

Managing Change for Sustainability

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Change is hard, doubly so if you're working within the limited governance and resources of a non-profit arts organization. It is even trickier when the changes you're looking to make are ethical considerations of how you work and not the art you support. But if we can identify what considerations create barriers to change and utilize tools which help us to plan for how to manage those changes, we can overcome those barriers and find a more flourishing future.

There are many things which can get in our way when it comes to change in the Arts. Arts organizations often have limited financial and personnel resources, which can make it difficult to implement ethical decision-making principles, and must balance their mission and programs with environmental considerations. As many are incorporated as non-profits, they are subject to legal and regulatory constraints that may limit their ability to fully implement ethical decision-making principles. Funders, board members, artists, and audiences have differing interests which can create tension when it comes to change. While this can spur on change—like we see in efforts to become accessible, safe, and equitable places to create—we can often come to a near breaking point before we act. Even if we overcome these structural challenges, arts organizations may not have in-house expertise necessary to make informed decisions.

It is useful to consider that some of these barriers are, in part, intentional. Non-profits are meant to serve communities or public good. Some barriers are intended to ensure organizations are doing what they say they're meant to do for the benefit of the communities they purport to serve.

There are tools to help them change. Some are actual tools, such as the Flourishing Business Canvas [[Download Flourishing Business Canvas | Flourishing Business](#)], a strategic tool for mapping sustainable and socially responsible business practices. The Canvas is related to the principles of integrated accounting, a system of accounting that considers both financial *and* non-financial information. This recognizes that financial performance is not the only measure of success, and often includes environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics.

We can also think of the core principles of and cultivate the skills for managing this change. It involves analyzing the impact of changes on different stakeholders, as well as developing and implementing strategies for transitions towards desired outcomes with minimal disruption. We can use this approach to mitigating the challenges we face in our incorporation structures.

We start by identifying the topic of our change. This should be practical. It should suggest changes that can be made with a reasonable amount of effort and is clearly related to a wasteful system (e.g., our system of set construction is wasteful because we throw out the materials when we are done with a show). The wastefulness can be obvious (it produces trash) or more abstract (it creates a need for more energy resources). But you must draw the connection. And your topic should be researchable. If the topic you chose involves systems and technologies that do not yet exist, then you won't get very far.

The first thing we need to research is the change itself. What is the product, material, or system which is being exchanged to result in less waste in your work? Does integrating this change require other changes which might require additional considerations that impact your operations? Identifying how something exists in larger systems of consumption, what we might refer to as a "sustainable nutrient", asks us to think about all the inputs that enable and outputs that are enabled by any item or process.

In no particular order, we can then look at our ability to manage these changes through three categories that evaluate our ability to address leadership, measurement, and management capacity in our organization or processes.

Leadership capacity refers to our ability to get decision makers engaged in the change process. Starting with questions of how sustainability is currently approached and addressed, we consider how cohesively sustainability efforts are being coordinated. This provides a foundation to focus on the leadership of your team so you can ask how institutional leaders are engaged in your proposed work. Are they dedicated to the success of your proposal? Can you depend on involvement and support? Does organizational leadership provide you with the institutional knowledge, experience, influence, and ability to apply systems and design thinking as you'll need? Is your vision such that they contribute to its scope, inspire participation, and work towards alignment with the core function of your organization?

Measurement capacity talks about the ability to collect and analyze the data we collect to support and then execute our proposal. It's how we know if we succeed. How strong is your institution's capacity to measure its financial impact? Are 'less conventional' sources of financial impact such as pay-back periods, and risk assessment considered? How strong is your institution's capacity to measure its social impact with groups we feel responsible to? We take a similar approach to the environment, our non-human stakeholders, and look at how important it is to manage our environmental impact, how this impacts our decision making, and what expertise is available for measuring those impacts. How will you conduct assessment and how effective are your methods which evaluate and compare potential?

Management capacity gets to the proverbial brass tacks, considering the ability to do the work necessary to implement changes. What focus is applied to managing internal change? When significant change is rolled out, how is progress measured? Does our team represent sufficient diversity? Institutional knowledge? Change management experience? Influence / Decision making authority? How will you all support stakeholder groups, work with subject matter experts, or cultivate expertise yourselves? What is your ability to engage your internal and external stakeholders with diverse methods that support two-way communication? This evaluation positions a team to be able to formalize change and be able to revise and expand organizational goals and objectives, operating guidelines, policies, reporting requirements, job descriptions, and performance metrics.

Having positioned ourselves and our appetite for change we are ready to put together a proposal that includes all the essential information we require. This begins with a summary of the project that includes what we propose, why we're proposing it, and why we're the ones making the proposal. It articulates the problem we're attempting to solve and why it's a problem. It includes necessary research about the problem and the proposed change while distilling and interpreting this for your stakeholders. It provides examples including case studies, reports, or data. This foundation will allow you to articulate changes. And having articulated what you want to do, you can then provide the practical application of your change with a clear articulation of your goals, budget, documentation plan, and all objectives and benchmarks which will indicate you're moving towards those goals on the timeline you expect.

This process isn't necessarily only applicable to eco-positive changes. It is a useful approach to any changes that require everyone involved to stretch. The last few years have seen many intersecting crises in society and there is consensus that we are in an ecological crisis. These crises are all related in a nested model of sustainability which visualizes everything and everyone within the environment. While we have many tools which we could employ to grapple with these crises, the question isn't what process we engage for change, but what we value so that we are committed to those changes. A just and sustainable world can only be achieved through valuing it. Having a process for change that reflects our values is essential, lest we default to fiduciary duty alone.

So, start with your values, recognize the systems you work within, consider your capacity and where there is room for change, and build an informed plan for that change. You may find that once you start, you begin to rebuild systems more and more easily.