

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Cultural Organizations

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As we begin a new year and look forward to all the challenges and opportunities ahead for the arts and culture sector, it may also be a good time to agree upon a few resolutions related to achieving successful outcomes. In this edition of *Arts Insights*, we've adapted Stephen R. Covey's bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, and looked at how it could be applied to the organizations and people who deliver value to the arts and culture industry. We'll look at each of the seven habits and think about how artistic and management professionals, board members, volunteers, community leaders and other visionaries create highly effective organizations.

Introduction and Definitions

What makes an arts and culture organization highly effective? Is it their ability to raise money? What about their capacity to sell thousands of tickets or memberships? Maybe they have a strong educational program? Or they have artistic quality or community impacts that are broadly recognized? Perhaps the answer to these questions is that all, some, or none of these end results play a role in organizational effectiveness. More likely is that something occurred much earlier in an ever-evolving pipeline that created those positive outcomes.

First of all, let's define a "habit" before we get into each of the seven. Webster's dictionary says a habit is "a characteristic action that is often repeated." When we expand upon that basic context, we use Covey's definition of a "habit" as "the intersection of knowledge, skills, and desire." Ultimately, this powerful combination is the "what to do and why," then the "how to do it," and finally the "want to do it." As we think about the macro concept of organizational effectiveness (outputs), perhaps it is best to simply apply the seven habits to the micro level inputs of the daily interactions of the people and processes that allow arts and culture institutions to achieve success.

1. Be Proactive

The first step in creating a highly impactful cultural organization is for its people to be proactive. That means taking initiative in both thinking through and then acting upon the artistic, administrative, financial, community, and many other challenges and priorities that the institution faces each day. The benefit of being in a creative industry is that problems can be seen as a learning experience for growth. Solutions can be discovered through stakeholder engagement with a can-do attitude. With that in mind, let's first consider the language you use each day. Is it proactive or reactive? Think about how you feel when reading each of these examples:

Reactive Language	Proactive Language
There's nothing we can do to change the situation.	Let's look at our alternatives.
We must present this artist this season.	We decided to present this artist because...
We don't have time to do it all.	Let's set our priorities together.
The board won't allow that to happen.	Let's create an effective presentation to persuade the board.
We can't raise any more money.	We are choosing to set limits based on our priorities and will meet our fundraising goals.

We can look at any situation or personal interaction with a reactive or proactive outlook. Highly effective cultural organizations are proactive. All the challenges that they face fall into three areas where they have direct control of their own actions, indirect control over the behavior of others, or no control over what has already happened to them. Covey looks at the Circle of Influence (things that we can do something about) and the Circle of Concern

(world events, problems at work, our health, etc.) in addressing these matters. Organizations can determine their level of proactivity by how much time and energy they spend in each of these concentric circles. The larger the Circle of Influence is, the smaller the Circle of Concern and vice versa. With that said, think about and listen to your own language and those of the colleagues around you. Does your organizational culture sound proactive or reactive? How can you and your organization create a greater Circle of Influence by being more proactive?

2. Begin with the End in Mind

Those organizations that have engaged in the strategic planning or visioning process have already seen the effects of this useful habit. Where do you want your organization to be in five to 10 years? What impacts do you hope to achieve through the programs or exhibitions will you be producing, presenting, and/or promoting? What are the major milestones in each of those years that will bring you to your vision? Who will help make it all happen, and how can you engage them in your organization’s vision? These can be very difficult, yet invigorating, questions that allow for significant organizational advancement.

Let’s use a more concrete example. You are going to build a concert hall or expand your museum. Before breaking ground, you need plans, blueprints, resource analyses, market reviews, business models, and much more. You need to know how the facility will be used programmatically, by whom, how often, and what it will look like in the architectural landscape of your community. You wouldn’t start building the structure without first thoroughly assessing the many aspects of how this vision will become a reality. In the same way, your organization needs to go through the process of beginning with the end in mind. How will the organization both look and feel in the future? What is the legacy that you want to leave for the community, and what will others say about what has been achieved?

Overall, it will take organizational leadership in order to achieve this second highly effective habit. An organizational mission statement, vision statement, goals, objectives, and action plans can all lead to a fruitful end result from your illustrious beginning.

3. Put First Things First

Both Peter Drucker and Warren Bennis have said that “Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.” Covey adds to that sentiment by saying that “Management is efficiency in climbing the ladder of success; leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall.” If you’re following Habits 1 and 2 above, Habit 3 will really get your organization moving in the right direction. It is about setting realistic priorities with the right people committed to them. Think about those issues that are “mission critical” in advancing your organization and its people to the next level. How do these play out daily, weekly or monthly?

Many organizations fall into what Covey calls the “urgency addiction” mode of operating, whereby it is easiest to simply react to issues that present themselves daily. His time management matrix will help your organization consider its activities through the four quadrants explained below:

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	I Crises Pressing Problems Deadline-Driven Projects	II Preparation and Prevention Values Clarification Planning and Recognizing Opportunities Relationship Building
Not Important	III Interruptions and Some Phone Calls Some Mail and Reports Popular Activities Proximate Pressing Matters	IV Trivia and Busywork Some Phone Calls and Irrelevant Mail Time Wasters “Escape” Activities

Ultimately, your organization should be spending a majority of its time in Quadrant II, although Quadrant I cannot be ignored. In order to ensure that your organization can “put first things first,” it is crucial to look at your activities, goals and objectives. Quadrants III and IV should be quite small, as minimizing these allows you to spend your time and energy dealing with mission critical activities. One way to do this is to establish your seven highest organizational priorities, likely already done by following Habit 2 above, and then develop your own time

management plan on how you and your organization will focus on these items daily, weekly, monthly and so on. That does not, however, mean scheduling every minute of every day, as there will periodically be crises that arise. But with proper planning and policies, your organization should become more resilient in overcoming them.

4. Think Win-Win

The first three habits generally focus on the private victories that are needed to begin your own organization effectiveness process. Once these have been established you will begin to move into the next level, which includes the three habits considered public victories. Win-win is a philosophy that allows for positive human and organizational interaction. This sounds simple, but many still follow the win-lose mentality or the win-or-we-have-no-deal thought process. With this mindset, how can they create effective internal collaborations and external strategic partnerships that advance their mission?

As Covey suggests, there are four steps in the process of achieving a win-win relationship. First, it is important to see the problem from various points of view. Let's say that earned income from ticket sales has dropped. The marketing director would be very concerned about this situation and may have a certain point of view. But in speaking with the development office, new clues about donor perceptions of the organization may come to light. Artistic challenges or a change in programming may have also had an effect on sales. Production problems may have arisen that have caused a drop in perceived value and thus in sales. Viewing the same problem from various perspectives allows for a greater breadth of understanding the real issues at hand.

Second is to identify the key issues and concerns of the organizational challenge. This is not necessarily taking a position, but rather attempting to understand the ramifications of the challenges at hand. Third is to determine what results would be considered fully acceptable solutions. Sometimes the answers are long-term changes while others are quick fixes that seek to achieve lasting impact. Fourth and finally is to identify the possible options for achieving the envisioned results. Keep in mind that sometimes these can be even better than expected as an iterative process unfolds, so staying flexible will be key to forward progress.

5. Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood

How do most organizations communicate their messages? Social media, website, print advertising, radio spots, e-newsletters, and in-person presentations are only a few. But how do they know if they are communicating the right message? Highly effective cultural organizations seek first to understand the "why" of their organizations. That is, to understand their programs and the impacts on audiences, donors, communities, artists, and even the integral internal stakeholders involved in developing and delivering those programs.

Colleagues in the arts and culture face similar institutional challenges that they discuss periodically in seeking to find a solution. But how do people and their organizations really perceive the challenges faced by others? They may evaluate by agreeing or disagreeing with the situation based on their own experiences. Or they may probe with questions that give them a frame of reference that relate to their own situation. With that said, it is crucial to really hear and understand the situation from other points of view. Once this has been achieved, it will be much easier to present your organization and its challenges from a broader worldview, and your message will be more clearly understood.

People tend to have greater faith in the organization's mission, goals, and integrity once they realize that you hear what they are saying. As an arts and culture organization, you are dealing with feelings and emotions at each performance, student interaction, or exhibition opening. Acknowledging those feelings will allow others to open their minds, so that your institutional messages will be understood. And finally, the logical presentation of your organization's challenges will be more open and readily accepted through effective public dialog. Ultimately, by seeking first to understand, you've followed Aristotle's three artistic proofs of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic) in convincing stakeholders that your organization is worthy of community support.

6. Synergize

How can organizations pull together during uncertain economic times in order to become more effective? Well, let's first define "synergy" as the whole organization being greater than the sum of its programmatic, departmental, human, technological, facility and other parts. It is only when these combine and become integrated that a cultural organization gains momentum in achieving its public victories and community impacts.

Think about those organizations that appear to be highly effective. How does their artistic product generate audiences? How does that flow into fundraising efforts that contribute to financial stability and organizational advancement? Effective organizations achieve momentum through efforts within and between all of their operational facets. Top-notch governance. Skilled and sensitive leaders. Dedicated artists, staff and volunteers. All gain synergy through the collective efforts in being the caretakers of their organizations, so that these institutions can be vibrant entities that better serve their communities.

7. Sharpen the Saw

The first six habits dealt with private and public victories in gaining organizational effectiveness. So, what does “sharpening the saw” have to do with advancing your goals? Think of a person in the woods sawing eight trees that must be all down by 5:00 P.M. It is 3:00 P.M. and there are still four trees to go. You suggest that the diligent worker takes a break to sharpen the saw, but the response is “I don’t have time to sharpen the saw. I’m too busy sawing!” Ultimately, the seventh habit of highly effective cultural organizations ties all the others together by allowing for a period of renewal—physically, intellectually, and emotionally.

As Covey says, “Sound motivation and organization theory embrace these four dimensions...the economic (physical), how people are treated (social), how people are developed and mobilized (mental), and the service... the organization gives” (value) to the community. Overall, this simply means taking the time (Quadrant II) to balance all four dimensions of our organizational existence. What does this mean for you in each of these four areas?

Physically, an organization needs to consistently maintain its facilities, perform financial planning, and thoroughly understand its human, technological, financial, and physical resources. Core values are what keep your organization centered, grounded, and committed to its stakeholders. A focus on these values lets you develop consensus and momentum in organizational visioning. Mentally, those who work in the organization need to be at their best. Education, training, and time off for rejuvenation are all critical components. Additionally, mentoring artists, board, staff, and volunteers will allow the organization to be in a position to address unexpected events more easily. And, finally, the social dimension comes into play. While the first three dimensions are closely tied to habits one, two, and three, the social or emotional dimension focuses on habits four, five, and six. This social dimension is centered on the principles of interpersonal leadership, empathetic communication, and creative cooperation between people and organizations. In other words, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Summary

Cultural organizations are vital, living, and dynamic entities that include thousands of people who are in a relationship with it. These institutions can become highly effective in achieving their visions by fine tuning the seven habits with clarity and focus. When we learn and repeat the simple habits above in a non-crisis way, we can hope to gain individual and institutional balance. As you think about your organization in the New Year, being proactive will be the first step to embracing the long-lasting legacy that you seek. Setting priorities will allow everyone to focus on what is most important to your success. Creating win-win relationships internally and externally will be achieved by first seeking to understand before presenting your case. Synergizing will occur as the first five habits are followed and mastered. Finally, sharpening your physical, intellectual, and emotional saw will revitalize and inspire organizational adaptability, vibrancy, and sustainability.

Bibliography

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen R. Covey, 1989, Simon & Schuster, Inc.

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