

Try leading from the middle for a change

A national conference on the art of leadership is taking place in Birmingham on February 24. Meanwhile, the Clore Leadership Programme has recently launched a search for 24 potential leaders of the arts industry, and there is a debate in the pages of national newspapers and trade publications, and in theatres, concert halls and galleries. There is much talk of the industry developing its business acumen, accountability and ability to manage change.

‘It is due to their enthusiasm and ability to inspire colleagues that shows go on at all’

Yet I think we are missing a trick or two. By concentrating on a narrow definition of “leadership” - the men (and a few women) who head the national arts institutions, or even those who are responsible for smaller organisations - we are in danger of failing to recognise that leadership is needed throughout creative organisations.

Leadership isn’t just about improving efficiency, balancing the books, making new

partnerships with the business sector and the community, and creating a vision for the organisation, crucial though those things are. It is also, or it ought to be, about recognising the contribution made by many people to our experiences of the arts - and taking responsibility when things go wrong.

There have always been exemplary leaders at all levels in the arts. They may not be well known, but it is because of the enthusiasm, wisdom, tenacity and ability to inspire colleagues of box office and theatre managers, technical supervisors and marketing directors that shows go on all every night and museums open their doors every day. Some of them may go on to run organisations of their own, but most will not, preferring a supporting role in the overall scheme of things.

What we need to address is how our leaders are chosen. While it is the boards of organisations that appoint managements and have final responsibility for organisations, it may be that the people lower down are well placed to make constructive suggestions about the leadership that their organisations need. In the case of the South Bank Centre, head-hunters did seek the views of senior staff in 2002 when recruiting a chief executive. But in my experience,

employees are rarely asked their opinion. (360°) assessment is one business technique that has not reached the arts yet.

It is this lack of lateral thinking that has contributed to a high burnout rate and turnover, which has been characteristic of arts management. Few leaders in the arts or the wider cultural industry have been prepared, when the chips are down, to take the rap.

The Birmingham conference provides an important opportunity for policymakers and managers, people involved in training and funding the arts - and, yes, artists themselves - to contribute to leadership of, in and for the arts.

Jodi Myers

The author is director of performing arts at the South Bank Centre and is chairing The Art of Leadership conference - www.theartofleadership.org.uk.

**This article appeared in
The Times February 9 2004**