

E. Andrew Taylor

THE ARTFUL MANAGER

**FIELD NOTES ON THE BUSINESS
OF ARTS AND CULTURE**

The Artful Manager:
Field Notes on the Business of Arts and Culture
by E. Andrew Taylor

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*Dedicated to the brilliant and beautiful humans
who make artistic expression and experience more possible,
more present, and more connected.*

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PROLOGUE

Folklorist and writer Zora Neale Hurston defined research as “formalized curiosity,” as “poking and prying with a purpose.”¹ For many researchers, “field notes” capture the sketches, clippings, scraps, tidbits, and scrawls through which that poking and prying takes shape.

In July 2003, at the kind and compelling invitation of Doug McLennan at ArtsJournal.com, I began writing my own “field notes” through the then-evolving medium of a blog. I was about eight years into my teaching career in nonprofit arts management, discovering (as teaching forces you to discover) the magnitude of what I didn’t know or understand about the field I had come to love.

The “purpose” that drove me was a nagging intuition that while the language, lenses, and assumptions of arts management may serve the work, they also distort our view and disrupt our progress. The charge I wrote as a first field note still captures the gist of that suspicion:

For six decades now, nonprofit arts and culture organizations have focused on a corporate ideal. Using the mantras of for-profit America – effectiveness, efficiency, professionalism, best practices, change management, accountability – a generation of arts leaders has struggled to graft business basics onto the world of creative expression.

But what if, all along the way, we fundamentally misunderstood what it meant to be run “like a business”? What if our management metaphors actually contribute to the problems we hope they will solve – separateness, disengagement, inflexibility, inequity, entropy, and stress?

The Artful Manager seeks a new set of metaphors for administrative leaders of arts and culture. There is a need for business thinking, to be sure, with an intensity and deftness we have only begun to understand. But there is also an energy beyond money and markets that the artful manager must channel. What if, in the end, the arts organization is not a problem to be managed, but an instrument to be played?²

This book gathers 50 posts from the first 18 years of my online field notes – edited, updated, complemented with opening quotes, and sorted into three themes.

In revising these works, I was filled again with gratitude and humility for the constellation of brilliant, beautiful, and inspiring people who read and reacted to them; who helped me think, speak, and act in the world in more productive ways; and who shaped me as a teacher, learner, and ally for the creative humans I love so dearly.

Here’s hoping these field notes bring some similar value to your own poking and prying, and to the valiant and vibrant work you do in the arts.

MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

1

ACT LIKE A BUSINESS? WHY AIM SO LOW?

“There’s no business like show business.”

IRVING BERLIN

In his monograph, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Jim Collins makes a rather bold statement: “We must reject the idea – well-intentioned, but dead wrong – that the primary path to greatness in the social sectors is to become ‘more like a business.’”³ His point is that most businesses are poorly run, and that many business practices correlate with mediocrity, not greatness. So, to him, telling nonprofit organizations to “run like a business” is like telling artists to lower their standards, or telling a visionary leader to “aim low.”

For those of us who have been struggling to convince cultural leaders to work with more focus, more discipline, and more responsiveness, Collins’ words come as a bit of a blow. But I must admit he has a point. For the past decades, our industry has fundamentally misunderstood what it means to run “like a business.” As a result, we’ve tended to become more rigid, less joyous, and increasingly

disconnected from the communities and the creative spirit we were formed to serve.

In the Arts Management master's degree program where I teach, we get to see both sides of the question – dwelling in management theory and practice, and working every day with cultural nonprofits. From that perspective, I suggest a six-point alternative to “running like a business,” to give arts leaders more worthy targets:

Strive to be better than a business. Being responsible, accountable, transparent, and responsive is the lowest standard we should set for ourselves. Let's be exceptional.

Use business tools with an artist's hand. Business tools are merely ways to see the world, and ways to structure our interaction with it. Let's be like the artists among us and around us and explore those tools with creative abandon.

Embrace our roles as social engineers. So much of our work involves engineering compelling social experiences and catalytic community space. Let's learn the tools of those trades with the same energy and effort we commit to our more familiar tasks.

Define our own goals, rather than having them assigned to us. We are continually lured by outside measures of success: economic impact, educational enhancement, social service. If these are our goals,

Act Like a Business? Why Aim So Low?

let's embrace them. If not, let's clarify our purpose to our constituents and ourselves.

Work with clarity and discipline. Nonprofit arts organizations don't have the luxury of elbow room; every action must be taken with elegance, intent, and an openness to learn and improve.

Calculate our efforts in multiple currencies. There are a multitude of resources beyond money that drive what we do: joy, discovery, connection, sense of purpose, sense of place, and on and on. Let's make room in our spreadsheets and strategic plans to ensure we're measuring what matters.

In the end, behaving "like a business" is a matter of semantics. Arts organizations are businesses, so their behavior is businesslike – just as good or just as bad. The deeper question is what kind of business do you want to be? And what skills and perspective do you need to get there? It's not about mimicry. It's about clarity, curiosity, and courage.

A version of this article originally appeared in the July/August 2006 issue of Inside Arts.

2

THINKING AND SPEAKING

“I...never could make a good impromptu speech without several hours to prepare it.”

MARK TWAIN

Most of us have been admonished from an early age to “think before you speak.” But it turns out that speaking doesn’t work that way. Studies in psycholinguistics (Smith and Wheeldon 1999,⁴ for example) suggest that humans routinely dive into spoken sentences without a plan for how they will end. We do some basic preprocessing of the opening phrase, and perhaps some sketching around how it might end. But otherwise, we’re constructing the sentence as we say it. Just notice yourself speaking at some moment today and see what you do.

Normally, an author would get normative after that statement: saying you should think a whole sentence through before you say it. But that’s not how our brains work. And if they did, we’d never actually speak to each other in productive ways.

Spoken communication is constructed entirely in context and in response to a thousand variables – implicit and

explicit. Leaping into a sentence before it's fully constructed is a necessary fact of life. And when you think of it, it's also an extraordinary act of faith – that the rest of the sentence will be waiting for you when you get to it; that you have a passable working knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax to make it through mostly unscathed; and that the person you're speaking to will be a collaborative partner in unpacking whatever you construct.

By this metric, each of us is making a thousand small leaps of faith each day.

This disconnect, between what we're supposed to do before speaking and what we actually do, strikes me as relevant to the many ways we talk about strategy and planning. We're supposed to draft a thorough plan before taking action in our individual work, or the collective work of our organization. We're supposed to think through all contingencies, and plan for them.

But what we actually do, at our best, is think through the opening phrase, and the possible closing phrase, and dive in. So many of the managers I meet in arts organizations recognize this in their work and feel bad about it. They imagine that they should have a better plan for their day, week, month, or year. But they're mostly acting in faith, and in response to the moments they bump into. As a result, they self-criticize continually, even as they're diving in to do extraordinary work.

The insights of psycholinguistics tell us we can't and won't prepare our sentences in full before we begin them.

But we can and might build our capacity to construct them on the fly. We can improve our vocabulary, enhance our focus and attention, listen more deeply, read sentences by masters to hear and feel how they flow. And, we can be open to our own voice and what it's reaching for mid-sentence, kindly encourage it along, and forgive it when it inevitably wanders off the path.

As E.M. Forster framed it: "Think before you speak is criticism's motto; speak before you think is creation's."⁵

Original blog post: September 26, 2016

3

NOTICING AND JUDGING

“If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between ‘for’ and ‘against’ is the mind’s worst disease.”

SENT-TS’AN, C. 700 CE

One of the attributes we recognize and admire in great artists, curators, and other professionals is how quickly and decisively they assess the world around them. They see almost immediately whether an action, object, or direction is “right” or “aligned” with some larger vision. Or whether an action, object, or direction is “good” by technical or aesthetic standards.

It is, in part, this ability to judge in the moment that makes their work exceptional. Through fast and focused assessment, they make continual micro and macro adjustments to what they’re doing. And the process finds its way to beauty, power, or impact because they and their team are able to make these adjustments in ways the rest of us cannot fathom or perceive.

Because this is a celebrated quality of great artists, craftspeople, and other professionals, it is natural to

assume that the path to greatness is about judging more quickly and more decisively. We should determine “right” or “good” as fast as we can, and then say it as loudly as we can, with commitment.

This is a rookie mistake.

In fact, what we perceive to be fast and focused judgment in extraordinary people is (usually) the byproduct of thousands of hours of suspended judgment...time spent learning to pause and probe an observation or experience long enough to understand it, and also to understand its relationship to a vision or goal.

What we perceive as instinct is more like relentlessly disciplined muscle memory or mental habit.

So, if your goal is greatness – peak performance in whatever it is you care about doing – fast and furious isn’t the place to begin. The place to begin is to notice without judgment – to see, and to say what you see, as cleanly as possible, without bundled assumptions.

This may sound stupid and dull. But this is how mastery begins – in art, in business, in pretty much anything. And this is how judgment actually gets better, and eventually faster.

Learn to notice without judgment (at least at first). From what I’ve noticed, it’s the best first step toward greatness.

Original blog post: November 5, 2015

4

OTHER PEOPLE'S METRICS

"We try to measure what we value. We come to value what we measure."

DONELLA MEADOWS

I'm part of a lot of conversations about metrics and measurement in the arts – the various ways we look for evidence that we're making progress on mission, or making a difference in some area of our community. And for many I speak with, metrics are a matter of concern and frustration: Why must I shift my focus from the work to measure the impact of the work? Or, why must I bend my artistic vision to achieve some external measure?

My response is becoming increasingly consistent: You *don't* have to do those things...as long as you're not asking for other people's money.

As soon as you take someone else's dollar – whether a donor or a foundation or a ticket buyer or a taxpayer (via a public agency) – you are suddenly subject to their metrics of success...particularly if you want *another* dollar after the one you just received.

Of course, their metrics might include joy and creation and escape and wonder. Or their metrics might include employment statistics, property values, public education, and success of surrounding retail. Your job as a cultural leader is to understand the various expectations that came with the money or time or attention, and to show you are meeting those expectations (while still staying true to your artistic or community mission).

You may not like that job. But you accepted that job when you accepted that dollar.

I'm constantly attempting to define the boundaries of the industry I study and serve. The "nonprofit arts" isn't quite right, as it's too narrow. Nor is the "arts and culture industries" sufficient, as it seems too broad. My working definition is this:

Enterprises that require more than one person to accomplish, that claim creative human expression as a primary purpose, and that can't or choose not to recapture their full costs from the audience they seek to serve.

Those enterprises *require* other people's money. And other people's money comes bundled with other people's metrics.

Original blog post: October 3, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

E. Andrew Taylor thinks (a bit too much) about organizational structure, strategy, and management practice in the nonprofit arts. An Associate Professor of Arts Management at American University in Washington, DC, he also consults for cultural, educational, and support organizations.

Since July 2003, he has shared what he learns at “The Artful Manager” (www.artfulmanager.com), where the original drafts of this book’s 50 chapters first appeared.

Andrew lives in Maryland with his brilliant wife, Ximena, and two glorious step-children, Sol and Joaquin. His two grown-up children, Abby and Sam, are out in the world making it significantly more beautiful and more kind.



Photo by Ximena Varela