

Key Issues in the Arts and Entertainment Industry

11

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11 Current Issues in Cultural and Strategic Leadership

Introduction	179
Culture today: a practical definition	181
The new importance of culture and cultural leaders	183
The new role of cultural leaders	186
Leaders, networks and interconnectedness	188
Leadership lessons	190
Conclusion	193

11 Current Issues in Cultural and Strategic Leadership

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Introduction

Leadership in the cultural sector involves negotiating changes that are taking place continually at three levels:

1. At the **macro**-level of society, where social attitudes constantly evolve, technology opens up new possibilities, and fluctuations in the economy present opportunities and constraints;
2. At the **median** level – that is to say the specific operating context – where the leader must take into account art-form developments, shifts in arts practice, changes in law, policy, and funding;
3. At the **micro**-level of the organisation, where relationships, resources, energy, intelligence and emotions combine to produce organisational effectiveness.

These are, of course, all interrelated. For example, when new technology enables arts and entertainment organisations to enter into a two-way relationship with audiences, the role of marketing changes. Instead of simply being about selling a predetermined product, marketing becomes a dialogue, with the audience helping to shape the direction, and sometimes the programming, of the organisation. In turn, the organisation will respond by changing its structure – in this case possibly by combining marketing and programming and appointing a webmaster – and that will inevitably affect the behaviour of people working there and bring into being a new set of relationships between them.

180 Key Issues in the Arts and Entertainment Industry

Given the pressures of running an organisation, it is easy to get bogged down in the minutiae of everyday life, particularly when leaders face difficulties in their immediate operating context, such as funding cuts, staff issues or governance problems. But one thing that leaders must do is to lift their eyes from the everyday and scan the horizon. They should be looking out for long-term trends, anticipating how these will affect their own organisations; and they should also be looking to see what other people are doing. In other words, leaders should be constantly learning and thinking, as well as doing and directing.

If cultural leaders do start to examine the long-term trends, I believe they will find many reasons to be optimistic. In this chapter, we will first look at the way that the meaning of the word ‘culture’ has been changing in the very recent past, because in turn that will show how culture is likely to become more important to people, and consequently, how it will be viewed differently by government. Next, we’ll consider the particular questions that cultural leaders face in serving the various, and sometimes competing, interests of artists, funders, businesses, politicians, the organisation’s staff and the public – all those many individuals and groups who have an interest in what goes on in the cultural world. Who has authority in that world – is it cultural leaders themselves, or do others also get to decide what culture really is and how it develops? Cultural leaders in the UK should be congratulated because they have led the debate about how competing priorities and the concerns of different interest groups, can be reconciled or accommodated in the everyday practice of their organisations.

Finally, we will discover how technology, social change, and globalisation are altering the way that all organisations, within and beyond the sector, are functioning, and hence how they are led. How can the leaders of cultural organisations – which are often quite small – develop the personal and organisational capacities they need?

In all this, I will draw on two pamphlets published by the London-based think-tank Demos. These are *Democratic Culture* (Holden, 2008) and *All Together*, a case study of leadership and organisational change at the Royal Shakespeare Company that I co-authored with Robert Hewison and Samuel Jones (Hewison *et al.*, 2010).

In writing about cultural leaders, I have in mind primarily the people who are running or who are aspiring to run both whole organisations, and the departments within them. This covers all art forms and all scales from small to large. Leadership roles are becoming more distributed around organisations, so it is important to grasp that leadership is not just about titles. Being given a label such as Director or Chief Executive may confer authority, but leadership is a capability and a way of being, rather than a badge of office. Leaders are

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