responses.² Such challenges demand novel solutions fueled by human ingenuity and creativity. Current ways of thinking may impede the development of a new idea, necessitating that organizations begin a process of change

by questioning assumptions – often the very assumptions that are closely tied to their historical success. As new space opens up for original thinking, the organization can engage in a period of exploring options and testing out ideas they have developed or adopted from elsewhere.

Because previous practices may hinder progress, implementing novel solutions inevitably requires changes in approaches, behaviors, and organizational structures. An organization's culture may embrace these kinds of changes, or resist them. Turning an innovative idea into an organizational reality demands attention to the idea, and to the conditions that will enable that idea to flourish. Successful innovations are much more than a clever idea – they are a function of many things, including culture, leadership, governance, collaboration, and capital resources.

The business world has long made investments in research and development (R&D), creating distinct processes and organizational cultures that foster innovation. The comprehensive set of supports in the *Innovation Lab* is directed at the same, and assists in the process of turning a novel idea into a practical, organizational reality. This is group work, drawing upon the diverse skills of those at the table. Rather than just coming up with original ideas, the focus of the *Innovation Lab* is to provide the frameworks and supports that make a difference toward designing, implementing, and ultimately sustaining an innovation.

EmcArts makes the distinction between launching *an innovation*, and developing the capacity for *ongoing innovation*. Ongoing innovation is facilitated by specific organizational skills that support a cycle of generating new ideas that respond to emerging challenges. The process of innovation selects new ideas with the greatest potential, refines and validates those ideas through prototyping, learning, and adjusting, and intentionally advances the organization's culture to be more supportive of this cycle. While the primary purpose of the *Innovation Lab* is to launch a particular innovation, building capacity for ongoing innovative work – adaptive capacity – is understood to be an accompanying benefit.³

WHAT THESE CASES WILL TELL US

In looking at these two cases, this examination 'goes deep' in understanding the many nuances and dynamics that are part of an adaptive process. Woolly Mammoth and the Denver Center were selected because they were examples, among others, where the response to the *Innovation Lab* was known to be strong, and the innovations they worked on are recognized as having early success. This approach to case selection helps us to understand *how* progress is made with an innovative idea supported by the *Innovation Lab*. It also gives us insight into how an organization might pivot from the innovative idea in question into improvements to how they navigate the ongoing need for adaptation and change.

There is a lot of complexity involved in launching an innovative idea, and even more so when building an ongoing practice that enables adaptation. When evaluating situations of high complexity, we cannot, and should not, reduce our conclusions to simple bottom-line metrics. Rather, evaluation asks a more nuanced question: What worked for whom, in what ways, under what conditions, and with what implications?

This is what we look at in the following two success cases. They are not intended to be a predictor of what *always happens*. The dynamic nature of organizations and adaptation results in an inevitable degree of uncertainty and unpredictability. When innovation does occur, we look closely and ask: What is actually happening? What did it actually take to make progress? These cases were developed through in-depth interviews with staff, board members, artists, and community partners at Woolly Mammoth and Denver Center, as well as with EmcArts principals and process facilitators. Relevant documents have been reviewed, including related proposals, reports, budgets, and presentations.

These cases reveal that moving *Connectivity* and *Off-Center* forward required a substantial effort from Woolly Mammoth and the Denver Center. In each case, the innovators needed to expand their

repertoire of change-supporting skills, and the organization had to invest in building the necessary conditions for the innovation's success. This included making resources available for innovation, embracing divergent thinking and diverse sources of input, building internal support for change among peers and board members, addressing internal conflict, and developing stronger feedback loops. Supporting the success of an innovative idea is more than simply saying yes to that idea. It requires a sophisticated, well-designed process.

Connectivity and *Off-Center* have proven beneficial for Woolly Mammoth and the Denver Center, and are initiatives that have earned national recognition. Woolly Mammoth is seeing new audiences, improvements to earned and contributed revenue, and new practices that contribute to the audience's artistic experience. *Off-Center* has brought in audiences that were previously not connected to the Denver Center, has diversified the overall offerings available, and is generating practical lessons about enhancing the theatre experience that are now migrating into mainstage productions.

While each of these cases is distinct, they both confirm that external support in the form of an *Innovation Lab* is a uniquely valuable contribution to advancing an innovative idea. Through their experiences, we get a view into how they address the critical barriers that would impede progress and implementation, and how the *Innovation Lab* contributes overall to an organization's ongoing capacity to adapt.

Case Study: Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company

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More than anything [the *Innovation Lab* provided] a kind of values exercise, understanding what's meaningful to us about the work that we do. What our hopes and dreams are and how our work is going to affect the world around us. It's made us look more harshly at other aspects of our organization, and say where we are not living up to those values.

- Howard Shalwitz
Artistic Director

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THE INNOVATION

Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company is known for producing cutting-edge works and challenging convention. Inspired by the discussion at their 30th anniversary conference in 2009, “Who’s In Your Circle? Theatre, Democracy, and Engagement in the Twenty-First Century,” Woolly Mammoth made a commitment to develop a new platform for community engagement that was built on the shows themselves, rather than as a separate body of work. This idea came to be known as *Connectivity*, and was the focus of their participation in the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*.

The Woolly Mammoth case is an example of an organization with a history of embracing change that found they had to address several new challenges in order to fully realize their innovation. These challenges prompted the organization to think and act differently in how they handled conflict, how they collaborated internally, and how they measured results. These challenges were surprising and difficult. They were also surmountable. *Connectivity* has become a well-developed initiative; it is central to how Woolly Mammoth presents its work and generates financial and artistic benefits, as well as new audiences and community relationships.

The Innovation: Connectivity

Social change is rooted in the founding of this theatre company, and for over twenty years, local schools and social service agencies were part of an education and outreach program inspired by the 52nd Street Project in New York. In 2005, when Woolly Mammoth moved into their new 265-seat, courtyard-style theatre in the Penn Quarter of Washington, DC, they were distanced from the 14th Street neighborhood where their education work had a close connection. Woolly Mammoth was also increasingly challenged to convince teachers and program administrators to bring students to their programming, a function of Woolly Mammoth’s preference for edgier material rubbing up against changing parental expectations. After a thorough

2005

Woolly Mammoth moves to new theatre

Spring 2009

Woolly Mammoth conducts a review of their education program

Summer 2009

Woolly Mammoth ends their education program

Fall 2009

Woolly Mammoth’s 30th Anniversary Conference

May 2010

Application to the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*

June 2010 – April 2011

Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts

February 2011

Prototype One: *Oedipus el Rey*

2011 – present

Experiments in *Connectivity* are part of every performance

review and a period of intense internal reflection, the education program ended, which was, in the words of Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz, "...a heart-stopping decision, because it was something meaningful to us."

For a long time, Woolly Mammoth had assumed that, "if we do interesting work, the audience will naturally gravitate towards that." Woolly has loyal followers, but was increasingly convinced that more needed to be done. The move to a larger space also put pressure on the organization to fill more seats. The company was very aware that this could pull them towards more marketable mainstream works. Woolly Mammoth was resolute in its commitment to the kind of material and approaches that reflected their mission, which is, *"To ignite an explosive engagement between theatre artists and the community by developing, producing, and promoting new plays that explore the edges of theatrical style and human experience, and by implementing new ways to use the artistry of theatre to serve the people of Greater Washington, DC."*

The concept of *Connectivity* started to take shape in response to the renewed focus on a civic role that came out of the 30th anniversary conference in 2009. The organization started to develop ideas for new models of community engagement to replace the education program, and how to link those models to new audience development. *Connectivity* begins with the premise that a play contains an embedded conversation. A set of activities are developed around three key features:

1. Audience Design

The people in the seats bring energy to the conversation in the play. For Woolly Mammoth, the purposeful cultivation and curation of the audience is as much a part of theatre as set design or casting. Having people in the house for whom the performance has particular resonance will enhance the engagement of the whole audience.

2. Total Audience Experience

A rigorous arrangement of the audience's engagement with the material from the moment they hear about it, to arriving at the theatre, and into

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The idea of what it means to do a play at Woolly has, I think, permanently enlarged.

- Howard Shalwitz
Artistic Director

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We'd be talking it out and I remember having some very frustrating moments during that week where I just wanted to kill everybody. But I think forcing us to really start articulating it, figuring it out, and working together...had a lot of ripple effects moving forward in terms of our ability to work cross-departmentally. When I think of the organization now, I just feel like it's so much more open to stuff that doesn't fit neatly into departmental boxes.

- Jeffrey Herrmann
Managing Director

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post-show discussions, will expand an audience's resonance with the performance.

3. Entry Point

The central organizing concept in the play – what Woolly Mammoth calls ‘the embedded conversation’ – is used to align everybody within the organization in how they think about and communicate the play and its underlying civic message.

Woolly Mammoth sees *Connectivity* as a new pillar for the organization, and a very natural and progressive extension of their mission. The artistic rationale for *Connectivity* is as important as the marketing and development purposes. *Connectivity* helps to promote new plays, enhance the audience experience, and link the theatre experience to larger social issues.

The Innovation Lab

Woolly Mammoth's clarity of definition for *Connectivity* results from a hard-fought battle. As the ten members of Woolly Mammoth's Innovation Team went into the Phase 2 Intensive Retreat as part of the *Innovation Lab*, the impulse to implement *Connectivity* was strong, but the concept lacked clarity. The organization had a general sense of where they wanted to go with the idea, but the language, definition, and elements needed rigor. The Innovation Team assumed common ground when, in reality, there were fundamental differences, including differences in thinking between Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz and Managing Director Jeffrey Herrmann.

At the 5-day Retreat, the facilitation focused on pushing the Team to more deeply examine their assumptions about *Connectivity* and reframing what the Team members were saying as a way of clarifying understanding and finding points of agreement. The Team was able to open up their thinking about the traditional boundaries of literary work, define what they meant by ‘entry point’ and how it could be implemented, and articulate what they expected when ‘designing an audience’ to elevate the impact of a performance. The *Lab* provided the space and framework for the

Examples of *Connectivity*

You For Me For You by Mia Chung is a comic fantasy about two North Korean sisters who make a bargain with a smuggler to flee to the United States. The theatre experience was paired with the visual arts and Woolly Mammoth presented a solo exhibit by Korean visual artist Song Byeok, who was in residence at Woolly Mammoth for a week and a half. His works were part of the lobby experience, and a talk to the cast and Woolly staff was noted as “a turning point in the emotional connection to the play.” During his time in Washington, DC, Song Byeok made several appearances at colleges, universities, and other local groups.

The Convert by Danai Gurira is about a girl in Zimbabwe and the struggle between her culture and newfound Christianity. *Connectivity* worked with 15 young women to create a piece of theatre around their own heritage as they see it, and at the end they did a DNA test that revealed their ancestry. Cast members attended the young women’s performance, and the young women and their families attended *The Convert*. As part of the performance, theatregoers could trace their own historical roots on the African continent with a genealogist and African-American history expert.

Team to face difficult questions and work them out. While the process was fraught with tension, breakthroughs did come. The Retreat put the bones on the idea such that the Team returned to Washington, DC with much more clarity about *Connectivity*, and a language that allowed them to talk about it – amongst themselves and in the process of enrolling their colleagues.

Following the Retreat, Woolly Mammoth included *Connectivity* in each production, each viewed as a prototype testing out the next iteration of ideas. The first prototype was Luis Alfaro's *Oedipus el Rey* - a Hispanic re-telling of the Greek tragedy exploring themes of recidivism and cycles of fate. Woolly Mammoth had done some prior experimentation with *Connectivity* in the shows leading up to the Retreat, but this was the first conscious application of the ideas developed during the Retreat, including the 'entry point' concept.⁴

The conversation in *Oedipus el Rey* was centered on self-determination versus destiny, thus the entry point: "Can we break the cycles that drive our fate?" The first *Connectivity* Director, Rachel Grossman, reached out to former inmates from local prisons, scholars of mythology, tattoo historians, and a transitions program at the YWCA. These perspectives were the catalyst for post-show conversations that focused on themes of the military, mental health, suicide, and family relationships, rather than the usual technical- and production-focused conversations.

The *Connectivity* prototype of *Oedipus el Rey* generated several valuable lessons, and reinforced the value of experimentation. The material connected in unique ways for different audience members and, because the play resonated differently for these various community members, depth and liveliness was brought to the conversation. In *Oedipus el Rey*, the company and the audience gained a deeper insight into recidivism, and related cycles of violence, poverty, and injustice, while fostering a set of new relationships with patrons, donors, and community partners.

Woolly Mammoth came out of *Oedipus el Rey* with confirmation that they could attract a diverse audience that could elevate perspectives on a topic

of civic concern. The *Oedipus el Rey* prototype also validated their approach of organizing *Connectivity* around an entry point.

Through multiple productions, *Connectivity* experiments have explored various strategies for bringing the 'embedded conversation' to life. For example, there have been several experiments in dialogue, bringing audience members together with community stakeholders and topic experts. *Connectivity* has also explored ways to enhance the lobby experience, such as blocking off the lobby before the show and sending the entire audience through a backstage door, where they engaged on stage with research material that accumulated during rehearsals.

The Benefits of Connectivity

After three years, *Connectivity* is a breakthrough in how a theatre company relates to its audience. It is a well-developed concept that is taking root as an established practice for the organization. Woolly Mammoth has seen value from *Connectivity*. They are benefitting financially and artistically, and are seeing new audiences and community relationships. Some benefits are immediate and tangible, while others are indirect, and therefore harder to measure. We can also expect that the scale of these benefits will grow as the idea is refined, and some of the longer-term effects begin to play out.

1. Connectivity is shaping the kind of work that Woolly Mammoth presents

Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz and the literary staff are guided by *Connectivity* as they select works. In Woolly Mammoth's 34th season, titled, *America's Tell-Tale Heart*, their success with *Connectivity* influenced them to try to carry conversations about race, class, and politics across an entire season. The season includes *Appropriate* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins and *We are Proud to Present* by Jackie Sibblies Drury, both of which deal with the legacy of slavery and racism in America. What may have previously been viewed as overlap was thought to be an advantage, helping Woolly Mammoth to carry dialogue

about race across the season. This gave Jocelyn Prince, the Connectivity Director, the opportunity to engage more than once in the season with various community leaders, non-profit groups, and university classes who are motivated about this topic.

Similarly, plays that Woolly Mammoth once might have once strongly considered may not be included now if they have a lower *Connectivity* potential. For example, Howard decided against a production of *The Lyons* by Nicky Silver. Woolly Mammoth had produced several works by this artist in the 1990s, and the piece would have likely been successful with Woolly's audiences. *The Lyons* deals with the neurotic members of a New York family responding to the death of their father. The work, however, did not ask any larger civic questions about how we deal with death in our society. Howard observed, "I think the simple question, 'What's the conversation?' had already become so central to our selection criteria that the play felt like it would be a step backwards, even though I think it's a terrific play."

2. Connectivity has attracted new audiences and new community relationships to Woolly

The link to new organizations and communities through *Connectivity* has brought in audience members who would not have otherwise attended. For example, in *Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris, the pre-show work with Washington, DC neighborhoods brought many of these people into Woolly Mammoth's theatre for the first time. *The Convert* and *Oedipus el Rey* each brought entire families to the shows, as well as topical experts, and the staff and volunteers of various community organizations.

The organization is expanding its web of connections in the community. The *Connectivity* work on several plays has prompted external collaborations with various organizations and agencies in the DC area. A few of these have started to develop into longer-term relationships. For example, a strong bond has emerged between the Duke Ellington School and Woolly Mammoth, leading to deeper engagement of students with the issues examined in several plays.

3. Connectivity is generating earned and contributed revenue

Woolly Mammoth's credibility, combined with the resonance of the idea of *Connectivity* across the theatre field nationally, has attracted \$350,000 in grant resources from several sources, including The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (\$30,000), the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (\$150,000 from the *Continuing Innovation* fund and a \$10,000 Capstone grant), and Theatre Communications Group (a \$90,000 grant and a \$65,000 grant). *Connectivity* has also resonated with some individual donors, and is part of the case for support made in Woolly's development efforts. In one example, *Connectivity* resulted in a \$25,000 individual donation, the largest single contribution to an individual play in Woolly's history. The expectation is that by building community with audiences – new and old – Woolly Mammoth will sustain its patron base.

There are several examples of leads identified in the *Connectivity* process that translated into group sales. For example, Woolly partnered with the DC Mayor's Office on African Affairs and hosted its regular discussion series as part of *The Convert*, which resulted in a sold-out matinee. In the upcoming season, a professor at Georgetown University will use Woolly's performance of *We Are Proud* as the kickoff event to a conference on race and performance.

BUILDING COMPETENCIES FOR ADAPTIVE CHANGE

The skills needed to develop something innovative differ from those needed to be efficient and effective with established programs and routine practices.⁵ Woolly Mammoth came into the *Connectivity* effort with some well-developed competencies to support innovative work. Through the *Innovation Lab*, and the subsequent experience of putting *Connectivity* into practice, areas needing development became apparent.

In developing *Connectivity*, Woolly Mammoth built on their existing competencies for adaptive change in three areas, and needed to strengthen three other areas.⁶

Existing Competencies Leveraged

1. Divergent thinking

Divergent thinking is about the organization creating space for different points of view, critical reflection, and drawing upon a range of sources for innovative ideas, including artists, audiences, and community partners. To this end, Woolly Mammoth invested effort in facilitating understanding, buy-in, and support from the primary creative artists. The playwright, director, and designers were engaged in designing and implementing each *Connectivity* prototype, as were members of 'The Claque' - Woolly's audience committee.

Challenging the status quo is part of Woolly Mammoth's organizational philosophy and is highly valued. Staff at Woolly Mammoth are encouraged to have 'awesome ideas,' and the board looks to senior staff to put provocative ideas on the table.

In developing *Connectivity*, Woolly Mammoth had to think differently and question some of their practices and assumptions: the sanctity of the dramaturgical process was opened up, some artists they respected were not those best suited for *Connectivity*, and non-traditional partnerships were sought. Rachel Grossman was granted a lot of flexibility to push the boundaries of the concept and to experiment with a variety of ideas. Jeffrey Herrmann, Managing Director, wanted her to be able to "...dive off the deep end" and fully explore the potential territory of *Connectivity*. With this in mind, each production was a new experiment.

The commitment to extending creative input fully into the organization is illustrated in a one-day workshop that occurred several months after the *Innovation Lab*. Woolly Mammoth's board and senior staff spent an entire day discussing *Connectivity* and developing a deep understanding of what it is and its implications. In this workshop, board members engaged with playwright Sam

Existing competencies leveraged

1. Divergent thinking
2. Leadership's support for change
3. Use of change capital

Competencies needing development

1. Addressing conflict
2. Internal collaboration
3. Measurement and feedback

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I believe that if we continue to practice *Connectivity* - and even put more effort into it - with the goal of deepening everyone's artistic experience, we will see financial benefits in both attendance and donations several years down the line. However, if we set short-term goals for financial outcomes, audience members and artists will detect that impulse in the work and be less likely to respond in the ways we need them to, either artistically or financially.

- **Pete Miller**

Woolly Mammoth Board Member

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Hunter to build the *Connectivity* plan for *A Bright New Boise*. The workshop was an important moment in deepening the board's understanding of *Connectivity*, and helped position *Connectivity* as a central part of the organization's strategy and future. This was a means to link artistic creativity with the business and governance of the organization. As a result, board members gained a considerably clearer understanding of *Connectivity*'s function, import, and relationship to other departments, and aligned their thinking about how *Connectivity* could not be measured from a purely marketing perspective. The workshop also prompted several board members to directly engage in *Connectivity* activity - some joined a working group, and others volunteered as post-show discussion facilitators.

2. Leadership's support for change

Staff and board leadership support Woolly Mammoth's innovation work by helping to drive a vision for change, securing the resources and expertise to advance innovation, and empowering those working on the innovation.

Pete Miller, a long-time board member, and chair at the time of the *Innovation Lab*, has been a strong advocate for *Connectivity* since the beginning. Having a champion on the board was critical for this initiative in the initial stages, and his persistence kept the board highly engaged with the concept in its earliest development. The board's trust and commitment to *Connectivity* have helped sustain the effort, even in the face of recent financial pressures.

The board is clear that the change that *Connectivity* is pushing for takes time, and while they expect progress and results, they are comfortable that the markers of success are not immediate. Their fiscal responsibility coexists with the need to take risks, and the recognition that innovative efforts need time. The initial board expectation was that *Connectivity* demonstrate its potential by attracting people to participate, and observing and engaging with them to understand what happened. In time, they expect that the financial benefits of *Connectivity* will be more comprehensively measured and assessed.

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What’s actually necessary is to generate staff and board buy-in on a basic level so people aren’t resisting the change, but not make it everybody’s responsibility to carry that innovation on their own shoulders. People should perceive it as an important element of the organization, but not absolutely everyone’s personal burden to make it work.

– Jeffrey Herrmann
Managing Director

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Woolly Mammoth’s staff leadership – Howard Shalwitz and Jeffrey Herrmann – have also championed *Connectivity* throughout. They have secured external expertise beyond the initial *Innovation Lab* to support *Connectivity*, and they have given Woolly staff latitude to shape the vision and experiments in *Connectivity*. There is autonomy and freedom for staff to come up with new ideas, and time is invested in stepping away from the day-to-day to look at bigger questions. This permits effort to be dedicated to innovative ideas like *Connectivity*, and supports an environment where assumptions can be challenged: as one staff member noted, “nothing is sacred.”

3. Use of change capital

Change capital means that the organization ‘puts its money where its mouth is’ in support of its innovation efforts. Investment is needed to develop an innovation modestly at first, with gradual increases if and when prototypes demonstrate effectiveness. Often, financial support is required to bridge a sustained effort through various iterations and adaptations to the time when value is created. Organizations looking to sustain adaptive capacity in support of innovation commit financially to the innovation effort and, over time, build strategic reserves that can be deployed in pursuit of ongoing adaptive change.

Woolly Mammoth invested in *Connectivity* in several ways. First, it became a distinct budget item from the outset, with an increasing financial commitment over time. Even in the face of financial pressure, *Connectivity* has received continued support. Woolly has supported the work of the Connectivity Director with interns, and recently expanded *Connectivity* into a two-person department.

The Development department at Woolly Mammoth was directed to find support for *Connectivity*, and grant-writing efforts proved beneficial, as previously noted.

A complementary effort to *Connectivity* currently underway is a four million dollar capital campaign, called *Free the Beast!* The purpose of this campaign is to allow for more intensive

developmental work in the production process of new plays, such as commissions, extended rehearsal periods, or more complex production elements. The intent is to expand the artistic collaboration that goes into a work. The objective is to support 25 new works over the next ten seasons.

The investment in innovation by Woolly Mammoth, as well as the championing from the organization's leadership, shows us that *Connectivity* is an organizational priority. Innovation is taken seriously, and *Connectivity* is positioned as something that is core to the organization's present and future.

Competencies Developed

1. Addressing conflict

Innovation inevitably disrupts, and conflict is common as assumptions are challenged, new norms are established, and resources shift. An organization's adaptive capacity is achieved with effective decision-making processes for such conflicts, including the use of data, and leaders' actions to resolve conflicts with new practices.

Woolly Mammoth experienced a lot of tension while experimenting with *Connectivity*, especially in the first year following the *Innovation Lab*. The emerging idea repeatedly rubbed up against existing practice, often the result of shifting boundaries between various roles, and competing priorities of various departments.

The first thing that was needed coming out of the *Innovation Lab* was to enroll those who were not on the Innovation Team. The Team prepared messages to communicate *Connectivity's* importance, recognizing that there would be varying degrees of hands-on involvement.

The same impulse that gives the Team at Woolly freedom to explore and generate ideas also leaves some undefined space where decisions must be made. Staff tended to look to the organization's leaders – Jeffrey and Howard – to make a call on critical issues. At the same time, their leadership style is to empower people to work things out on their own. Staff members at Woolly appreciated

the latitude for pursuing new ideas and, at the same time, realized that direction and parameters are a necessary part of working innovation into the realities of an organization. One staff member noted, "I feel like I could have done almost anything I wanted. This was my favorite thing and, at the same time, I really needed constructive pushback."

This communication gap proved to be a challenge: conflicts went unaddressed and consume valuable energy and focus from the organization. What Woolly has learned is that there needs to be more clearly defined processes for decision-making when these conflicts emerge, and that the organization's leadership needs to provide some structure and feedback for these processes.

2. Internal collaboration

Working cross-functionally is often vital in an adaptive change. New ideas usually span the existing boundaries within an organization. While *Connectivity* is defined as a stand-alone area within the organization's structure, it consistently involves the Marketing, Production, Literary, and Development departments. As the *Connectivity* concept emerged, it was understood that extensive cross-organizational input was required to succeed. The *Lab* heightened the understanding of how important this would be.

Going into the *Innovation Lab*, Woolly Mammoth had assumed that they would be inherently good at working cross-departmentally. The *Lab* began to surface boundary issues, and revealed that this was an area that Woolly would need to improve on. This was a primary source of conflict (as outlined in the above section), and was also necessary as a creative source for the practice of *Connectivity*. Jeffrey Herrmann observes, "We had a bit of arrogance around our ability to collaborate internally. We are smart and we thought we could get it. It was humbling, and we are still struggling with it to some degree. We are now more realistic about what it takes to do it... we are able to embrace the mess and persevere."

The greatest cross-departmental challenge has been finding the balance point between *Connectivity* and Marketing. There are some

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We've been able to retain a level of sophistication in our problem solving as senior staff. We've retained institutional memory of the things we learned early, and at the same time have built more trust internally.

– **Miriam Weisfeld**
Associate Artistic Director

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inherent tensions in how Woolly Mammoth has constructed the *Connectivity* and Marketing functions: Marketing is judged on revenue, while *Connectivity* is judged on the character and energy of the house. These goals often compete, and the two departments draw upon a common pool of resources. Several activities, including pre-show engagement, the use of social media, and the creation of a lobby experience, cross both domains.

There has been considerable progress in finding a balance for internal collaboration, with several contributing factors:

- The organization's leadership is providing more direction on issues of concern and more strongly articulating the desired direction for the organization.
- *Connectivity* has moved from an entrepreneurial phase, with everyone pushing the potential of the idea, which is disruptive to the established norms in the organization, to a phase of greater predictability and routine.
- *Connectivity* has a much tighter and specific focus than when the organization first started it. There is recognition of what is achievable and sustainable by one person in that position.
- Woolly Mammoth has developed specific processes for supporting collaboration. For example, in the early stages of a new production, the Connectivity Director runs a meeting with all staff where the playwright and director have a conversation about the material. Through a series of group discussions, the whole staff team explores a set of questions intended to develop the play's entry point.
- Over time, roles and responsibilities have been ironed out and clarified. For example, Marketing is focused on devising the broadest appeal to the broadest cross-section of the populace, while *Connectivity* is focused on very targeted constituencies and a more direct and specific engagement strategy. This has helped ease tensions and confusion.
- The Connectivity Director and Marketing Director talk much more than when *Connectivity* first

launched. This is facilitated, in part, by new people in these roles, and by the organization providing expectations and frameworks for interaction between Marketing and *Connectivity*.

The efforts toward internal collaboration have surfaced how important a holistic approach is for all of their work. Internal collaboration has since become central in the organization's philosophy. The senior team now talks about the idea of 'one department', reflecting the movement towards a more integrated way of thinking about their work.

3. Measurement and feedback

The appropriate design of measures of success for innovation, building mechanisms for collecting and using feedback, and using learning to question results, are all change competencies that inform the evolution of an innovation, and contribute to the case for ongoing support of it.

There are inherent challenges to measuring *Connectivity*, given the artistic component to the work. *Connectivity* is a multi-faceted concept and, with each production, the understanding and approach evolves. Woolly Mammoth understands that it is unhelpful to reduce *Connectivity* to a simple quantitative measure of success. More comprehensive measures are difficult to design and require more effort to implement.

Measurement and feedback for *Connectivity* has been challenging for Woolly Mammoth. Informally, Woolly's staff has been strong in thinking critically about each *Connectivity* offering and intuitively adjusting based on their experience. They came out of the *Innovation Lab* with some initial strategies for measurement: A few productions involved intensive audience surveys and, more recently, they began tracking the link between *Connectivity* activity and marketing and development benefits.

The primary difficulty has been maintaining a focus on evaluative efforts. As personnel change, and with competing pressures for delivery, measurement gives way to more immediate priorities. The result is ad-hoc efforts. The implication of this is that it becomes difficult to generate a comprehensive and meaningful analysis over time, and data is not

integrated into larger decision and strategy making processes. Another challenge is in assessing the performance of departments related to their work on *Connectivity*, as efforts cross boundaries. There is a tension between how a department's success is measured, and activity that contributes to the overall health of the organization.

Woolly Mammoth recognizes that, to be able to make a strong case for sustaining *Connectivity*, a more consistent effort in measurement and feedback is necessary. Just as *Connectivity* has experimented with different engagement techniques, different measurement techniques can also be tested. In the current season, Woolly Mammoth has put in place an evaluation strategy to focus on a series of small experiments, each one specifically testing a particular *Connectivity* idea or design adaptation. Through more intensive audience surveys and analysis, they have explored questions related to the use of promotional codes linked to *Connectivity* events, participation in post-show discussions, and perceptions about the lobby experience. This has helped them to make decisions such as which digital lobby tools to use, and what kinds of outreach events to repeat, and to better understand the extent to which they are fulfilling their audience design goals for each individual show.

Long-term Adaptive Capacity

The value of the various competencies leveraged and strengthened in developing *Connectivity* extend well beyond this single innovation. While the intent of the *Innovation Lab* was to incubate and launch a specific innovative strategy, its influence has led to growth in a set of skills and an orientation to change that benefits the ongoing work of Woolly Mammoth.

Several other organizational changes, each at various stages of development, are underway: *The Free the Beast!* Campaign, an exploration of alternatives to the traditional subscription model; and an expanded company of artists including, for the first time ever, resident playwrights, designers, and directors. Many of these are innovations for Woolly Mammoth in that they involve a new practice and are disruptive to the way they have

traditionally done business. These organizational challenges are all part of a larger theme – the need for new ways to engage audiences, and to more fully realize Woolly Mammoth’s underlying philosophy of the role of theatre in community life.

The pivot from developing a specific innovation to strengthening a sustained adaptive capacity for ongoing change has several features:

1. Success in one innovation builds an overall credibility for taking on innovation.

Woolly Mammoth is engaged with a new prospective funder who is interested in investing in the work to explore an alternative the subscription model. The *Connectivity* experience helped them to get a foot in the door and make the case for their capacity to do innovative work.

2. Organizational culture is foundational to sustaining a long-term orientation to change.

Culture is the set of collective assumptions within an organization and shapes ‘the way we do things around here.’ Behaviors are rewarded, copied, or critiqued depending on the extent to which they fit within the overall culture. Specific competencies for change exist because of the prevailing organizational culture, and culture can enable – or disable – the permission and support necessary to change practices and behaviors.

Woolly Mammoth’s predominant culture⁷ values innovation. As an organization, they are dynamic, entrepreneurial, and comfortable with risk. These characteristics have been part of the company since its creation; however, such features can grow and fall away over time. The organization’s culture had developed elements helpful in the business-as-usual mode: structure, stability, and efficiency. These elements became unhelpful as the organization entered into a period of rapid change prompted in part by the move to their new building, but also by the changing realities of theatre audiences and Woolly Mammoth’s renewed commitment to its founding values and intentions.

Woolly Mammoth could have responded differently to the move to the new building: they could have

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Many nights in the theatre, we feel we accomplish our mission. It wouldn’t happen if we weren’t intentional about it. At a visceral level, we recognize that with *Connectivity*, we’ve taken steps forward.

– Miriam Weisfeld
Associate Artistic Director

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presented more mainstream works to fill seats, developed an aversion to risk, as the stakes rose for the organization. This is a common trajectory. Instead, what happened in this tension was that the return to a more entrepreneurial culture gained traction, in part because the organization has retained a stronger preference towards such a culture, and there was an underlying commitment to do so from the Board of Directors and the staff leadership.

3. Structural changes enable the cultural changes.

As an organization moves from an existing culture toward a preferred culture, changes in roles, responsibilities, and the way work is organized support the cultural shift. One of the advantages of a smaller organization is that it can be more nimble in moving on these structural changes. The marketing and communications roles in the organization have been defined in different ways than before, the Connectivity Director has held a seat at the senior management table from the outset and, in a more recent change, the Connectivity Director now reports to the Associate Artistic Director, a move intended to protect the artistic purpose of *Connectivity* in the midst of pressures to strengthen the marketing expectations around the department.

There has also been staff turnover throughout this period. To some degree, this is a normal change typical for a theatre company of this size; however, the process of change has also contributed to turnover. Recruiting new people in sync with the changes supports adaptation. Jeffrey Herrmann noted that at the time of his arrival, “I definitely sensed a certain rigidity, especially among folks who’d been here a while. And I think what’s interesting, at the same time, there were some very powerful impulses to change and innovate coming from Howard, supported by myself and some newer staff members.”

Within this structure, particular roles were emphasized at different stages. As the idea of *Connectivity* first emerged, Pete Miller and Howard Shalwitz were vital as champions for the concept, drawing attention to it and continuing to build early momentum. As the idea first moved

into practice, Rachel Grossman acted as a kind of ‘organizational astronaut’ by moving into new territory and expanding the boundaries of the idea. This was in concert with the permission granting and setting of organizational conditions led by Jeffrey Hermann. As the entrepreneurship of the initial seasons transitioned into preparing the organization to sustain the effort over time, Jocelyn Prince, the second Connectivity Director, and Deeksha Gaur, the current Marketing Director, have focused on stabilizing the innovation by bringing a practical, implementation lens to the work. As this most recent stage moves forward, Miriam Weisfeld, the Associate Artistic Director, has assumed a leadership role in *Connectivity*, balancing the practical sustainability needs of the innovation while protecting important artistic values and the integrity of the concept. All of these roles are important in their particular moments, as is supporting the transitions between them.

4. Stability and adaptability are dynamic.

The initial radical disruption of *Connectivity* is shifting into a phase of stabilizing and confirming. Jocelyn Prince is building routines for *Connectivity* that allow for more efficient delivery. While each performance requires a unique and creative *Connectivity* element, the organization has built up a base of practice and can better predict what is required.

There are similar patterns in other innovations in Woolly Mammoth’s pipeline. The organization is settling into its new company, and is starting to figure out the best way to tap into the risk capital facilitated by the *Free the Beast!* campaign. The exploration of an alternative to subscriptions is at the idea stage, but should Woolly Mammoth start to experiment with changes, this will no doubt prompt disruption.

All of this is reflective of a long view, and the role of adaptive change co-existing with the capacity for stability. Change can consume a large amount of organizational bandwidth, and having adaptive capacity at the ready is important for any organization that is continually exploring and adjusting. This casts *situation recognition* as a vital skill for leaders in this era of rapid change: knowing when to flex the muscles for adaptation and when

to flex the muscles for stability. Some of these muscles may be dormant at times. Having the potential to activate them when necessary allows an organization to be nimble in the face of change.

WHAT IS THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE INNOVATION LAB TO CONNECTIVITY'S PROGRESS?

The *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* was a vital and unique contribution in the development of *Connectivity*. Without the *Innovation Lab*, *Connectivity* would not be as far along, or as well-defined, and unresolved tensions between departments may have stalled this idea at a formative stage.

The *Innovation Lab* offered several unique contributions:

1. The time and resources of the Innovation Lab gave the idea of Connectivity legitimacy.

The process sharpened the organization's internal commitment, and created the necessary time and space needed to clarify the concept. Acceptance into the *Lab* gave the idea of *Connectivity* internal legitimacy, without which the board would have questioned the idea more vigorously. With the support of the *Innovation Lab*, the concept was sufficiently developed so that it could attract additional support for the effort to launch *Connectivity*.

2. The Lab also built momentum.

Innovative ideas require protected time and space to be thought through. Good intentions can get lost in the immediate pressures of running an organization. The *Lab* provided a critical step in moving the idea of *Connectivity* forward by turning a loosely articulated idea into something that the organization could work with.

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Oedipus el Rey was a catalyst for conversation. There were moments when larger questions emerged because community members were talking about different ways the play resonated with them. Their understanding broadened with this conversation.

- Rachel Grossman
Former Connectivity Director

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3. The initial process drew attention to the critical barriers that would impede progress and implementation.

The *Lab* gave insight into some of the necessary skills and capabilities that would be needed for *Connectivity's* success. Once identified, the organization was able to think through changes they needed to work on, and to start drawing on the necessary resources to help them implement these changes.

4. The Innovation Lab created a track that the initiative could move forward on.

Process facilitation that is content neutral is uncommon in the arts field. With the help of the *Lab*, Woolly Mammoth was able to build their agenda for prototyping and experimentation, and wrestle with their internal challenges. The value of the *Lab* was that it helped shape an understanding of what enables innovation, and set in motion a process for how to analyze and discuss challenging issues among the senior team. Following the intensive Retreat, the *Innovation Lab* facilitator checked in and debriefed the learning that was emerging from the *Connectivity* prototypes. This served as an opportunity to organize and consider the implications of this learning for the next round of prototyping.

WHAT DOES THE WOOLLY MAMMOTH CASE TELL US?

The case of Woolly Mammoth building their adaptive capacity to develop *Connectivity* offers us the following lessons:

1. Innovation requires a sustained effort

Woolly's experience demonstrates that persistence, ongoing adjustment, and a commitment of time, attention, and resources for a sustained period of time are needed to fully develop an innovative idea. Innovation is hard work: it requires patience, and is demanding of the organization. Even an organization with a strong orientation to innovation and some inherent adaptive capacity will uncover things that need to be worked on.

2. Innovation means living with some ambiguities

There are overlapping interests in an innovation like *Connectivity*. The pressure to monetize and extract tangible value is very real and, at the same time, *Connectivity* is an important pathway to Woolly Mammoth's mission. These can play out as competing pressures, and are further challenged by the difficulty in assessing the more intangible and long-term benefits of *Connectivity*. Adaptive leaders balance these tensions within organizations. The artistic and marketing components of *Connectivity* meet real needs, and their combination is what makes *Connectivity* truly unique.

3. The process support of the Innovation Lab pushes a new idea over a tipping point

Support through EmcArts provided the necessary catalyst, support, and pathway forward for Woolly Mammoth to move *Connectivity* through the difficult transition from idea into action. The support from the *Innovation Lab* helped Woolly Mammoth over crucial hurdles that emerged early in their process. This built enough momentum for the initiative to sustain the effort to develop it. In turn, the *Innovation Lab* process gave space for Woolly Mammoth to strengthen their overall adaptive capacity that can be drawn upon as needed.

4. Progress is non-linear

There are many interdependent factors and influences in the complexity of launching an innovation in an organization. How something moves forward is affected by starting conditions, culture, operating context, and the parallel priorities and changes unfolding in an organization. In advancing innovative ideas, we can anticipate and expect emergent issues and unanticipated consequences. Adaptive management relies on learning by doing and observing and adjusting based on what has been learned. Organizations can anticipate some issues and opportunities in advance, but many emerge over time, requiring them to continually repeat a cycle of sensing, learning, and adapting.

For Woolly Mammoth, *Connectivity's* ultimate contribution is as a platform for a larger conversation in the community. The organization is currently working to recast its mission and vision to be clearer about the role of Woolly Mammoth in civic dialogue in Washington DC. The proposed mission, "Explosive engagement in the nation's capital sparked by daringly original theatre," and proposed long-term vision, "Theatre as a catalyst of American democracy," are reflective of *Connectivity's* influence.

Connectivity is a well-developed, and likely a highly resilient, innovation for the organization. Given the attention of the performing arts field across the country, it is potentially an innovation for American theatre. There is interest in learning from Woolly's experience, and many other theatres are building their own similar experiments in audience engagement. More than just a program, it has become 'a way of doing things.'

Case Study: Denver Center Theatre Company

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When our team went to the *Innovation Lab*, I saw that they became more confident in their ability to go into risky territory and to try untried things.

- **Daniel Ritchie**

Chairman, Denver Center Theatre
Company Board of Directors

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2005

DCTC starts examining how they can find new ways to engage artists and audiences

2008

Charlie Miller joins DCTC

2009

Emily Tarquin joins DCTC

2009

DCTC's unsuccessful application to the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*

2010

DCTC's successful application to the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*

June 2010 – April 2011

DCTC participates in the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*

January 2011

Prototype One: *The Ultimate Wii Baseball Game*

Feb 2011

Prototype Two: *Buntport Reading*

April 2011

Prototype Three: *Hip Hop Jambalaya*

2011-12

Off-Center Season One

2012-13

Off-Center Season Two

2013-14

Off-Center Season Three

THE INNOVATION

The Denver Center Theatre Company (DCTC) is a professional theatre company operating within the umbrella of The Denver Center for the Performing Arts. In the last 30 years, DCTC has produced over 330 classical and contemporary works, 88 world premieres and, since 2006, hosted the annual Colorado New Play Summit. In the face of tough economic times, DCTC had to make some difficult decisions: in 2009, budgets were trimmed, productions reduced, and the Denver Center's National Theatre Conservatory phased out. In the midst of these challenges, questions similar to those facing theatres across the country were top of mind for Artistic Director Kent Thompson and the team at DCTC: What is the next evolution of theatre? How do we reach the audience of the future? How do we do this in a world that is changing faster than ever?

Off-Center is a place for experimenting with new techniques that enhance the theatre experience, diversify programming, and explore how non-traditional theatre-goers might respond to different experiences. The creation of *Off-Center* was the focus of DCTC's participation in the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*.

The DCTC case is an example of an organization incubating a radical idea on the periphery of a large institution. To take *Off-Center* from an idea to an organizational reality, several challenges needed to be addressed: building support within the organization, securing resources in a time of constraint, and enabling mechanisms for learning from the many *Off-Center* experiments. *Off-Center* has become a valuable resource for DCTC, primarily as a testing ground where ideas get a trial run in a low-risk environment.

The Innovation: Off-Center

The Jones is a 200-seat black-box stage somewhat separated from the main walkway entrances to the mainstages of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts campus. When the burning questions facing DCTC and the under-utilized Jones met the energy and passion of Charlie

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I cannot imagine the older artistic management staff would create *Off-Center* programming as well as Charlie and Emily. They had the skills, the talent, and they were the age of the audience we wanted. So I handed them the keys to the car.

- Kent Thompson
Artistic Director

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Miller and Emily Tarquin, the ideas that ultimately became *Off-Center* started to take shape. Charlie is the Resident Multimedia Specialist for DCTC, and Emily is the Artistic Associate and New Play Coordinator. After extended internal conversations about a new use for the dormant Jones Theatre, Charlie and Emily approached Kent Thompson to pursue an application to the *Innovation Lab* to support an innovation that combined several of these ideas. They wanted to create interactive events that were part theatre, part nightclub, and part multimedia experience aimed at a young, socially engaged audience, and develop a new point of entry for artists and audiences.

For Kent Thompson, having Charlie and Emily assume the leadership was a strategic decision. He had trust and enthusiasm for their work, and wanted to nurture their enthusiasm by creating new opportunities for them. Attracting a new generation of theatre audiences was best done by individuals of that same generation and, as professionals early in their careers, they were less encumbered by the ways things ‘have always been done’. Emily and Charlie have remained the champions of *Off-Center* throughout.

Emily and Charlie recognized that there are many barriers that keep people, especially those of a younger demographic, from coming to the theatre. They also recognized that the answers to the questions that DCTC was facing would come from doing - putting ideas into practice and learning from what happened. Among many other things, *Off-Center* has explored the use of multimedia in theatre, marketing theatre through word of mouth and social media, curating a ‘before-during-and-after’ theatre experience, and an emergent creative design process that engages artists, audience members, and community groups. As Charlie and Emily note: “This model makes every show a prototype and every audience a focus group.”

To guide the kind of experiments that *Off-Center* would test, DCTC developed a ‘recipe’ consisting of the following five elements:

1. Immersive: expanding the experience beyond the show - inside and outside of the theatre; before, during, and after.

2. Convergent: collaborating across genres and incorporating a variety of art forms and technologies.

3. Connective: building a community of local artists and audiences, creating a social hub in Denver.

4. Inventive: having a separate brand that allows for experimentation and focuses on learning - every show is a prototype, every audience is a focus group.

5. Now: capacity to be spontaneous and immediate with programming.

The Innovation Lab

In June 2010, DCTC entered the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* as part of the cohort. DCTC had applied in 2009, but it was not clear from the application if the organization's leadership was fully engaged in the proposal, something EmcArts knows to be an essential element for a successful journey through the *Innovation Lab*. This prompted some internal conversations at DCTC, and in the second, and successful application, there was a clear articulation of their leadership's commitment.

Prior to the *Innovation Lab*, there were many ideas and intentions to make use of the Jones, and an interest in exploring ways to reach new audiences. Charlie and Emily would bring forward suggestions, and while the organization would say 'do it,' moving to action proved difficult. Without focus, and the commitment of resources, the necessary follow-through did not happen. Acceptance into the *Lab* gave recognition to this effort, and said to everyone internally, "this is something to take seriously." The extended process facilitation provided a means to shape the ideas to a sufficient level so that they could be acted upon, and the *Innovation Lab* moved the idea of *Off-Center* from something that was in the margins to something that was an organizational priority. In part, acceptance into the *Innovation Lab* forced the organization's hand.

The *Innovation Lab* gave DCTC a structured process for tackling innovation. Prior to the 5-day residential

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We felt we were onto something when people treated the space differently and the atmosphere felt more like a sporting event than a live performance.

- **Charlie Miller**
Co-Curator of Off-Center

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Retreat, the full team had only spent a sum total of two days talking about *Off-Center*. DCTC's Innovation Team came out of the Retreat with:

- Enhanced clarity in their objectives for *Off-Center*
- The key concepts of test kitchen and curation, articulated in the Recipe
- A core group from DCTC who were intensely committed and had a clear understanding of why this effort was important
- Group confidence for going into more risky territory
- A clear message and a strategy for enrolling their colleagues in this potentially disruptive effort
- A concept for the first three prototypes – small experimental shows that would test out the Recipe and the *Off-Center* model
- A way of thinking that informs 'doing innovation': know what you want to test, question assumptions, explore ideas and options, and hold them up to your original goal, select those to pursue informed by research, conduct simple tests and adjust based on what is learned through quick feedback loops

During the *Innovation Lab*, three prototype performances were tested. The first was called *The Ultimate Wii Baseball Game*, and it was produced while DCTC's mainstage was premiering *The Catch* - a production about a man who tries to catch a record-breaking home run. At *The Ultimate Wii Baseball Game*, audience members were assigned a team as they entered the Jones. The performance was an immersive experience with coaches, a mascot, a scoreboard and the option to participate in the game. The idea was to introduce a radical event where 'the normal rules of theatre did not apply.'

The next two prototypes were *Buntport Reading* and *Hip Hop Jambalaya*. *Buntport Reading* was a reading of a new play about Nicholas Tesla by Buntport, a local theatre ensemble, at the Colorado New Play Summit. The play involved different video and sound technologies, and experimented with an interactive talk back and text-based audience polling for feedback. While not an original *Off-*

Center show at the Jones, this was an opportunity to add in *Off-Center* experiments to something already happening. *Buntport Reading* and *Hip Hop Jambalaya* each explored an interactive multimedia experience, a comprehensive curatorial process and, with *Hip Hop Jambalaya*, word-of-mouth marketing by working with local artists and their followers.

These prototypes generated some useful trial-and-error learning. This early round of investigation not only validated that people enjoyed the experience and participated, it confirmed that *Off-Center* was attracting a unique audience, that these people were open to a different kind of experience, and that the audience wanted to interact with the performers. In *Hip Hop Jambalaya*, they tried to impose too much on a collaborating artist, diminishing the overall effect of their art. In *Buntport Reading*, they learned how a presenting model was less effective for *Off-Center* and testing elements of the recipe.

THE BENEFITS OF OFF-CENTER

For DCTC, the goal to have an experimental space geared to finding new audiences was difficult to get off the ground. The process facilitation support and financial aid of the *Innovation Lab* helped move DCTC from the 'just talking phase' into action. Charlie and Emily were equipped with the foundation, tools, and language to demonstrate their seriousness and the effectiveness of their prototypes. The *Off-Center* prototypes established some internal legitimacy, and with this momentum, the transition into the first season was well supported and relatively smooth.

Season One featured four distinct productions and continued to test the *Off-Center* Recipe in experiments like: an immersive experience from the moment an audience member walks in the door, off-site excursions, customized events for a corporate partner, live use of social media in a performance, late-night performances, and an alternative approach to new play development. Seasons Two and Three continued with four performances per season, with new experiments: stimulating a theatrical collaboration between

a photographer, local musicians and a dance company further exploration of the immersive experience, and creating an outdoor experience as part of the performance.

Off-Center has moved from an idea to a well-established initiative at DCTC that supports experimenting with new approaches to attracting and engaging theatre audiences. Some benefits are immediate and tangible, and others indirect, and therefore harder to measure. DCTC is currently benefitting from *Off-Center* in the following ways:

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The *Lab* changed my whole thought process. I am spontaneous in my thinking and a do-er. There can be a lot of structure and rules at DCTC. The *Lab* gave me tools to bridge structure and process with brainstorming.

- Emily Tarquin
Co-Curator of Off-Center

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1. *Off-Center* brings in audiences that were previously not connected to DCTC.

Approximately two-thirds⁸ of the audiences at *Off-Center* performances are new to the Denver Center. To date there has been little cross-over with DCTC audiences - that is, people who attend an *Off-Center* show are not, in turn, going to see a mainstage production. These new audiences are attracted to the affordability and informality of *Off-Center* at The Jones.

2. *Off-Center* has diversified the overall offerings at the Denver Center.

The shows at *Off-Center* are unique and are seen as a valuable addition to the Denver Center's programming and overall brand. In presenting different types of shows, at a significantly lower price point than the rest of the Denver Center's offerings, *Off-Center* reaches new audiences.

3. *Off-Center* has advanced the practice of using social media and word of mouth marketing.

Social media and word-of-mouth marketing have been the primary mechanisms for promoting *Off-Center* shows. Together, these approaches account for over 70% of *Off-Center's* audience. Facebook defines reach as the number of unique people that saw any content related to a Page in a given time frame. In its first full season, despite much smaller total audience numbers, *Off-Center's* Facebook Page had an almost identical reach score to the Denver Center's Page overall.⁹ The lessons in social media and word-of-mouth marketing have been useful to the organization's marketing department.

Competencies needing attention and focus:

1. Building internal support for change
2. Making resources available for innovation
3. Using diverse sources to generate ideas
4. Measuring and building feedback loops

For example, because most of the artists are local, the artists themselves are a link to new audiences. Tapping into these existing social networks has been a boost for several performances.

4. *Off-Center* has provided a pathway for local artists to engage with DCTC.

Several of the artists that have been involved with an *Off-Center* show have noted that they would not have otherwise been involved with DCTC. For some, their art is outside the norms of traditional theatre and they are a fit with the unconventional *Off-Center*. Other artists were intimidated by the size of the Denver Center and hesitated to engage. Several actors, musicians and other artists, such as a DJ, have since engaged with other DCTC productions. Junior staff at DCTC have found opportunities to showcase their design talents in an *Off-Center* show, giving them a chance to profile their work early in their careers.

5. *Off-Center* has connected the Denver Center to new local networks.

The link to local networks that has accompanied *Off-Center* productions has put a different face on the Denver Center and built new community relationships. For example, *Off-Center* has built relationships with Denver's LGBT community, the Denver Cruisers, a large and well-recognized cycling club, and a wide variety of local performance artists. Through *Off-Center's* collaborative approach, these groups are highly engaged in the planning, performance, and feedback of a show. With the early engagement leading up to a performance, *Off-Center* taps into existing networks of local groups supporting word-of-mouth advertising and the attraction of new audiences unique to the Denver Center. As each performance engages a new network, *Off-Center* develops sustained relationships with keen individuals who volunteer and support future performances.

6. *Off-Center* has added to DCTC's national recognition.

The *Off-Center* team has been invited to present on *Off-Center* at eight national conferences, and other theatres have expressed interest in the

model. For example, Milwaukee Repertory Theater is looking to start something called The Generator as a space for experimenting that is incorporating some of the lessons from *Off-Center*.

Building Competencies for Adaptive Change

Working on an innovation demands specific skills from an organization, and which differ from those skills needed to be efficient and effective with established programs and routine practices.¹⁰ Through the *Innovation Lab*, and the subsequent experience of putting *Off-Center* into practice, areas needing development became apparent. In particular, four competencies for adaptive change¹¹ needed attention and focus.

COMPETENCIES NEEDING ATTENTION AND FOCUS

1. Building internal support for change

A big step in moving *Off-Center* ahead was the need to engage colleagues beyond their core Innovation Team in understanding and supporting the concept. The Team spent time in the *Lab*'s Intensive Retreat thinking about their messages and developing strategies for enrolling others. This enrollment was particularly important because of the size of the organization, the continuously evolving nature of the project, and the fact that two junior staff led the initiative. Charlie and Emily did not have built-in decision-making authority and, despite being 'handed the keys' by Artistic Director Kent Thompson, they would rely heavily on informal relationship building and the genuine interest of others in the idea.

The 'elevator speech' developed at the Intensive Retreat helped Charlie and Emily to engage colleagues by focusing on common ground and shared interests. The initial prototypes further refined their language, as they could draw upon specific examples rather than abstract concepts. They also learned that they had to host meetings and deliver messages multiple times in order to effectively engage with all departments.

In addition to enrollment, Charlie and Emily needed to build respect and credibility for their leadership of *Off-Center*. The *Innovation Lab* helped Charlie and Emily to think through how they might be recognized differently within the organization. For them, this meant taking on a high personal commitment and effort, and finding ways to *Off-Center*'s communicate early successes. Their credibility was also aided by garnering the support of the organization's leaders, and in particular, DCTC Board Chairman Daniel Ritchie, Artistic Director Kent Thompson, and Managing Director, Charles Varin. To do this, Charlie and Emily directly presented to the board several times. This is unique, as only the Denver Center's senior managers generally make board presentations. By speaking directly their work with *Off-Center*, they were seen as the leaders, which gave the board an unfiltered understanding of what they were experimenting with and why.

After the first season, DCTC engaged a team of staff and board members in the development of a strategic plan for *Off-Center*. This process helped Charlie and Emily to push out to another level of internal stakeholders and lay the foundation for the next stage of their work. This process focused on the long term, and clarified the *raison d'être* of *Off-Center* in a way that communicated its value beyond the economic benefit. The primary value of this strategic planning process was that it gave some key board members and senior staff a deeper understanding of what the initiative was about and its importance.

Commonly, a strategic plan is something that is done at the outset of an initiative. *Off-Center* chose to do this strategic planning following several initial prototypes. By waiting, the planning process took advantage of a clearer understanding of the concept, and the useful learning generated by the prototypes.

2. Making resources available for innovation

Off-Center has an annual budget of \$140,000.¹² The financial support that is part of the *Innovation Lab* demonstrated to the larger organization that *Off-Center* is 'for real', which elevated its internal credibility. A lot of the resource contribution is informal in that departments provide hands-on support to *Off-Center* activity in the way they

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My big a-ha moment was looking around [at an Off-Center performance] and wondering ‘Who are these people?’ I recognized that these are not our normal customers and I thought, This is fantastic.

- Randy Weeks

President/Chief Operating Officer,
Denver Center Attractions

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would support any mainstage activity, such as production or marketing assistance. The underutilized Jones and the production assets of a major company meant *Off-Center* didn't have to start from scratch, and could focus on the work in a timely way.

The Denver Center Board of Directors has paid close attention to *Off-Center*, and has been largely supportive from the beginning. Several of the corporate leaders on the Board of Directors identified with the experimental nature of *Off-Center*, seeing a parallel to the importance of investing in research and development (R&D) in business. They recognized it as an important investment in understanding the organization's path forward. After the first season, the board pledged \$100,000 from their collective contributions to the organization to enhance the financial support available to *Off-Center*.

Charlie and Emily's personal bootstrapping has been a huge part of the resourcing for *Off-Center*. While some responsibilities are attached to their main DCTC roles, they curate *Off-Center* in addition to their full-time jobs. *Off-Center* is now at a place where it will require additional staffing, resources, and structural support going forward. Efforts are underway to free up Charlie and Emily's time for *Off-Center*. At various points in the past season, they hit a threshold where their main jobs at DCTC and their *Off-Center* roles had incompatible demands. The organization is taking some steps to address this: for example, one of the marketing staff, Jane McDonald, has now taken on the role of Marketing Manager for *Off-Center* as part of her overall responsibilities.

With a small budget, and drawing upon informal extras, *Off-Center* has demonstrated it can function as a low cost R&D lab. This keeps the stakes lower compared to a mainstage show with higher revenue expectations, allowing for riskier experiments.

3. Using diverse sources to generate ideas

To generate ideas and contribute to the development of productions, *Off-Center* collaborates with audience members, artists, and other staff at DCTC. While DCTC has a

history of engaging broadly within the arts field at the institution level, *Off-Center* has emphasized connecting with local artists, small arts organizations, and local communities of interest, such as cyclists and Denver's LGBT community. They have also looked outside the performing arts field - to business, museums, and the entertainment industry - to source ideas from other domains.

Team-OFF is a group of audience members that provide input and volunteer support to *Off-Center* productions. They have grown to be a highly committed group of people who provide perspectives on ideas and feel that they have a stake in *Off-Center*.

Off-Center has a very iterative relationship with artists - one that starts in the early stages of an idea about a show. This requires a lot of trust and comfort for both the artists and the show's curators. Artists highly value this kind of relationship. While artists may have a similar level of engagement in other places, the unique opportunity with *Off-Center* is the combination of the scale of activity and resources available at the Denver Center.

DCTC also initially set up an internal committee to support *Off-Center*. The Off-Committee was active in the early days of *Off-Center*, and then diminished. The initial purpose for this committee was to provide some hands-on support to *Off-Center*, which was something that did not happen. A newly proposed version of the *Off-Committee* would consist of a regular meeting of organizational change agents, who would discuss what is going on at the organization and, given that, what to test next in *Off-Center's* test kitchen. This new iteration of the *Off-Committee* is intended to include more involvement from senior staff leadership.

The benefits of a heightened audience and artist engagement are twofold: First, the input enriches the overall pool of ideas and shapes decisions about *Off-Center* shows, and second, this engagement provides a feedback mechanism that enhances the lessons and improvements that can be gathered from each experiment. To date, DCTC has learned that these relationships give *Off-Center* access to useful and authentic feedback, and

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If you want the audience to be an equal player - they can't just come and watch the show.

- Emily Tarquin
Co-Curator of Off-Center

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Examples of *Off-Center* lessons used at the Denver Center

A reading of *8 The Play* incorporated a live Twitter stream as part of the talkback, a technology that had been tested by *Off-Center*. The reading also had a pre-show cocktail party with human rights organizations curated by Charlie and Emily. The multimedia production *Ed, Downloaded* incorporated video in workshops as part of the development process, an idea that had been tested with the Buntport prototype.

As Assistant Director for the mainstage production *Sense & Sensibility The Musical*, Emily applied the curatorial approach taken in *Off-Center* performances to a mainstage production. This promoted a liaison between *Off-Center* and mainstage departments much earlier in the production process.

Emily and Charlie will curate the premiere of *The Legend of Georgia McBride*, a play about an Elvis impersonator who becomes a drag show performer as a way to provide for his family. The lessons of *Off-Center*, and in particular, the lessons from the *Off-Center* performance *Drag Machine*, will inform the look and feel of the lobby, how the ushers dress, the off-site pre-events, and the way in which they connect to community groups.

engaged audience members feel very connected to *Off-Center*. Charlie and Emily have also observed that diverse engagement throughout the creative process grants a different kind of permission for trying things out in the performances: rather than a transactional relationship between audience and performer, the risks are shared across the performers, the audience and the curators.

4. Measurement and feedback

With experimentation at the heart of every *Off-Center* production, it is, in effect, the standing innovation lab for the Denver Center. As a result, DCTC has needed to build a discipline in their approach to research and evaluation as it relates to *Off-Center*.

There has always been a lot of experimentation at DCTC. Prior to the *Innovation Lab*, this tended to focus on the immediate problem at hand, but with *Off-Center*, the orientation is on the future. The *Innovation Lab* helped DCTC to focus evaluation efforts on a key question or two for each prototype. The *Off-Center* Recipe acts as a filter for determining what ideas to test out. Once identified, Charlie and Emily research the experience of others to see if there are lessons from elsewhere that can inform what they are testing, or what to expect. As soon as the planning starts for the performance, they also start planning how they will assess and learn about what they are testing out.

Initially, the *Off-Center* Team was looking for indicators that they could track over the long term. The *Innovation Lab* helped them to move away from fixed criteria to specific mechanisms for collecting information and feedback that are unique to each performance. For example, following *The Ultimate Wii Baseball Game*, they held focus groups with artists and audience members and, during the event, a dedicated group of observers watched the experience and informally interacted with audience members using a pre-determined set of questions as a guide. In Season Two, *Off-Center* looked at the effects of their efforts in social media and connecting with local networks by asking audience members some simple questions about how they came to be at the show. During the Season Two performance of *Drag Machine*, a DCTC staff member dressed as an airline stewardess conducted surveys. This reinforced

the airline terminal theme of the lobby, and helped to drive a high response rate for the survey.

Looking back, Charlie and Emily reflected that it would have been useful to more fully document the experiments, lessons, and evolutions in *Off-Center* as they happened. They have been very intentional about feedback; however, much of this has been immediately incorporated into what they are doing and how they are thinking. Having a record of their experiments and learning would help them inform the design of new experiments, and would serve as a record of their experimentation that colleagues at DCTC and from other theatres could access.

LONG-TERM ADAPTIVE CAPACITY

While the *Innovation Lab* focuses first and foremost on the launch of a singular innovation, *Off-Center's* development has contributed to a longer-term capacity for adaptation and change at the Denver Center. The pivot from developing a specific innovation to a sustained adaptive capacity for ongoing change has several features.

1. *Off-Center* acts as an innovation engine.

A pipeline of innovative ideas has started to migrate from *Off-Center* into other parts of the Denver Center. *Off-Center* facilitates idea generation, reality-testing these ideas in a low-risk environment, and then a refining of approaches through multiple iterations. The next chapter for *Off-Center* is moving proven ideas to the mainstages of DCTC.

For example, the organization now has a vision where every mainstage performance is curated. Making curation integral to the production process is now part of DCTC's five-year plan. Curators play an active role in shaping the whole experience of a show. They take into account what happens on stage, but also think about how to engage the audience outside of the theatre, and before, during, and after a performance. They are tasked with upholding the mission of *Off-Center* by developing original ideas, concepts, or jumping-off points that

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I think we are all learning the importance of having a place to experiment, to try out new ideas with an audience. Those ideas will come from all parts of the Center. Three years from now, I think we will see *Off-Center* as an integrated part of the Center—a connecting piece that reminds us to include innovation in all of our thinking.

- Dorothy Denny
Executive Vice President and
Director of Development

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fit within the *Off-Center* Recipe.

DCTC has been able to attract support for extending *Off-Center* experiments onto the mainstage. DCTC received a \$100,000 Continuing Innovation grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation to assist with their growth in Season Two and the strategic planning for *Off-Center*. The same Foundation provided an additional \$10,000 capstone grant to fund the curation of the mainstage performance, *The Legend of Georgia McBride*, which is the most substantial effort to date in transferring lessons from *Off-Center* to the mainstage.

In its third season (2013-14), *Off-Center* is proactively engaging with other departments to identify opportunities for experiments that can be built into upcoming productions. DCTC is moving to a place where any department can identify something they want to test, and they can work with the *Off-Center* team to build an appropriate experiment. Given this, Charlie and Emily recognize that it is time for another round of enrolling others at the Denver Center. They will engage with colleagues, explore their challenges, and help them to consider possible experiments that could be part of *Off-Center*.

2. Organizational culture matters, and it takes time to evolve.

Culture is the set of collective assumptions within an organization and shapes ‘the way we do things around here’. Behaviors are rewarded, copied, or critiqued depending on the extent to which they fit within the overall culture. Specific competencies for change exist because of the prevailing organizational culture, and culture can enable – or disable – the permission and support necessary to change practices and behaviors.

The Denver Center’s organizational culture¹³ is multi-faceted. As a large organization – the 2013 budget is \$55 million – departments are responsible for carrying out a substantial volume of work. Structured systems and processes are needed to accomplish this efficiently. This has resulted in a culture that favors stability, timeliness, and consistency. There is also some degree of silo-ing

between departments, common to large institutions.

The cultural challenge for Denver Center has been figuring out how to integrate the disruptive and divergent *Off-Center* culture into the dominant stability-oriented culture. Stability can restrict the creativity and risk tolerance needed to drive experimentation. Knowing this, the Denver Center has taken steps to create new space within the organization to support the emerging innovation-oriented culture. They have created a unique brand for *Off-Center* to differentiate it from other DCTC productions. *Off-Center* can operate with a different definition of quality and success, freeing its leaders to explore different strategies for attracting audiences that are not part of what DCTC already offers. The low-risk environment supports experimentation without affecting the DCTC brand.

Within each department is a variation on the overall organizational culture. As an example, Marketing is more externally focused and competition-driven, while Production is more internally focused and 'family-like'. As a result, some departments have a more natural link and higher degree of active support for *Off-Center*. Initially, it was easiest for Production to bridge the distance. The innovation culture of *Off-Center* matches Production's on-the-fly flexibility in putting on a show. There is a high level of team solidarity in Production, and Charlie and Emily are seen as part of the Production family. The distance is greater with departments that rely more on structure. For example, Development relies on well-established methodologies for fundraising, and what they do for the Denver Center overall is huge in comparison to *Off-Center*. There have not yet been experiments in contributed revenue, and there is not an active contributed revenue plan for *Off-Center*.

Off-Center is starting to influence a larger shift in the organizational culture at DCTC. The appetite and comfort for innovation has grown. Charlie and Emily possess an ability to effectively move with and work with the organization's predominant cultures. Their openness to ambiguity is a valuable leadership trait in this kind of circumstance – some things can be left open, while others need a push for clarity. These efforts have started to strengthen internal links between departments.

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We can have a bigger impact here than if we did it in a warehouse.

- Emily Tarquin
Co-Curator of Off-Center

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3. *Off-Center is a mechanism to mitigate risk.*

Part of *Off-Center's* value is that experiments can be done without the same stakes as a mainstage show. *Off-Center's* operating costs are low, revenue expectations are modest, and, because of the Jones Theatre's infrequent use, other activity is not displaced. Its unique brand also helps to mitigate risk, thus creating space and permission for innovation. There is recognition, and even an expectation, that at *Off-Center*, some things will succeed while others do not. This facilitates longer-term adaptive capacity as assumptions can be questioned and ideas tried out in an environment where it is okay to push the boundaries of a traditional theatre experience.

WHAT IS THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE INNOVATION LAB TO OFF-CENTER'S PROGRESS?

The *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* was an essential part of the creation and development of *Off-Center*. The initiative's progress and positioning within DCTC are the result of the time, facilitation and support made available through the *Lab*. Absent the *Lab* experience, the test kitchen concept would be less developed and likely a marginal component of what might simply be an alternative venue. The prototypes would most certainly have been less purposeful. The *Lab* also significantly contributed to the skill building of two junior staff, helping them to navigate the complexities of launching an innovation within a large organization.

The *Innovation Lab* offered several unique contributions:

1. *The Innovation Lab effectively positioned the innovation within a large organization.*

The *Innovation Lab* set up the *Off-Center* Innovation Team to effectively negotiate the process of introducing an innovation into a large organization. The *Lab* helped them to anticipate some critical

issues, and to build strategies to enlist others in the change. Often, something disruptive like *Off-Center* winds up outside the work of established institutions. The Denver Center was able to find a balance point where *Off-Center* operates in the margins of the organization, offering some insulation for risk-taking and different expectations, but is still linked to institutional resources, such as production and marketing.

The internal and external recognition that came with acceptance into the *Lab* helped resources to be committed to the initiative. The DCTC Innovation Team and, in particular, Charlie and Emily, gained a structure for how to approach the work, one that DCTC has largely adopted and put into practice. This helped them feel professional about what they were doing, enhance self-confidence, and help garner the respect of others.

2. *The Innovation Lab took the ad-hoc ideas of the Denver Center team and focused the concept.*

The loose ideas that went into the Intensive Retreat emerged as a more fully developed concept. *Off-Center* would not be as established or as cohesive a strategy without the *Innovation Lab*. The *Lab* enabled the full potential of the test-kitchen idea. Without the *Lab* process, there is a strong likelihood that the use of the Jones would have emphasized building a new audience pipeline, rather than being a place for ongoing experimentation.

3. *The Innovation Lab built a template for prototyping.*

The *Innovation Lab* introduced DCTC to a process for exploring ideas through active experimentation and learning. They have built a practice for identifying the two or three ideas that will be tested in each prototype, and for building the appropriate feedback and measurement mechanisms from the outset so that each experiment is fully exploited for their learning. Embracing this idea, and then learning how to effectively implement these experiments, became the essential idea underneath *Off-Center's* role as an R&D lab for the Denver Center.

WHAT DOES THE DENVER CENTER CASE TELL US?

The emergence of *Off-Center* at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts illustrates the pathway from an idea to an innovation that is increasingly seen as an instrumental part of a large operation. The borders between *Off-Center* and DCTC's main season are starting to open, and the expectation is that they will be increasingly porous over the next few years. *Off-Center* will continue to evolve. The case of DCTC building their adaptive capacity to develop *Off-Center* offers us the following lessons about innovation:

1. In a large organization, developing an innovation at the periphery has advantages.

Off-Center developed on the margins of the organization's primary activity. Developing a distinct brand helped this, as did housing the activity in the somewhat isolated yet still connected space at the Jones. Over time, *Off-Center* was able to gradually demonstrate its effectiveness and, as its value was recognized, its role in the organization has increased.

If *Off-Center* had had to compete within the institution for a larger set of resources from the outset, it would likely have not made it through when financial pressures hit. By keeping the initial costs of prototyping low, and isolating the risk associated with unconventional activity, *Off-Center* was positioned as an easy experiment to sustain.

2. Innovation comes in phases.

For *Off-Center*, the first challenge was to carve out enough space and credibility within the organization to move the idea from concept into action. As *Off-Center* demonstrated its capacity to experiment, and the learning from these experiments proved useful to the organization, the idea of a test kitchen has gained momentum. In this shift from a peripheral activity to something that is seen as a more integrated part of the organization, *Off-Center* enters a new phase of work. This has

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Off-Center shows we cannot do things the way we have always done them.

- Kent Thompson
Artistic Director

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prompted the Denver Center to begin working through a business model that will sustain *Off-Center*. One vision emphasizes growing audiences and trying to increase their attendance at mainstage activity. The other remains focused on a test kitchen for adaptive change. The transition to a new phase is a marker of progress and, as initial challenges are resolved, a new round of challenges emerge.

3. The required adaptive capacities can change over time.

The *Innovation Lab* effectively equipped DCTC with the adaptive skills needed to launch: enrolling others in a new idea, building resources for innovation, and developing effective ways to measure the ideas they were testing. As the profile of *Off-Center* grew within DCTC, and its role became increasingly interconnected with other activity at the Denver Center, different competencies for supporting adaptive change were needed. The team leading *Off-Center* is now looking for more comprehensive and sophisticated measures to inform the testing of ideas, building processes for negotiating conflict as *Off-Center* increasingly works across boundaries with other departments, examining options for a sustainable business model, and figuring out how to fill a pipeline of new ideas that draws upon input from across the organization.

At the outset of a project, it is difficult to predict what skills will be needed in a future phase. The *Off-Center* team is seeking input and support for a new set of challenges and questions. They are drawing upon the learning from the *Innovation Lab* in new ways, are reaching out to peers, and researching lessons in innovation from other domains. They have found it useful to build a network of support outside of their organization that they can tap into as their work evolves.

Well-established organizations often resist change as their resources and practices are tuned, over time, to a particular way of doing things. The Denver Center has reacted differently. It has supported *Off-Center* as a way to overcome this common inertia. The result is an increasingly effective mechanism for addressing the need to experiment in a sustained way. The ideas that are explored in an *Off-Center* production are the very things that keep – or should keep – the nation's

artistic directors and managing directors up at night. We will likely look back one day and consider some of the radical ideas first examined in an *Off-Center* show to be a normal part of theatre.

The Recipe, the use of the Jones, and the focus on experiments are all things that could adapt further as the organization explores new responses to a rapidly evolving theatre environment. The process of creating *Off-Center* has helped the Denver Center to see the questioning of practice and the creation of alternatives as an essential feature of its work.

Lessons in Innovation

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People initially looked at us and said, ‘I don’t understand how a Wii baseball night fits into what we do here.’ Over the course of a year, people got to see and experience *Off-Center* and the commentary started to shift to ‘Now I see what is happening.’

- **Charlie Miller**
Co-Curator of Off-Center

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COMPARING CONNECTIVITY AND OFF-CENTER

The experiences of Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company and Denver Center Theatre Company reveal insights into the dynamics of change in support of an innovative idea, and how the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* is constructive toward a longer-term ability to adapt. At the heart of these two cases are lessons that come from what is common between them, and what is different.

The premise of the *Innovation Lab* is that adaptive change requires a different mindset, and a different set of skills than the business-as-usual operations of well-established programs and organizational routines. The paths pursued, and the tensions inherent in them in each case, make Woolly Mammoth and DCTC great examples of the process of *exploration* – What is it that will effectively respond to a new situation? How can organizations effectively navigate the dynamics of change? What do they pay attention to so they don't get stuck, and what do they do when they are?

1. Innovative ideas can grow at the core, or the periphery of an organization.

From the start, *Connectivity* was an innovation that was fully integrated into the activity and operations of Woolly Mammoth. In contrast, *Off-Center* has developed on the margins of DCTC, with a unique brand and experiments that were insulated from the mainstage shows. The 'inside' strategy and 'outside' strategy were each appropriate in its own way for the different contexts of these two organizations. *Off-Center* created an environment where it was safe to try new ideas, allowing for risks that would have put too much at stake in a mainstage production. In contrast, the purpose of *Connectivity* is to change the relationship with the audience from start to finish. It had to be fully integrated into the organization from the beginning to fully test the idea, and to embed the innovation across departments.

The implication is that these different situations required the organizations to pay attention to different things. With *Connectivity*, new patterns of work had to be established and some departmental boundaries needed to be reorganized. As a result, Woolly Mammoth was confronted with a need for strengthened internal collaboration and conflict resolution. The Denver Center team didn't initially face this same conflict, largely because they could isolate their innovation within the larger company. Instead, they needed to focus on peer enrollment to gather support for the idea, and improve measurement mechanisms so that they could effectively harvest the lessons from their experiments, and start to build the long-term case for *Off-Center*. It is an advantage of the *Innovation Lab* that it provides a robust framework, yet allows for these distinct and quite divergent approaches to be worked through.

2. Adaptive change requires leaders to balance the push for clarity with tolerance for ambiguity.

For *Connectivity* and *Off-Center*, the Innovation Teams supporting their development needed to refine the language they used to describe their ideas and, over time, take an abstract original idea and convert it into something more concrete. The *Innovation Lab* helps unearth the assumptions that emerge with a new idea and, using process facilitation, moves Innovation Teams toward greater clarity and alignment in their thinking.

Even with steps toward increased clarity, the messiness of adaptive work means that some ambiguities will persist. For Woolly Mammoth, there remains an underlying tension between the monetization of *Connectivity* in support of marketing, development and sales, and the artistic goal of elevating the audience experience. With DCTC, the emerging expectation that *Off-Center* could be a new pipeline for converting audiences into mainstage patrons pushes against the original objective of *Off-Center* as a test kitchen where new ideas and practices in theatre are examined in a safe-to-fail environment.

DCTC and Woolly Mammoth have needed to let these tensions co-exist. There is a paradox here:

organizations need to live with some uncertainty in early-stage innovations and, at the same time, work through underlying assumptions and competing expectations. 'Working through' often involves conflict, as Woolly faced early in their process, and DCTC more recently experienced conflict as they started to negotiate different expectations for *Off-Center*. This suggests that conflict is not a question of 'if', but rather 'when.' The inside and outside strategies are ways for organizations to manage the timing of necessary conflicts, and navigate their readiness to address them.

3. Disruptive change is vulnerable work.

The work of exploration usually begins with the courageous decision to let go of some existing practices. Organizations can hold so tightly to existing ways of doing things that they fail to respond to a changing environment in the first place. In these two cases, a space for new ideas had opened up in response to changing realities. Woolly Mammoth had stepped away from its education program, and the Denver Center was confronted with new financial circumstances and an unused theatre space. When organizations are able to let go of established practices and routines that are no longer serving them with new ideas, resources and relationships become available to the organization. These feed into the next stage of exploration – reorganization – in which innovators take the emerging ideas, resources, and relationships, and configure them in novel arrangements.

This is fragile work. An innovative idea can fail to gather sufficient legitimacy and clarity to secure the necessary commitment of resources for it to develop. As new ideas transition into actions they inevitably require adjustment and refinement. If they are prematurely scrutinized for effectiveness, a good idea with 'the bugs not yet worked out' may cease to exist before it has a chance to contribute.

4. Leadership in support of adaptive change takes multiple forms.

The Denver Center Theatre Company and Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company cases illustrate the critical role of leadership in adaptive change. Boards and senior managers are vital champions

who confirm the importance of adaptive work in the organization and hold a space open for the ambiguity and uncertainty of early-stage innovations. The organization's leaders help to create the conditions for success by committing resources and influencing the organizational culture. Successful adaptive change is also highly dependent upon hands-on leadership from individuals who commit their talent and energy to making something happen. In each case, heroic efforts were needed to push the innovative idea along. Moving an innovative strategy forward is exhilarating at times, and frustrating at others. The perseverance of innovators is vital and is fueled by their passion, commitment, and resolve.

5. The process of launching an innovative idea strengthens an organization's adaptive capacity.

The first two phases of the *Innovation Lab*, the initial exploration work, and the residential Intensive Retreat act as a cocoon for the organization to more fully put the bones on its idea. The recognition that comes with acceptance into the program, and its related facilitation and financial supports, promote an idea's internal legitimacy and help to build momentum. The thorough facilitated process support of the *Innovation Lab* surfaces the critical competencies that are needed to move the innovation forward, and helps the organization begin to develop strategies to address them. The Intensive Retreat supports organizations in examining their governance, leadership, and culture to consider how these can better create the conditions for change. In the third phase of the *Innovation Lab*, the emphasis on repeated prototyping enables ideas to be quickly tested, learned from, and adjusted accordingly.

In developing the skills needed by teams to move their innovative idea forward, the *Innovation Lab* supported the development of enhanced organizational readiness for adaptation. In each case, an innovation that gathered momentum was disruptive to the established culture, even if that culture was already oriented to change, as was the case with Woolly Mammoth. At DCTC, the organization had built structures and processes that enabled efficient operations on a large scale.

With *Off-Center* as an isolated experiment, and its championing by two junior staff, a back door was created for DCTC to start to build adaptive capacity. In the work of the initial prototypes, and then the first two seasons of *Off-Center*, the organization has started to more fully embrace the potential of *Off-Center*.

Woolly Mammoth and Denver Center also demonstrate the kind of sustained effort required for progress on innovative ideas. Looking retrospectively at the multi-year journey of these two organizations, we can see the benefit that sustained support beyond the scope of the *Innovation Lab* could offer. As progress is made, new challenges emerge. Even as the benefits start to accrue, these innovative strategies can enter stages of vulnerability. Access to ongoing coaching, facilitation, and other expertise could help organizations work through these challenges efficiently when they emerge.

CONCLUSION

In Woolly Mammoth and DCTC, the conditions were right. They had already let go of some assumptions and practices, and were beginning to tease out how they might respond with a novel idea. The *Lab* is not a program that is designed to help organizations overcome the rigidity that prevents them from adapting when needed. There needs to be an idea already in formation, and a commitment to change.

For Woolly Mammoth and DCTC there was clear recognition that the theatre of the past could not be the theatre of the future, and that they needed to start to learn their way through that transition. Going into the *Lab*, Woolly Mammoth and DCTC had rough ideas about *Connectivity* and *Off-Center* and, in Woolly's case, they had done some initial experiments in productions. These cases are instructive about the kind of readiness needed for the *Innovation Lab*. Ideal candidates are prepared for exploration. Senior leaders are champions, passionate individuals are in harness to carry the work, and the organizations are already transitioning away from ingrained approaches as they begin to investigate how to transfer their novel idea into action.

The benefit of the *Innovation Lab* is that it supports organizations working on an innovation through the highly vulnerable phase of exploration. This is a specific and unusual value proposition, because funding and technical assistance in the arts tend to support improving the effectiveness of established practices. Common practice has been to apply funding models and technical assistance designed for established practices to adaptive situations. This tends to reinforce the very things that limit adaptive change, rather than enable it. In helping organizations to improve their processes and skills for adaptation, the *Innovation Lab* offers a more situationally appropriate response. This better enables an organization to take a good idea and make it concrete. *Connectivity* and *Off-Center* are not only valuable additions to Woolly Mammoth and the Denver Center. They also represent a different way of working for these organizations, and, as the performing arts field watches and learns from their experience, are innovations with broader impact.

EmcArts's *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* is a highly valuable support that accelerates the difficult transition from concept to reality. Its design mitigates against the risks of losing momentum, insufficient clarity of expectation and strategy, and failure to learn quickly about what works and what does not. As American cultural institutions contend with changing circumstances and new challenges, the *Innovation Lab* is a welcome and unique contribution to organizations seeking to effectively respond and adapt.

End Notes

1

For a list of the organizations who have participated in the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts*, visit: <http://bit.ly/EmcArtsProgramParticipants>.

2

Heifetz, R. A., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.

3

This has been verified in two external evaluations of the *Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts: Findings and Assessment: Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts* by Elizabeth Long Lingo and *The Continuing Impact of DDCF Interventions in Support of Innovation* by Edward A. Martenson and Martha Olivia Jurczak.

4

The idea of “entry points” emerged from Woolly’s work with teaching artist Eric Booth at the *Innovation Lab* Retreat. Booth’s role was to act as an external provocateur to their ideas.

5

The concept of an adaptive challenge comes from the work of Ron Heifetz. See Heifetz, R. A., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.

6

EmcArts has developed a comprehensive analysis of change competencies and organized these into a self-assessment Rubric that Innovation Teams and their facilitators use as part of the *Innovation Lab*.

7

The Competing Values Framework was used to guide the assessment and commentary on organizational culture. This framework underpins an *Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument* developed by Robert Quinn and Kim Cameron. The framework examines an organization’s primary focus: internal or external, and their orientation towards stability or flexibility.

8

66% in Season One and 60% in Season Two.

9

In Season One, *Off-Center’s* reach was 75,655 and DCPA’s was 77,924.

10

The concept of an adaptive challenge comes from the work of Ron Heifetz. See Heifetz, R. A., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.

11

EmcArts has developed a comprehensive list of change competencies and organized these into a self-assessment rubric that Innovation Teams and their facilitators use as part of the *Innovation Lab*.

12

This is the Season Three budget. The Season One budget was \$100,000, and the Season Two budget was \$160,000.

13

The Competing Values Framework was used to guide the assessment and commentary on organizational culture. This framework underpins an *Organizational Culture Assessment Instrument* developed by Robert Quinn and Kim Cameron. The framework examines an organization’s primary focus: internal or external, and their orientation toward stability or flexibility.

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