

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

A leadership debate for the voluntary arts – are you a hidden leader?

It doesn't seem so very long ago that leadership was something that was only talked about in management circles. Yet its role in the general election and the global financial crisis has made all of us more aware of its value. It has been gaining prominence in the arts too, with the emergence of leadership programmes like the Clore Cultural Leadership Programme. But for small, voluntary organisations set up purely for the love of a creative pursuit, leadership may seem completely irrelevant, or only possible when a particular 'type' of person gets involved. So can voluntary arts groups learn anything from leadership, or vice versa?

Everyone seems to have a different view about what leadership is all about. Ask a selection of people and you're sure to hear words like 'charisma', 'confidence' and 'vision'. But even those working in the field of leadership development can't agree on a definition.

The one thing people do seem to agree on is that leadership, practised well, can change things for the better. It can turn a failing organisation into a successful one, motivate and inspire people to reach their potential, and enable people to achieve common goals. Yet ask most people who are actively involved in voluntary arts group whether they consider themselves to be a leader – and we've been doing just that recently – and most will say no.

The Cotswold Players – an amateur theatre company that presents around six productions a year and runs its own theatre in Stroud, Gloucestershire – is an organisation full of 'leaders' who wouldn't classify

themselves in this way. Over the past four years the group has managed a £526,000 building project (opened by Sir Ian McKellen) and navigated both financial and practical setbacks. At the same time, they continued to develop new ideas and ways of working, win awards and increase the number of supporters and participants. The group will reach its centenary year in 2011 in rude health, having maintained the high standards set by its founder members (*for more on the Players' story, see the website links in the box on page 2*).

Success without leadership?

Is such success possible without strong leadership? The Players' ways of working are typical of the thousands of voluntary arts organisations across the UK – run by an elected committee of dedicated individuals, but with strong involvement from everyone. In this case, however, there are more than the usual number of roles available, both within and outside the committee – and many of them involve 'leadership' of some form. There are committee positions including Theatre Manager, 'Member Development' and 'Box



AfroReggae samba band in the Vigário Geral favela, Rio de Janeiro
See Chief Executive's news on page 4

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Office', and non-committee roles ranging from Director (of the production) to 'Lighting'.

Patrick Howell, who was Chair until recently, believes this is the key. "I'm not a leader," he explains, "but what I do is to support people... I think I am able to recognise when someone has a particular aptitude, and encourage them to use it."

Patrick is reticent to accept the title of 'leader', but he acknowledges that 'leadership' has played a part in the group's success. "I can think of many organisations that are struggling because of lack of leadership," he says. "People won't join an organisation that's badly run. But perhaps it's not necessary for a leader in the voluntary arts to have all the qualities a business leader needs."

In the Players, it seems that many people take leadership roles – no matter what 'official' title they have: "Our organisation has been very well run and, yes, I guess it's involved leadership... the Front of House person has to lead and organise a team of front of house staff, the Technical Director is the ideas man, he has a vision for how he wants the theatre to be in the future... and the Theatre Manager came up with the idea for a Friends' scheme and it's growing all the time. The ideas come from the committee, not from me... I'm not an innovator."

Opportunities for everyone

Typical of voluntary arts organisations, everyone is encouraged to make an active contribution in all areas to the success and the development of the organisation. Patrick stresses the importance of being prepared to do whatever needs to be done. Members are discouraged from joining just to act, or to be on the committee – they get involved in everything from a weekly working party "doing whatever needs to be done, painting, maintenance, cleaning..." to the myriad backstage activities.

Everyone's role is valued and acknowledged. "Lots of theatre companies allow play readings or even rehearsals to get underway before involving the rest of the crew like lighting, sound or wardrobe," says Patrick. "We involve everyone from the very start. That's very important." This extends to the annual award-giving ceremony too, where alongside the usual 'best actor' type awards, there are other awards, e.g. one for the 'non-committee member who's done the most for the organisation'.

There's an annual members' cabaret evening, for those who would like to act, but haven't been successful in getting, or don't want, a part in the main productions. "There's a danger that these people may feel overlooked," Patrick continues. "It's important as a social activity too – because if you're not in the play, you may not see people that often – and it raises funds from members."

There's also a strong sense of developing people. An apprenticeship system exists for people to try out new roles: "If there's someone wanting to take on a particular role, like

Director, we'll let them experience what it's really like first by being Assistant Director first. It gives them an insight, and an awareness of any pitfalls."

A distributed form of leadership

One of the factors contributing to this group's success, it seems, is that leadership extends far beyond one individual or a particular job title – and that's surely the strength of leadership in the voluntary sector.

Patrick is a leader – he's taken on the traditional role of Chair and has helped the group to achieve its vision. As well as contributing his own talents and ideas, he's recognised and encouraged the abilities of its members, ensured that people are involved and offered opportunities, and facilitated the generation of ideas and innovation. But he's not the only one – everyone is contributing to the leadership of organisation.

If leadership isn't about one individual – if it's instead about achieving common goals through a shared vision and passion, collective ownership, a distribution of influential roles, and opportunities for people to develop – then it's very much part of the way we work in the voluntary arts. Perhaps some of us are performing leadership roles without even realising it. Are you?

Facts about the Cotswold Players and Playhouse

- **Membership:** 150 members (80/90 who are regularly and actively involved), 400 friends, 11 committee members.
- **Committee members' roles:** Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Theatre Manager (all officers of the committee). Box Office, Theatre Development, Membership Development, Marketing and Publicity, Production Planning, Social Activities, Bar, Front of House, Archives (some members take more than one role).
- **Other members' roles:** these include Director, Assistant Director, Actors, Scenery, Lighting, Sound, Props, Costume and Prompt.
- **More information:** www.cotswoldplayers.co.uk and www.cotswoldplayhouse.co.uk.

To read the full case study, plus a second case study featuring the Guild of Enamellers, see www.voluntaryarts.org/strongertogether.

Unlocking the potential in your voluntary arts group

The '**Stronger Together**' Briefing 1 (available to download from www.voluntaryarts.org/strongertogether) encourages you to think about leadership in a new way and explore why it is relevant to your group – to help you get more out of the time, resources and people that you have at your disposal. It's part of a 2010 programme that includes three Briefings and a training course in the autumn.