

**Jodi Myers** reflects on why leadership training initiatives are only part of a much bigger picture.

# Leadership – hit or myth?



**Jodi Myers**

Every few years the industry buzzwords change – education, access, outreach, diversity and evaluation are amongst those that spring to mind. The issue *du jour* now seems to be leadership. Yes, like all those other subjects, leadership is a major issue, but according to my colleagues who work outside the arts it is no more an issue in our industry than it is in any other. What concerns me is that the current attention and investment that leadership of the arts is getting may be setting up unrealistic expectations and obscuring a number of associated issues.

## Leadership and complexity

Given the rapid pace of change in society, technology and management, leadership is a more complex activity nowadays than it has ever been before. With the support of several enlightened individuals and trusts and from government, there are now more training opportunities for the emerging arts leader than there were previously. However, while many of these initiatives may provide just what is wanted by the participants and by their current or potential employers and/or employees, it is inevitable that some graduates will find that courses are only part of the picture.

Several exciting programmes have been established, where people with a certain level of experience benefit from being offered context, the chance for reflection and practical skills, but I worry that they may also be attempting to fast-track people far too quickly, when what they – and their sector – really need is wisdom and judgement gained by working one's way up and through hands-on experience. Leadership isn't just about the top tier of management – leadership skills are needed throughout an organisation – and calling yourself a leader doesn't necessarily make you one.

Of course, there are many different ways of learning. In a recent interview in *The Guardian*, Allan Leighton, Chair of Royal Mail and former CEO of Asda is quoted as saying, "I'd like to debunk the myth that leadership is some sort

of pseudo-science – most of it is bloody common sense. And the best way to learn is simply to watch others – to see the good and bad, take the bits you like and that fit with your personality and style... and then copy shamelessly."

I couldn't agree more about common sense and watching other people and learning from their mistakes as well as from their successes.

The sector is in danger of setting up expectations that coming off a leadership course means one will land a big job and that all organisations run by someone with a leadership qualification will be well managed and successful. Of course, this might be the case, but it is just as likely not to be. I don't want to give the impression I do not value formal training, but I still don't see a substitute for practical experience.

As Pam Henderson wrote in *AP* issue 155, "For leaders to learn, they need to be challenged and stimulated by new experiences. Training can do this to a degree, but it is not as effective as coaching or mentoring, or action learning sets. Job shadowing or job swaps are also great, as is acting up."

Mentoring, action learning sets and job swaps are usually cheaper to set up than courses, but less attention grabbing.

## A career in leadership

I am also concerned that, ironically, the current emphasis on leadership is making it harder to attract and retain middle management. Rather than seeing career progression over a number of years and jobs as a way to round out one's experience and skills, a divide is emerging whereby if someone isn't running something substantial by the time he or she is, say, in their mid-30s, they may have missed the boat. We need investment in career paths, with halfway decent salaries and on-going training so people don't feel forced upwards or out altogether.

Which brings me on to corporate amnesia, by which I mean the constant cycle of reinventing the wheel and not learning from what has gone before. The current emphasis on youth is appealing in many ways (greater awareness of globalisation and new technologies, less cynicism and more

energy, etc.), but, given that a number of experienced leaders and managers are moving away from running organisations to freelance work or consultancy, I wonder if the sector is losing considerable accumulated wisdom in the field without replacing it with a viable alternative.

## Board responsibilities

If there is a crisis of leadership in the arts it's in the area of governance rather than in executive and artistic management. The prioritisation of leadership includes a number of opportunities for board development, but until we address the fundamental issue of how arts organisations are structured, these are merely sticking plaster.

Board membership carries onerous fiscal and other responsibilities usually requiring a significant time commitment, but while many board directors work long and hard on behalf of their organisations, we have to acknowledge that some have neither the expertise nor the time to provide appropriate leadership to a company, and expanding the pool of board recruits can be difficult. Board membership is a job – it needs a job description and appraisal, and a commitment of time beyond a few board meetings and attending a handful of shows or events each year – and, as such, it may be incompatible with the current concept of voluntary public service.

## Too charitable?

Members of boards of companies limited by guarantee or by shares frequently bear separate responsibilities as trustees of a charity. Charitable status, while bringing a number of benefits, tends to encourage people to be over cautious and have difficulty embracing artistic risk or entrepreneurialism – both key leadership requirements. I'd like to see a real debate about whether the

charitable status model is still the right one for 21st century arts organisations. It may continue to work in some instances, but in others alternative structures, for example, Community Interest Companies (CICs), might be more conducive to risk management and development of an entrepreneurial culture.

CICs are able to pay their board



members, which means they can negotiate the amount of time directors are expected to commit. If people are being paid for their input the pool of board members is likely to expand beyond the 'great and the good' or the 'responsible and motivated but overstretched'. Perhaps we might end up with several models involving a small executive board working in tandem with the executive management, or, as Watershed in Bristol has established, a CIC running alongside a charitable company.

Change isn't going to happen overnight, nor in the arts alone, it would need to range across the Third Sector. However, if we don't acknowledge that leadership needs to start in the boardroom and put our own houses in order, much of the arts sector is going to be outperformed in the leisure market, and, despite all the leadership initiatives, we'll probably still be in pretty much the same place with the same cycle of boom and bust in 20 years' time. n

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