

Framing Community Engagement Efforts: Four Lessons to Learn from Donor Relations

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Community engagement activities and becoming embedded and valued within a population starts and ends with relationship building. Establishing authentic relationships begins with how arts and culture organizations position themselves in relation to the people they exist to serve or who they want to benefit through their artistic and cultural programming. As mentioned in the first of this two-part series, successful community engagement begins with clear identification of the populations, groups, or individuals who should be centered in the organization's mission. Once those people are identified, what principles should be followed to establish those authentic relationships, which can then inform programming, communication, behaviors, and hopefully participation or impacts?

Conveniently, arts and culture organizations already know how to create valued and authentic relationships. Many organizations do it all the time in their major donor relations activities. The specific group with which the organization wants to deeply engage—a local neighborhood, racial group, local elementary school, or any other targeted set of people—should be approached with the same tenacity and sincerity that donor identification and cultivation would embrace with a group of newly identified potential major donors. This issue of *Arts Insights*, the second in a two-part series, highlights four lessons learned from relationship-oriented work that can be applied to conducting genuine and effective community engagement activities.

1. Treat People with Dignity and Respect

Community engagement activities can often risk edging into deep-seated and longstanding patterns of colonialism or missionary-like behavior, where assumptions in the approach are some variation of: If people do not show up, they must not appreciate the arts or culture.¹ While well-intentioned to bring the arts and culture to communities, this method often centers the institution's values over those of the people who are being served—doing more harm than good. Fundraising professionals, for example, would never approach a potential new donor with this kind of disparaging attitude.

Instead, arts and culture organizations should approach the group they wish to serve with honor and humility, demonstrating a high level of interest in their needs and providing accommodations in the same way a donor relationship team would with philanthropic supporters. Their values and passions should deeply matter to the organization. A nonprofit arts and culture organization's mission is to serve its constituents and provide a public benefit, so to authentically engage with a community, the identified group must be treated as fundamental to the organization's existence.

2. Build Trust through Inclusion, Understanding, and Humility

Just like donors, community members have varying interests that may or may not be apparent to the organization. While some donors are interested in high-profile artists, others may prefer supporting educational programming. Similarly, individuals or community groups may have different values and priorities. Building trust and developing authentic relationships, rather than transactional interactions, with these groups are only possible with knowledge, sensitivity, and understanding.

If arts and culture institutions are to design effective community engagement strategies, they must build a rapport of trust through transparent, accessible, and regular public forums. This may include a variety of forms, including surveys, town halls, and certainly one-on-one conversations. Rather than making assumptions, arts and culture organizations should listen to the community—both in group settings and individual conversations. They should not just scratch the surface. In some cases, deep historical research is necessary to better understand the community's past relationship and engagement with the organization, other communities, and the land on which the organization exists, as well as how those past dynamics or traumas are directly impacting relationships in the present.

¹ "Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement Guide," Racial & Social Justice Initiative, 2009, <https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/RSJI/GRE/IOPEguide01-11-12.pdf>.

Most importantly, arts and culture leaders should not assume that the organization's current artistic or cultural offerings have value to the groups they wish to engage. Their key values or interests may not match what is provided or presented at this time. If this is the case, arts and culture organizations should collaborate with other successful groups to strategize ways they can adapt to engage the specific community they desire to serve. True community engagement requires a willingness for the organization to embrace change internally so it can provide more relevant and impactful experiences to those they value.

3. Build a Lasting Legacy

When fundraising professionals engage important donors, they are not simply pursuing a single interaction or gift. They are intent on building a long-term relationship that will have benefits both now and in the future.² In an ideal scenario, major donors are leaving a lasting legacy on an organization, which could be through specific, short-term project support or long-term planned giving even after they have passed on.

Taking that same long-term approach, how can an arts and culture organization be valuable to the community today, next year, and a decade from now? Can it leave a lasting community legacy in 50 years? This enduring commitment changes how an organization thinks, plans, and treats the people it serves. It also alters how others will perceive an organization over time. To be effective and sustainable, it is crucial to commit to ongoing engagement rather than doing one event now and then abandoning that community next season.

Choosing to engage with a particular community will also impact the artistic, educational, or cultural offerings and potentially the artists who should be actively presented by the institution. By entering a long-term relationship, organizations must put time and effort into developing artistic and cultural content and programming that appeals to the community it seeks to serve. This trajectory cannot be met with a one-time production or exhibit. Continuously collecting feedback from the community on current offerings is crucial to the artists and organization in planning what comes next. Embracing a collaborative approach over time will change not only the way art is created, but it will also strengthen the cultural vitality of the organization and the community.³

4. Build and Support an Inclusive Board

When a donor provides support to benefit an organization, is passionate about its success, and is excited about its artistic, educational, or cultural offerings, they are often asked to join the board of trustees. As the governing entity in an organization, the board of trustees is vested with the power to change the mission, legally open and close the entity, and hire and fire the executive leaders. Holding the fiduciary responsibility for ongoing sustainability, the board takes shared ownership for the organization's success and holds it "in trust" for the community it serves.

The board also acts as the most public and crucial ambassadors for an arts and culture organization's mission, vision, and values. They are often publicly identified as volunteers who stand up for the organization and care deeply enough to provide their time and resources. Their position on the board is a signal to their social, professional, and other affiliated groups about the organization's offerings and their relationship with the organization. It also can inspire others with whom they are connected that they should consider becoming more involved with the organization.

To demonstrate that community engagement is fundamental to its mission, arts and culture organizations must include community representation on its board. Communities want to see members of their own circles represented on the board and welcomed into every area of the organization. According to Vu Le, former Executive Director of Rainier Valley Corps, "the spotlight shouldn't necessarily be on individual board members, many of whom are doing their best and actively contributing to the organization. Rather, it's the system and the design of governance that should be reimaged. As ongoing conversations about racial justice remind us, it is simply not enough to focus on the symptoms of an issue: solutions must hone in on the root of the problem."⁴ If a goal is for particular communities to have full ownership in the activities of the organization, but best practices and policies prevent them from joining the board or engaging in leadership of the organization, it is imperative to question those policies and consider new structures that open doors rather than build walls. These barriers can include financial policies like give-or-get donation requirements,⁵ but can also be about board activities, meeting dynamics, or even the time and location of board meetings.

² Tanya Mote, "Building Authenticity in Major Donor Relationships," *Nonprofit Quarterly*, 2020, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/building-authenticity-in-major-donor-relationships/>.

³ Maria Rosario Jackson, Florence Kabwasa-Green, Joaquín Herranz, "Cultural Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators," The Urban Institute, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/50676/311392-Cultural-Vitality-in-Communities-Interpretation-and-Indicators.PDF>.

⁴ "Equity, power, and the future of the nonprofit sector," Ontario Nonprofit Network, <https://theonnc.ca/equity-power-and-the-future-of-the-nonprofit-sector/>.

⁵ "Board Members and Personal Contributions," BoardSource, 2019, <https://boardsource.org/resources/personal-contributions/>.

Conclusion

Arts and culture organizations can make concrete, positive changes that can center their communities in authentic ways for the long-term benefit of all. While this process can (and often should) be uncomfortable, the result will be a dramatic shift in community narratives that result in powerful, committed, and impactful community engagement. Best of all, most organizations already know how to implement these tactics—by applying patterns of thought and operational behaviors present in existing donor relations activities throughout the nonprofit sector.

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Mr. Clayton joined ACG in 2019, bringing more than 20 years of experience in the arts and culture industry, specifically within opera, theater, and arts service organizations. Passionate about innovative business models in the arts and culture sector, he leads ACG's Planning & Capacity Building area, guiding strategic planning and community engagement, facilities and program planning, organizational benchmarking studies, board governance summits, team building retreats, and a variety of services that strengthen nonprofit organizations, universities, government agencies, and the communities they serve. Mr. Clayton has an extensive background in cross-sector collaboration in public-private partnerships and the dynamic relationships that exist in the creative industries. Prior to joining ACG, Mr. Clayton served in various roles at Chicago Opera Theater, ultimately becoming General Director. He has also served as Director of Programming and Operations for LA Stage Alliance, as Chair of the Host Committee for the record-breaking 2011 Theater Communications Group national conference, and as a member of the Directors Lab West's steering committee. Mr. Clayton has worked artistically as a stage director, playwright, and performer and has hands-on experience as both an artist and producer with a range of theatrical unions in the United States, including the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, Actors' Equity Association, American Guild of Musical Artists, and United Scenic Artists. Mr. Clayton holds a bachelor of science from the University of Southern California and earned a master of business administration from the Anderson School of Management at the University of California, Los Angeles. In 2018 he was named to Crain's Chicago Business 40 under 40 list as a leading innovator in the business of culture.



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Ms. Jones brings more than 20 years of experience in planning, workshop and curriculum development, project management, and advancing equity, diversity, inclusion, and access initiatives. She has provided strategic guidance to organizations across the country, supporting and assisting arts in the creation of equity, diversity, inclusion, and access goals. Ms. Jones previously served as the Director of Engagement of The Hartt School at the University of Hartford, where she implemented a faculty development training program, collaborated with the University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion office, and curated external community partnerships with local and national youth arts agencies. She also served as Program Director for Music Matters and Conductor of the Hartford All-City Youth Orchestra in conjunction with the Charter Oak Culture Center, Director of Development and Advocacy for the El Sistema-inspired program PROJECT MUSIC, and Artistic Director of the Waterbury Symphony Orchestra's El Sistema-inspired program Bravo Waterbury!. Ms. Jones currently serves as the President of the Connecticut Arts Alliance and as Board Clerk for El Sistema USA, where she also chairs the Racial Diversity and Cultural Understanding Committee. A TEDx speaker in San Jose, Ms. Jones has had the privilege of speaking at prestigious institutions such as Yale School of Music, Duke University, The Connecticut State Capitol, and The Hartt School. She has received numerous honors during her career, including a scholar fellowship at the Aspen Ideas Festival, Elizabeth L. Mahaffey Fellowship, Grammy Music Educator Award nomination, 2018 Connecticut Arts Hero Award, and the Father Thomas H. Dwyer Humanitarian Award for her work in Waterbury, Connecticut. Ms. Jones holds a bachelor of fine arts degree in violin performance from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a master of music degree in violin performance and Suzuki pedagogy from The Hartt School.

Contact ACG for more information on how we can partner with your team through organizational assessments, strategic planning, or leadership coaching to set new structures and relational values that will deepen community engagement for your organization.

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